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## Assad's Fall, Syrian Military Failure, and Implications for Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

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This paper aims to assess the factors that led to the overnight ouster of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Pakistani interests in the changing Middle East. The paper also analyzes the military weaknesses of Assad as he focused on the political loyalty of his troops rather than performance, belittling dependence on foreign allies, and being vulnerable to quick defeat in the face of an opposition led by HTS. As a result, this has also revealed major security threats facing Pakistan, especially the return of the Zainebiyoun brigade fighters and increasing sectarian tensions. On the other hand, identification of major opportunities where Pakistan can exploit its counter-terrorism experience and political influence in the region. Hence, the analysis established the fact that since Syria is steadily heading towards an era of volatility whereby factions struggle to control means of power, Pakistan needs to find balance between the securitization of its economy and strategic interests of an allegoric link between Iran and India for the stability of the region. Therefore, a proactive foreign policy approach is essential for Pakistan to navigate the shifting alliances and power dynamics in the Middle East. Strengthening regional cooperation and intelligence-sharing mechanisms will be crucial to safeguard national interests and maintain internal stability.

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## 1.0 Introduction

The overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime is a total revolution in the Middle East that has direct implications for Pakistan's strategic location. When Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other rebel groups captured major cities, such as the capital city, Damascus, with little to no fights, they revealed how Assad's military tactic of concentrating more on regime sustainability had badly compromised Syria's military strength. This kind of fast-paced takeover in the region has been expedited because of Russia's preoccupations with Ukraine and Iran's somewhat diminished backing, which presents opportunities and risks to Pakistan's regional interests.

It has marked the end of the Assad dynasty's dominance over Syria for the past half-century, and this is one change that provides the possibility of a new page being turned in Syria's history. In the meantime, however, post-Assad Syria's challenges loom large. As rightly said, in the accommodation process of authoritarianism and sectarian division within the society, it will continue to be a convenient fact that the society will be divided into different parts of the geographical landscape; the impact will be enormous and very difficult for any leader to wish away. Nevertheless, there are several milestones on the way to the construction of the new state that has been damaged by civil war, and it all begins with the fall of Assad.

Beyond normal security concerns, the implications for Pakistan reach far. As Syria fragments among competing opposition groups and as Iran's "Axis of Resistance" weakens, Pakistan faces complex scenarios about how to leverage its unique position between the South and the West Asia. A careful strategic response is needed to the return of Zainabyon brigade fighters, the Iran-India coop from Chabahar port, as well as Iran's potential involvement with militant groups in Syria.

This paper analyses how Pakistan can overcome these challenges and use its opportunities in post-Assad Syria. Through a critical analysis of immediate security imperatives and long-term strategic possibilities, we show that Pakistan can no longer afford to strive for a comprehensive formulation that balances internal security, regional diplomacy, and economic concerns. The prevailing situation should encourage Pakistan to use its counter-terrorism expertise and its relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia to help construct regional stability.

## 2.0 Literature Review

Over the last few years, discussing the prospects of the Syrian conflict has involved considering and predicting the possible fall of the Al-Assad regime and the consequent effects in the Middle East. There is no doubt that Assad has managed to maintain his rule through civil war, but there has been an erosion of support. From a strong economy, Syria has been reduced to its barest form due to war and sanctions – for years, its economy had reduced to 60%, the Syrian pound lost 99% of its value, and over 80% of its citizens were living in poverty as of 2021 (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This resultant economic deterioration has rekindled unwanted protest, even in territories controlled by the regime.

Protests erupted in the southern provinces, such as Sweida and Daraa, in 2023 over price hikes and cuts in subsidies, and people chanted, "The people want the fall of the regime", as in the time of the uprising in 2011 (AFP, 2023). It seems that the Assad regime still had a very weak

authority in its backyard when such an open rebellious movement emerged. When the protests were initially started, it was over economic issues. Still, it transformed into political demonstrations that called for the removal of Bashar al-Assad from power. This phenomenon shocked the authorities after numerous efforts were made to stop such actions (Al Jazeera, 2023). Such signs of discontent, combined with worsening living standards, indicate that despite the aspects of military recapture, Assad's power regime is fragile and ripe for overthrow in case of hikes in pressure.

