



## Indian Foreign Minister's Visit to Syria: A Sign of Deepening Ties

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In the coming days India's External Affairs Minister Smt. Sushma Swaraj is leading a high-level delegation to Syria. India is among those countries that maintained relationship with Syria amidst the flux that surrounded the country in a situation of civil war. Throughout the conflict period, India maintained its mission in Damascus and a number of multi-level visits continued on the both directions.

During the height of the civil war, President Assad sent his political advisor, Mrs. Bhutainai Shaban to India in 2013. Later in January, 2016 Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Al-Muallem visited India. During that visit, India donated a consignment of medicine worth one million dollars. In August, 2016 India's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, M. J. Akbar visited Syria and both sides discussed the growing influence of the ISIS in the region and its growing footprint in the South Asia, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This year in April, Syrian minister of higher education was in India to meet his Indian counterpart and both leaders discussed the prospect of increasing the number of scholarships given to Syrians to study in India. It is worth mentioning here that a number of Syrian students are studying in Indian universities in courses such as IT, communication and applied sciences.

India Syria relations have a long history. India's constant support to Syria on the Golan Heights and Syria's support to India on Jammu & Kashmir have deepened the bilateral relationship. Historical milestones in this relationship include the Friendship Treaty of 1952; the visit of late Syrian President Hafiz Assad to India in 1978 and again in 1983; Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Syria in 2003 and President Bashar Assad visited India in 2008. India has remained active in the economic sphere of Syria as well. In the pre-war era, both ONGC and BHEL were working on exploration and electricity projects. India and Syria have several agreements in field of taxation, income and agriculture.

After the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, India maintained a regular engagement with the Syrian government and expressed its opposition in principled to external intervention or imposed solutions. India's policy has been largely guided by the dictum "Syria-led solution in

Syria” which was proposed by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in the NAM summit of 2012.<sup>1</sup>

In this visit, External Affairs Minister Smt. Sushma Swaraj is leading a high level delegation representing several ministries to participate in 60<sup>th</sup> Damascus International Universal Fair to be held on 6-15 September, 2018 in the capital city of Damascus. During her stay in Syria, she will also participate in Joint Commission Meeting with her Syrian counterpart. Around thirty Indian major companies including ONGC, BHEL and PSU, have been invited to be the part of the high-profile trade fair. According to a media report, many companies from sixty two other countries are also participating but the Indian contingent is likely to be the biggest one.<sup>2</sup>

Syria wants India to revive airline service between the two countries which was suspended after the outbreak of the war. Visa facilities for Indians have already been eased by the Syrian government. Syria also wants India to be an active partner in the reconstruction program along with Iran and Russia. According to a World Bank report, Syria needs US \$ 300 billion worth assistance for its reconstruction program.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the continued violence in the country, India’s economic involvement in Syria has continued. An Indian company Apollo International modernised a steel plant, worth US \$ 25 million under a line of credit facility. Another major Indian giant BHEL is working on an electricity project under difficult circumstances. Syria is reported to have offered India a phosphate block to be developed in its northern desert.

There are many factors which have deepened ties between the two countries. India has a principled position against external intervention and is supportive of Syria’s territorial integrity and unity. Both sides have a common perspective on threats posed by ISIS and terrorism in general. India supports a unified and stable Syria and has always supported the establishment of long term peace and stability in the region and beyond. India supports all efforts to bring about an end to violence by all parties in Syria.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup><http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/need-syria-led-solution-to-conflict--pm/995703/>

<sup>2</sup> Asharq Al-awsat, An Arabic Daily  
<https://aawsat.com/home/article/1381531/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>

<sup>3</sup> Asharq Al-awsat , An Arabic Daily  
<https://aawsat.com/home/article/1381531/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>