

QUESTION NO: 2

The HTS Islamist rebels have toppled down Bashar-Al Assad regime in Syria. Critically evaluate the reasons and implications of the unprecedented change in Syria.

ANSWER NO: 2

1. INTRODUCTION: 8th of December, 2024 marked the most significant event in the history of Syria; the fall of Bashar Al-Assad. Bashar Al-Assad took charge of Syria after the death of his father Hafez Al-Assad in 2001. Following the 2011 Arab Spring, protests erupted in all over Syria as well. However, Assad responded with a brutal crackdown for more than a decade. Bashar Al-Assad managed to maintain his status quo in Syria against the Syrian rebels, with the help of his regional and international allies like Russia and Iran, but consequently his government fell on the 8th of December, 2024 leaving Syria in the hands of HTS;

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a rebel group. The fall of Bashar Al-Assad's government has several reasons such as the diminishing support of his allies, Turkey backed forces in the Northern Syria, and his oppressive regime itself. However, it left the region and Syria itself with daunting implications domestically and internationally.

2- REASONS OF THE FALL OF BASHAR -AL ASSAD'S REGIME:

Every dictator has a looming threat on his head towards his end, and for each dictator, the first and the foremost threat, are his own people turned against him due to his unprecedented oppression. For Bashar Al-Assad, the causes that became a threat to his regime were the several rebel groups operating against him in every corner of Syria, the rebel groups backed by Turkey, fading support of Iran and Russia, and millions of displaced Syrians filled with anger.

(i) Diminishing Russian Support:

Syria has been a key Russian ally in the Middle Eastern region since the start of Syrian Civil war. Moreover, the military, weaponry and financial support provided by Russia as well as the fighters jets, became the sole reason Bashar Al-Assad's government was able to maintain his foothold in Syria in the 2016 war. In contrast, the recent offensive against Assad came at a time when Russia was already strained of his defence resources in Ukraine and has been engaged since 2022. Thus, the HTS rebel forces took chance and launched an offensive. Due to a minimal or no Russian support, the Syrian regime fell into the rebel's hand.

(ii) Iran And Hezbollah's engagement with Israel:

According to UN, Iran spent \$6 billion per year military aid to the Assad regime, in the past years. Undoubtedly, Iran was the most staunch and biggest ally of the Assad regime in the region. However,

in 2024 Iran engaged in a direct military offensive with Israel more than once and in response, Israel responded with further attacks, both on Iranian territory as well as killing the leadership of Hezbollah in Lebanon. As a result, Iran could not back Assad's regime in December, 2024's rebel attack. Therefore, the lack of both Iranian support and Hezbollah's senior leadership led to the fall of Bashar Al-Assad's regime.

(iii) Turkiye backed forces on the Northern

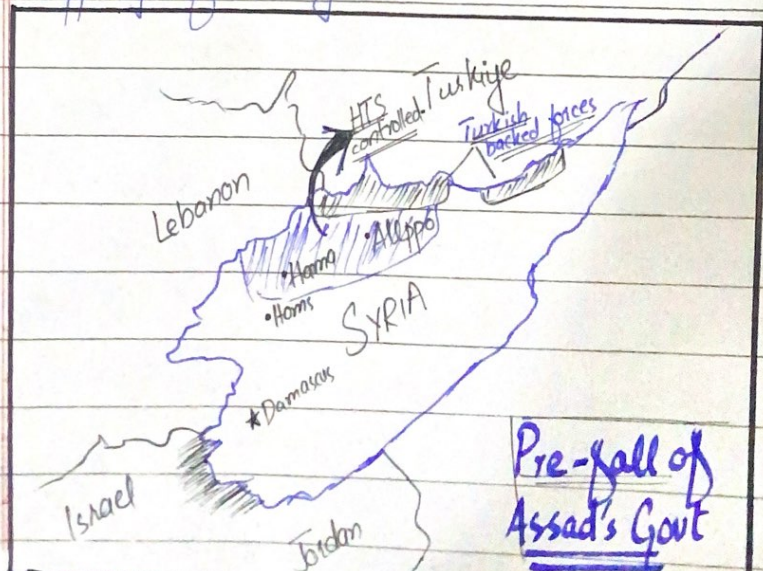
Front: On the northern border of Syria, the presence of Syrian National Coalition (SNA) was primarily backed by Turkiye, ~~due~~ to curb the rise of Syrian-Kurdish groups i.e SDF. The SNA in turn was allied with the rebel group Hajaty Tahrir Al-shaam, the victor rebel group. Thus, Turkiye's military support over the years resulted in a strong presence of these groups which had already captured Aleppo and had formed a local government over there. Therefore, it can be