In addition, critics have noted deep-rooted weaknesses inside the Syrian military that catalyzed the collapse of the regime. Despite the civil war that has lasted more than ten years, Assad's military has "notably dwindled " in terms of human capital and has evolved into multiple groups whose focus is on maintaining the regime in power rather than a unified national army (Gebeily et al., 2024). As Syrian forces entered 2020, the army's size was around 130000; this number decline was attributed to desertions and losses on the battlefield. Morale had been eroded over the years of protracted instability, rampant corruption, and the realization that the tough battle had been delegated to Shiite militias from Iraq and other countries and the Russian Air Force (Gebeily et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, Assad has been militarily supported by Iran's revolutionary guards and Hezbollah, who at one time also supplied not only the workforce but also assumed many critical roles in the Syrian war machine (Gebeily et al., 2024). Notably, as evidenced in a proper war against a capable enemy, which happened at the beginning of 2020, the intervention in Idlib, Syrian forces folded quickly. In February–March, Turkish drone strikes and artillery destroyed dozens of Assad's tanks and killed hundreds of Syrian soldiers and affiliated militiamen, which again exposed " the weakness of a tired military and its aged inventory"(Chulov, 2020). Many Iranian, Afghan, and Pakistani Shia personnel fighting alongside Assad's troops were among the dead in Idlib, which reveals that the regime had come to heavily depend on sectarian foreign mercenaries on the frontline (Chulov, 2020).

Critics note these structural vices – and a disaffected conscript army eroded due to corruption and an over-reliance on hired guns – which implies that even if Assad faces a rebellion across the country without full Iranian or Russian support, his army will disintegrate soon (Gebeily et al., 2024; Mackinnon & Haltiwanger, 2024). Realistic recent scenarios demonstrate this: In one of the FP scenarios, rebels stormed the major cities in two weeks and "demoralized and disorganized" Syrian government forces crumbled rapidly (Mackinnon & Haltiwanger, 2024). This turned out to be true in December of 2024 when during the fast-paced overturning of Assad's regime, Iranian advisors left the region in turmoil and the Hezbollah was engaged in a new war in Lebanon, resulting in Assad's army with no leadership and no means to defend critical positions (Gebeily et al., 2024).

Researchers noted this outcome as hypothetical, although it stemmed from the realities of the Syrian military's weak state. As has been conclusively established in recent literature, there is a sense in which the survival of the regime has more to do with the support the regime receives, and this, as the article shows, if the regime's allies change their tune and or prioritize differently,

then the remaining support base for the regime would not hold out for too long.

Assad's prospective fall entails an earth-shattering value for the Middle East. However, as a regional player and an ideological actor – albeit distant – Pakistan is not immune to the consequential shake-up. The first consequence often mentioned is a direct impact on Iran's standing in the region. Syria, under Assad, has been the chief member of the Axis of resistance against Western and Sunni Arab influence; it has allowed Iran to transport arms and support to Hezbollah in Lebanon and has provided Tehran with a battleground against Israel. As experts pointed out, if Damascus is lost to Iran due to regime change, this "would be catastrophic" for this axis and will shut Iran's direct connection to the Levant (Sharifi, 2024).

Iran laid hundreds of billions of dollars and thousands of members of its Revolutionary Guard and its proxies to prop up Assad (Sharifi, 2024). Losing Syria would remove an important strategic depth and limit the ability of Iran to provide support to Hezbollah significantly, thus severely crippling Tehran's strategic capabilities in the next conflict in the Middle East (Sharifi, 2024). This could change the strategic thinking in Pakistan, and perhaps that is what the secretive agencies of Pakistan want – to make the world pay attention to the militant groups inside the country while keeping the broader, strategic goal of achieving nuclear parity with its neighbours. Iran has been a close ally of Pakistan, while it also has to tread cautiously regarding its relations with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Sunni Arab countries.

A weakened Iran, following the loss of its ally, Syria, may try to assert its leverage in other countries with the same enthusiasm. It can turn towards Pakistan, or it may choose to withdraw and focus within its boundaries due to sanctions and pressure. In any case, Pakistan would have to adjust its regional policy, no matter what course the Taliban decided to take between the two rival camps. Still, some critics argue that the demise of Assad would ease the relations between Pakistan and the Arab states because Assad was a factor that created problems for Islamabad in pursuing its diplomacy in the region. Having been relieved from the burden of not upsetting Iran against the Syria issue, which Pakistan has officially supported busting a settlement but did not act to offend Iran, Pakistan may now act more in consonance with the Sunni Arabs on the future of Syria.

Recent events signify that Pakistan has been following the concept of hedging in welcoming the Syria Arab League's integration in 2023 as a peace building measure, which suggests that, while working on rapprochement with Assad, it has also banned a few Iranian backed militia inside the country (Imran, 2023; Khan, 2024). This implies that the overriding concern in Pakistan is stability; whether stability returns due to Assad's return to power or following Assad's removal, it is therefore amply clear that Pakistan is more interested in personalities as conduits to stability than in personalities that govern stability.

