

Q1.

Reasons and implications of the unprecedented change in Syria

Fall of Assad's Regime in Syria:

'Syria is free', By 6am on December 8, the fighters declared Damascus liberated, confirming that Bashar-ul-Assad had fled the country. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham emerged as a dominant force in 2024 and after significant advances in Idlib and Aleppo, finally succeeded in toppling Assad's regime. It marks a turning point in Syria's tumultuous history. Assad's downfall is the culmination of over a decade of civil war, characterized by authoritarian governance, economic mismanagement, sectarian tension, and widespread external interventions. Now, the rise of HTS introduces new challenges and uncertainties which carries far-reaching implications for Syria, the region, and the broader international community. It includes regional instability and extremist threats to shifting power dynamics and global humanitarian challenges.

Reasons behind the Fall of Assad's regime:

1. Authoritarian Governance and Sectarianism

Bashar ul Assad's regime was marked by authoritarian governance that alienated large sections of the population. Power was concentrated within the Alawite minority, which marginalized the Sunni majority and exacerbated sectarian divisions. Historical instances of repression, such as 1982 Hama massacre, showcased the regime's brutality, while sectarian favoritism in political and military institutions created deep societal fractures leading to widespread resentment.

2. Economic Mismanagement and Inequality

Economic challenges were also a burden to Assad's regime and weakened it. Corruption and nepotism were pervasive, eroding public trust. The 2006-2010 drought forced

many rural Syrians to migrate to urban areas, creating civil unrest. During civil war, Syria's GDP contracted by over 60% and by 2023, over 90% of population lived in poverty. The economic collapse undermined the regime's ability to maintain stability.

3. The Arab Spring and Initial Protests

The Arab Spring in 2011 ignited protests across Syria as citizens demanded political reform and greater freedoms. However, the regime's violent crackdown on peaceful protests escalated the situation into a full-scale rebellion. Over 500,000 people were killed, millions were displaced, and the regime lost significant support both domestically and internationally.

4. Foreign Interventions and Proxy Wars

The Syrian civil war became a battleground for international powers. Opposition forces were supported by United States, Turkey, the Gulf States, while Assad regime heavily relied on military and financial backing from Russia and Iran. The rise of extremist groups like ISIS and HTS further destabilized the situation. HTS, with the backing from Turkey, emerged as a dominant force, eventually playing a pivotal role in Assad's downfall.

5. Decline in Russian and Iranian Support

Russia's military and financial support for Assad's regime weakened as it became preoccupied with the Ukraine war, reducing its involvement in Syria. Similarly, Iran faced economic sanctions and weakening axis of resistance i.e. Hezbollah which limited its capacity to sustain its regional influence and support for Assad's regime.

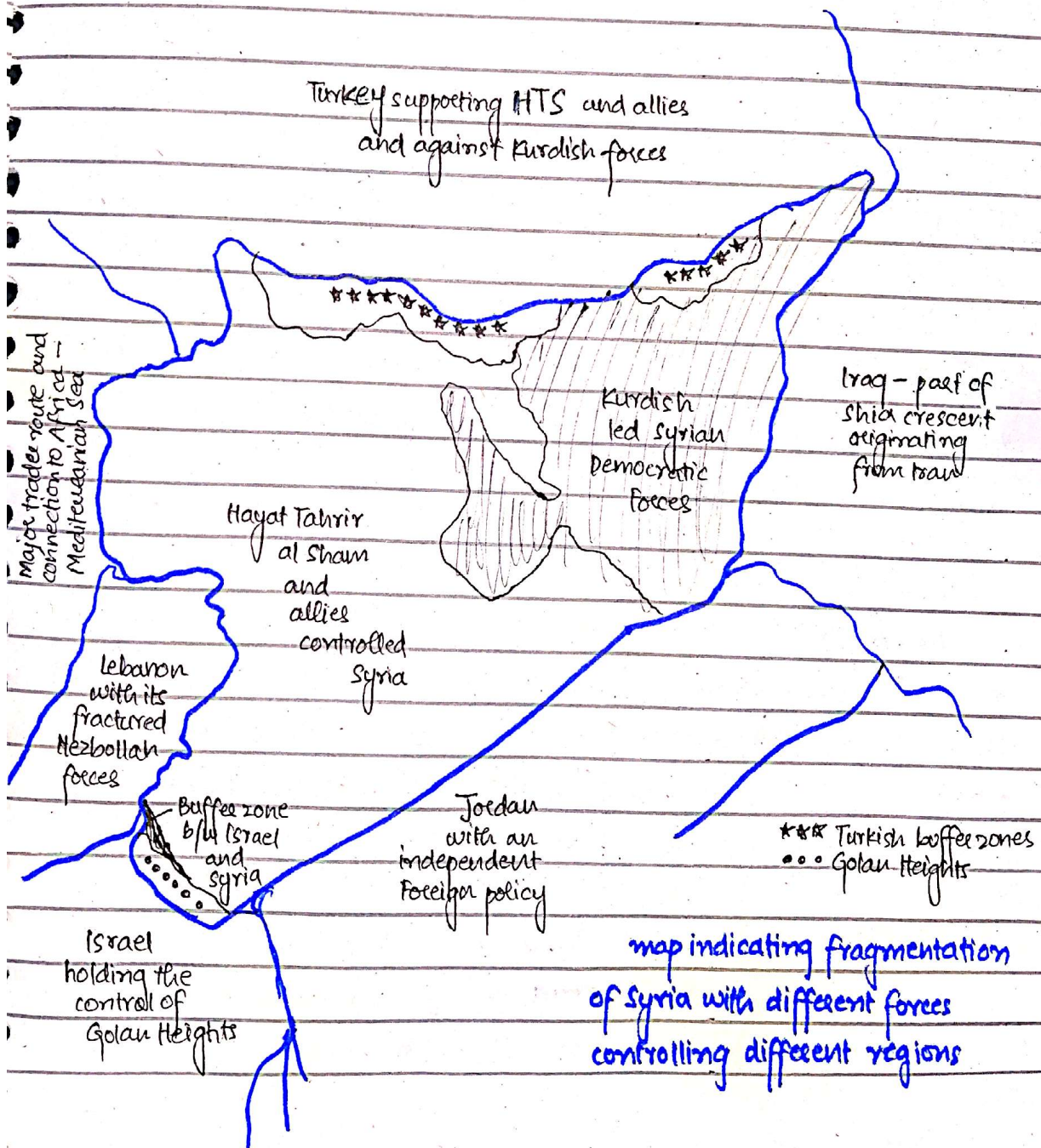
6. Humanitarian Crisis and Refugee Burden

