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1. Why New Delhi is Cautious About Events in Syria

The Fall of Assad and the Rise of HTS

The recent ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has sparked jubilation in Damascus but left global capitals, including New Delhi, wary of the unfolding events. Assad, who ruled since 2000 after inheriting power from his father, Hafez al-Assad, was forced to flee as Islamist rebels, led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), advanced on the capital.

Discontent with Assad's Rule

Initially viewed as a reluctant yet popular leader, Assad faced growing discontent due to his failure to address social justice issues during economic liberalization. The discontent stemmed from:

1. **Economic Inequality:** Liberalization disproportionately impacted lower socioeconomic groups.
2. **Political Suppression:** Calls for democratic reform were met with authoritarian crackdowns.
3. **Religious Extremism:** Modern and secular Syria became fertile ground for extremist exploitation.

The Arab Spring protests in 2011, mirroring uprisings across West Asia and North Africa, turned into a brutal civil war. Assad's regime, accused of using chemical weapons, faced opposition backed by the U.S., while Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah supported him.

HTS's Evolution and the Shift in Power

HTS emerged victorious in the recent conflict. Initially formed as Jabhat al-Nusrah in 2012, the group evolved from its origins as a branch of the Islamic State's predecessor. Over time:

- **2013:** Disavowed ties with the Islamic State and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda.
- **2016:** Broke away from al-Qaeda, focusing on localized goals over global jihad.
- **2020:** Successfully dismantled Islamic State and al-Qaeda factions in rebel-held territories.

HTS, described as "political jihadists" by experts like Aaron Y. Zelin, prioritizes pragmatic, localized decision-making over rigid ideological frameworks.

Regional and Global Implications

The weakening of Syria's key allies—Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah—created an opportunity for rebels to capitalize. Russia's focus on Ukraine, Iran's conflicts with Israel, and Hezbollah's setbacks left Assad's forces vulnerable. Turkey's support for HTS further tipped the scales.

Who is Abu Mohammed al-Golani?



- **Transformation:** Al-Golani evolved from al-Qaida affiliate to regional leader, seeking legitimacy & public support.
- **Current role:** He leads Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), ruling northwestern Syria with significant influence.
- **Offensive in Aleppo:** His fighters recently led major offensive, shaking Syria's tense stalemate.
- **Ties to Al-Qaida:** Al-Golani joined al-Qaida in 2003, rising to prominence through its Nusra Front branch in Syria.
- **Break with Al-Qaida:** In 2016, he severed ties with al-Qaida, rebranding his group for broader appeal.
- **Reputation shift:** Al-Golani promoted pluralism, tolerance & outreach to minorities, diverging from his earlier stance.
- **Conflict with Isis:** He rejected merging with Isis, battling it & other factions for dominance in Syria.
- **HTS consolidation:** Under his leadership, HTS merged smaller groups, becoming the dominant force in Idlib province.
- **Global perception:** Despite rebranding, HTS remains US-designated terrorist group, with \$10M bounty on al-Golani.
- **Media strategy:** He changed his public image, granting interviews to Western outlets to distance HTS from global jihadism.

Concerns in New Delhi

India remains cautious, drawing lessons from the instability in Libya and Egypt post-Arab Spring. HTS's assurances of protecting minorities and establishing institutional governance are being met with skepticism.

Outlook for Syria and Global Watch

HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani has pledged to safeguard civilians and address sectarian fears, emphasizing actions over promises. However, New Delhi and other nations are closely monitoring the situation, particularly in light of the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan. The coming months will reveal whether Syria stabilizes under new leadership or descends into further chaos.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

2. How Saudi Arabia Secured the Hosting Rights for the 2034 FIFA World Cup

Saudi Arabia Emerges as the Sole Bidder

On December 11, FIFA is expected to announce Saudi Arabia as the host for the 2034 FIFA World Cup, making it the sole bidder for the event. This marks the return of football to the Gulf region after Qatar hosted the 2022 World Cup. Saudi Arabia's bid showcases how strategic investments and global alliances were employed to secure this prestigious event.



Extensive Sponsorship Deals

Saudi Arabia's path to hosting involved significant financial investments, including 910 sponsorship deals across 28 sports, with 194 focused solely on football. The Public Investment Fund (PIF), the Kingdom's sovereign wealth fund, played a crucial role by backing 346 sponsorships. These efforts were complemented by 48 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) signed with countries worldwide. These agreements helped foster goodwill and provided access to key decision-makers in FIFA.

Strengthening AFC Ties

Saudi Arabia also bolstered its relationship with the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). High-profile partnerships, like the Neom megacity project and Visit Saudi as AFC's Global Partners, positioned the Kingdom as a dominant force in Asian football. This strategy paid off when Saudi Arabia was chosen to host the 2027 Asian Cup and when Yasser Al-Mishehal, president of Saudi's football federation, secured a seat on FIFA's governing council.

Corporate Investments in Global Football

The Kingdom's influence extended through investments in football leagues and clubs worldwide. Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil company, Aramco, partnered with FIFA, despite criticism over human rights concerns. Meanwhile, the Kingdom acquired top international

players and teams, including the English Premier League club Newcastle United. Saudi royals also own clubs in Europe, the UAE, and India, highlighting their global reach.

Australia's Withdrawal

In October 2023, FIFA set a tight 25-day deadline for countries to submit bids for the 2034 World Cup. Saudi Arabia immediately declared its bid, followed by Australia. However, Australia withdrew shortly after to focus on other tournaments, leaving Saudi Arabia as the sole candidate. FIFA later praised Saudi Arabia's bid, giving it a higher score (4.2 out of 5) than the 2026 joint bid by the USA, Canada, and Mexico.

Implications for the Future

Saudi Arabia's unopposed victory is a result of its financial power and strategic alliances. This success could influence the Kingdom's approach to securing the hosting rights for the 2036 Olympics, where it will compete with Qatar and India. For now, Saudi Arabia's efforts underscore how nations can leverage investments and diplomacy to dominate the global sports landscape.

Relevance: GS Prelims

3. PM launches LIC's 'Bima Sakhi Yojana'

Overview



Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the 'Bima Sakhi Yojana' of LIC under which two lakh woman insurance agents will be appointed over the next three years.

About the Scheme

'Bima Sakhi Yojana', an initiative of State-owned LIC, is designed to empower women aged 18-70 years who are Class X pass.

The women agents will receive specialised training and a stipend for the first three years to promote financial literacy and insurance awareness.

Under the scheme, the woman agents will also get a stipend of ₹7,000 per month for the first year, ₹6,000 per month in the second year and ₹5,000 per month in the third year. Bima Sakhis will also get the benefit of commission.

The plan is to appoint two lakh Bima Sakhi over a period of three years.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Governance