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argued that Turkey played a role in the fall of Assad's Regime.

(iv) **Assad's brutal regime and Syrian masses:** There were hundreds of detention centres in Syria formed by the Al-Assad regime where normal Syrian people were taken as prisoners just on the basis of dissent. Moreover, Human Rights Watch found various human rights violations taking place in those detention centres. Due to the oppressive regime, Syrians, particularly the locals sided with the rebel forces just to be able to get rid of the regime. Thus, the local Syrian's aid and information to the rebel groups proved to be helpful in the toppling of the government.



3- IMPLICATIONS OF THE FALL OF SYRIAN REGIME :

(i) **Power Vacuum Inside Syria and Possible Instability:** The fall of a central government gives rise to power vacuum, which can be detrimental for the peace of the state.

a. **Fragmentation Of Syria:** There are various rebel groups operating in Syria and currently, the HTS is in control of the government after the fall. However, this can potentially trigger a civil war for the gain of control among other rebel groups like SNA, SDF, ISIS etc.

b. **Rise Of Extremism:** The US backed SDF countered the previous presence of ISIS on Syrian soil. However, after the fall of the Syrian regime and amidst the chaos of new government shifting and adjusting, the terrorist group could seize land or gain a slight rise due to the power vacuum created. Moreover, with the success of HTS, other Islamist groups in the region might take heed and follow into the steps.

(ii) Impact On the Region:

a. **Iran's losing ground:** Iran lost a prominent ally in his axis of resistance. The fall of Bashar Al-Assad gave a significant blow to the strategic hold of Iran in the region. Thus, Iran lost significant influence on the Middle Eastern region.

b. Cutting Supply Chains to Hezbollah:

Syria served as the supply route for Iran towards its proxies such as Hezbollah. Thus, with the fall of Assad's government, Hezbollah's supply chains on the ground through Syria got cut off. This served as another significant blow to the already weakened Hezbollah in Lebanon.

c. Fear Among the Regional Dictators:

The fall of Assad regime in Syria served as a reminder for regional authoritarian regimes, particularly Egypt. There has been multiple calls on the Egyptian social media, rendering Abdel Fatah al-Sisi as the next in line.

d. **Turkiye's gains:** As the rebel forces toppled the Assad regime, Turkey is preparing to send 3.5 million refugees back to their home country.

(iii) Shift in Global Geo-Politics :

a. Russia losing only ally in the Middle Eastern Region:

Russia lost its only ally in the middle eastern region with the fall of Assad regime. With the diminishing Russian influence, great/global powers will look for opportunities to gain a soft corner in the heart of the new Syrian government and global power politics will be at play.

Thus, Russia may lose its strategic bases such as the Tartus naval facility.

b. Israel advancing into the Golan Heights:

Israel has already entered into the bufferzone after the occupied Golan Heights in Syria. Moreover, the reduced Iranian influence has alleviated some of the security concerns for Israel from Syria. As a result, Israel might take the chance during anarchy.

(iv) Humanitarian & Refugee Crisis: A

protracted conflict post-Assad can exacerbate the already dire humanitarian crisis within Syria. Thus, the refugee crisis in the country could get worse with the arrival from the neighbouring countries.