After the regime's violent crackdown on masses in Arab Spring, displacements starting taking place. Syria under Assad's regime faced a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale, with over 13 million Syrians displaced. Refugees spread accounts of regime brutality, further delegitimizing Assad's government. These refugees travelled to

neighboring countries including Turkey and Iraq. The overwhelming humanitarian burden of Syria weakened public trust and contributed to the regime's collapse.

7. Fragmentation of Syrian territory

The loss of control over key regions, such as Idlib and Kurdish-led territories, signalled the regime's weakening grip on the country. HTS capitalized on this fragmentation, consolidating power in Idlib and eventually launching an offensive to topple Assad.



Implications of Assad's regime's fall

1. Regional Destabilization

The fall of Assad's regime and emergence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as the leading forces of the state being a nascent power holder destabilizes Syria along with the whole region. This fall has created a major power vacuum, risking further balkanization of Syria. Regional powers like Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia along with international powers like USA and Russia are likely to compete for influence in post-Assad Syria. This competition may intensify Middle Eastern geopolitical rivalries given Syria's strategic location.

2. Rise of Extremist Groups

HTS's victory raises concerns about the establishment of hardline Islamist regime in Syria. The fall of Assad's regime could embolden extremist groups like ISIS, increasing the risk of resurgence. This could lead to direct confrontation between the two groups further weakening the state while taking ^{away} the basic rights of the population from them. Neighboring countries like Iraq and Lebanon could experience spillover effects from this instability.

3. Kurdish Autonomy and Tensions

The weakening of central government would strengthen the Kurdish-controlled regions in Syria. This can lead to advancing Kurdish aspirations for autonomy or statehood & which they called "Kurdistan". This development may prompt Turkey to escalate military operations to prevent Kurdish separatism to protect their own identity and nationalism. This tensed relation will also strain relations of Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

4. Refugee Crisis

The emergence of nascent and hardline Islamist regime can lead to the increase and rapid surge of number of refugees, triggering a secondary wave of refugees.

It can exacerbate pressures on neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq. This influx could fuel xenophobia and political instability in host countries, complicating regional stability further.

5. Shifting power dynamics in the Middle East

The fall of Assad disrupts the balance of power in the region. Turkey may see an opportunity to expand its influence in northern Syria somewhere around the buffer zone between the two states while potentially repatriating refugees. Iran loses a key ally, which disrupts its regional ambitions and arms supply corridor to Hezbollah, which has already weakened down in Lebanon. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States could step in to shape Syria's reconstruction and governance, further reshaping Middle Eastern geopolitics.

6. Global Implications

The fall of Assad regime invites greater involvement from global powers such as the United States, Russia, and China in determining Syria's future. International organizations face significant challenges in managing humanitarian aid and reconstruction efforts, with an estimated cost exceeding \$250 billion. This can exacerbate tensions between major powers as they want their influence in the region.

7. Impact on Global Energy markets

The ^{control} ~~impact~~ of Syrian oil fields by Kurdish forces or other factions could shift regional energy dynamics. Additionally, instability in Syria may disrupt oil transit routes for Iran who is currently facing sanctions and Syria being an ally was exploited by Iran to trade with African countries. This could affect global supply chains and potentially drive up energy prices.

Conclusion:

The fall of Bashar al-Assad at the hands of HTS represents a monumental shift in Syria's political landscape. Decades of authoritarian governance, economic mismanagement, sectarianism and other external proxies led to regime's downfall.

The implications of this unprecedented change extends beyond Syria, with regional destabilization, threats and shifting power dynamics presenting serious challenges. Effective international cooperation will be essential to address the humanitarian crisis, prevent extremism, and rebuild a fractured Syria.