4- **CRITICAL ANALYSIS:** The fall of the Bashar Al-Assad regime in Syria is one of the most prominent events in the region. However, it brought with itself several implications on the region as well as some gains for countries like Turkey. Though, the Western media as well as the displaced Syrian refugees ^{around} ~~in~~ the world celebrated his fall, it is not without consequences. The global power politics will once again shift in the region and states like Israel might start advancing further the Golan heights given the ideology of "Greater Israel" because there is no Iranian influence in the state of Syria anymore. Thus, it can be summarized that the fall of the Assad regime has both pros and cons, depending on the interests of the regional and global players.

5. **CONCLUSION:** In essence, the reasons behind the toppling of the Assad Regime in Syria are the diminishing Russian and Iranian support as well as the enhancing capabilities of the HTS due to Turkish backing.

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Moreover, the fall of the regime brought regional and geo-political implications including losing Russian influence, blow to Iran's strategic power, ripple effects towards other authoritarian regimes and an exacerbating humanitarian and Refugee Crisis. Therefore, the fall of Bashar Al-Assad has been categorized as an unprecedented event in the Middle Eastern Region.

QUESTION NO; 7

Critically evaluate the opportunities and challenges for neighbours in post Hasina Bangladesh.
Also analyze the opportunities for Pakistan and Islamabad approach towards Dhaka.

ANSWER NO; 7

- 1- INTRODUCTION: "A revolution is a struggle to death between the future and the past." - said by Fidel Castro serves as a reminder that a revolution changes the course of the future and buries the past. The student led political revolution in Bangladesh in July-August 2024, can be studied in a similar lens. It resulted in the resignation of the country's long term leader Sheikh Hasina Wajed, daughter of the founding father of the country; Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman. The political void in Bangladesh and the removal of an authoritarian regime poses significant opportunities as well as challenges for its Neighbours i.e India, Pakistan, and China. The opportunities

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range from maintaining and establishing the close ties with the new regime and the challenges vary from country to country.

2- OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NEIGHBOURS IN SOUTH ASIA:

(i) ^{For} **CHINA:** In a recent press conference, India's minister of External Affairs endorsed the fact that China might enhance its influence on regional countries due to its geographical proximity, directing to Bangladesh. It can be an opportunity for China to deepen its engagement with Bangladesh strengthening BRI and further encroaching India's traditional sphere of influence.

(ii) **For Pakistan to enhance engagement with the new leadership:** Sheikh Hasina Wajid was a long term ally of the Indian government, thus, with the resignation of Hasina, Indian influence over the South Asian country has diminished. It can serve as an opportunity for Pakistan to deepen its engagement with the new administration, categorically

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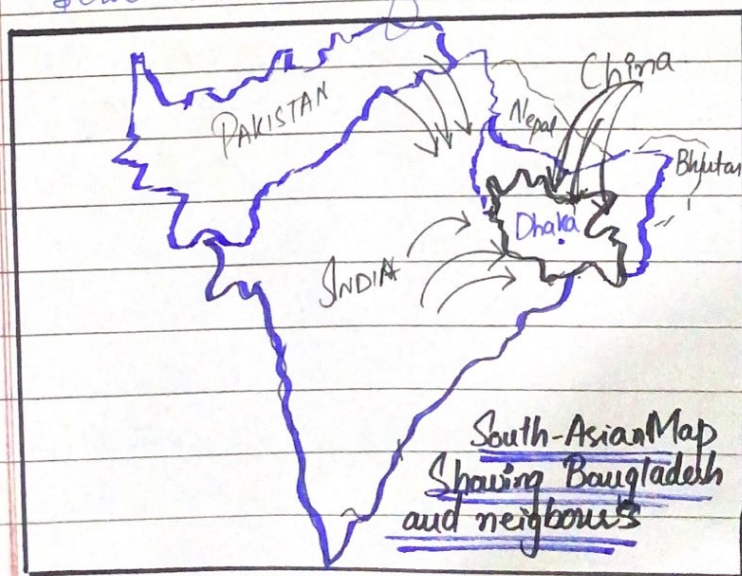
the party of opposition Khalida Zia, who had been serving in the political prison under Sheikh Hasina. Thus, Pakistan can adapt on the mutual 'Muslim' identity and build bridges to win the new administration back.

3 CHALLENGES FOR THE SOUTH ASIAN NEIGHBOURS :

- (i) A Setback to India and the loss of a strategic ally: The new development in Bangladesh gives a considerable setback to India as Sheikh Hasina's government has always been a strategic ally to India since her father Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman. The recent upheaval threatens to weaken India's influence in the region after losing its strategic partner. Moreover, it provides a void for other regional countries to fill and take place of India's traditional sphere of influence. India might have to reshape its regional strategies due to the already deep seated resentment against India in Bangladesh.

(ii) Cautionary Tale For Pakistan's Elite:

The recent events in Bangladesh serve as a cautionary tale for Pakistan's elite. Pakistan, too, is a country where political instability and economic challenges persist. Thus, the deep-seated grievances and demand for change in Bangladesh's populace highlight the importance of "Responsive governance and political inclusivity" for Pakistan. Thus, as a result, this failure to address the concerns of the citizenry, particularly the ones related to economic opportunity and social justice, could lead to similar unrest. Therefore, the events of August, 2024 in Bangladesh serve as a lesson for Pakistan's elite.



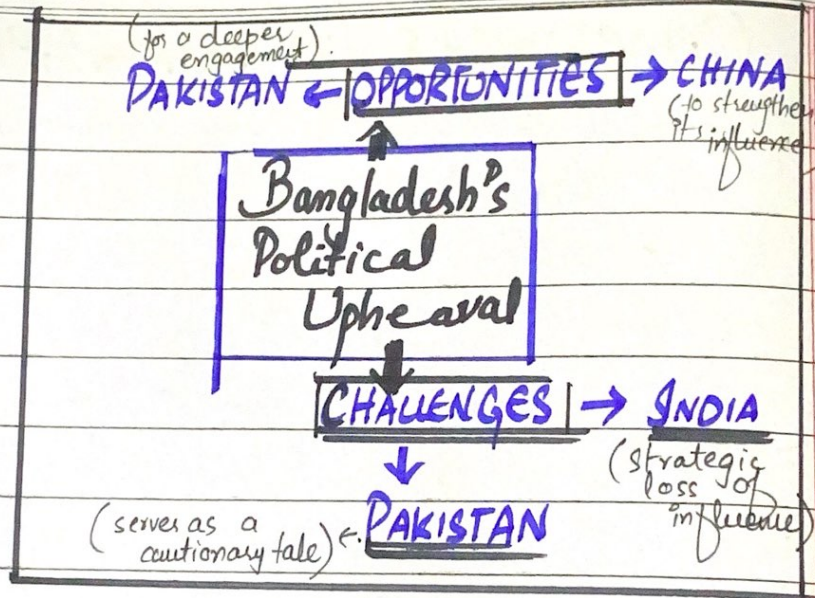
4. OPPORTUNITIES FOR ISLAMABAD:

(i) Deeper Engagement and enlarging the sphere of ties: Pakistan can leverage from this event and can use this as an opportunity to indulge in enhanced engagement and dialogues on the political level and can increase its sphere of economic ties as well, given the reduced Indian influence. Pakistan can enlarge its share of exports to Bangladesh as well as imports. Both countries can strengthen ties and move to a deeper level of strategic partnership as the remaining forces in ~~the~~ Bangladesh are pro-Pakistan.

(ii) Can take the Useful bits of the revolution: Islamabad can also use this as an opportunity to understand the deep seated resentment in the hearts of the Bangladesh's youth. This can serve as a reminder for Islamabad and its government to take what is useful for them in this event.

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5. CONCLUSION: Thus, the removal of the Sheikh Hasena government from Bangladesh presents many opportunities as well as challenges for its neighbours. For India, it is a loss of long term strategic partner and loss of influence. However, for Pakistan and China, there lies an opportunity to strengthen their bond with upcoming administration and deepen the engagement with Dhaka.
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