Should Assad be ousted, Pakistan's response from the side of the representatives of its foreign policy and strategic studies would most likely adhere to principles of Syria's sovereignty and non-interference in light of Pakistan's overall approach to foreign relations. As it will be recalled, when there was speculation about the ousting of Assad in the latter part of 2024, Pakistan quickly supported an 'inclusive political solution in Syria within the framework of no foreign interference' (Shabbir, 2024). This official reaction delivered when news of Assad's fall was

brought to the Foreign Office shows that Pakistan's interest is that the new government in Damascus is not only clean from foreign influence but also domestic – this could very well be due to Pakistan's history that it does not want to be a part of any of its neighbouring countries to become a proxy to a foreign power.

Such language also insinuates what Pakistan would not desire after Assad: influence sharing by superpowers or regional enemies, or the emergence of an Islamist Syrian state that discriminates against a section of the Syrian populace. For example, the Syrian rebel coalition that has been assumed to lead the hypothetical transition was dominated by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is an Islamist group with a jihadist background. Pakistan's assertion of the need to be inclusive in Syria can be interpreted as a mild warning to any group (and particularly one formerly associated with al-Qaeda) not to dominate in Damascus (Shabbir, 2024). However, there are issues globally if HTS were to lead the government – HTS is a terrorist group according to the US and other related countries.

Therefore, it may not be internationally recognized and would not receive aid. Being itself a state that has received the flames of terrorism inside its premises, Pakistan may prefer not to let Syria descend into chaos, each time resulting in the emergence of a new hub for transnational terrorism. If an extremist regime occupies office, Islamabad might be faced with a situation where it has to negotiate with friends of the enemies that Pakistan confronts internally. That is why Pakistani analysts emphasize that outside actors should not determine Syria's future but also note that the new masters in Damascus should demonstrate restraint and inclusiveness (Shabbir, 2024).

As for state behaviour, Pakistan would most probably act in concert with Turkey and somehow manage the Syrian transition. Turkey, which has given support to Syria's Sunni insurgents, will be a primary winner in Assad's defeat, something that is in Pakistan's interests due to the strategic partnership between Ankara and Islamabad. Some critics have argued that Ankara may become "one of the main beneficiaries of the change in Syria," the legitimacy and power Ankara seeks to be recognized and further used to address the refugee issue and fight Kurdish forces (Gostoli, 2024).

A post-war Turkey with more influence in Syria is beneficial to Pakistan since Pakistan recognizes Turkey as a brotherly state and has endorsed a majority of its actions in the region. Pakistan may, therefore, find a new Syria more in tune with Ankara and the Sunni camp because it would extend Pakistan's political influence in the Middle East indirectly through a friendly Sunni bloc. Some analyses regard the northern axis as potentially weakening and Syria's future as being dictated by the Turkey-Saudi coalition; some sources suggest that Pakistan's geopolitical assets might increase in case of the deterioration of the triangle Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah (Sputnik News, cited by, for instance, broader analyses, believes that Assad's departure will enhance Pakistan's advantage by strengthening its friends).

However, it needs to be understood that there are definite gains in terms of strategy for Pakistan, though it is fraught with security risks, especially the issues of terrorism as well as sectarianism. This war has always existed in the periphery of Pakistan – it has manifested in the form of radicalization and sectarian mobilization in Pakistan. On the one side, Pakistan faced the

issue of having Sunni militants returning from Iraq and Afghanistan after being influenced by the anti-Assad jihad; on the other side, Pakistani Shia fighters were fighting for Iran in support of Assad's regime. The latter are particularly concerned for more reasons. Many Pakistani Shia youth were recruited to join the Zainebiyoun Brigade to fight in Syria through the lure of funds from Iran on a sectarian basis as well. Islamabad has grown more concerned about this development. In 2024, the Zainebiyoun Brigade, as a terrorist organization and arrested its members in the country (Khan, 2024).

Pakistani officials worried that when the war ended, and more so if Assad was removed from power, they could bring this menace home or else use them as Iran's asset in Pakistan's sectarian fault lines (Khan, 2024). A security expert has aptly pointed out that Zainebiyoun's presence threatens a major sectarian conflict in Pakistan because, by its presence in the country, these forces 'rendered vulnerabilities to deadly Sunni militant attacks (Khan, 2024). The envisaged scenario of Assad's demise might spur this process: a defeated Iran may reintroduce loyal assets in other locations, including Pakistan, to "awaken." There were cases where some of the Zainebiyoun operatives based in Pakistan planned to conduct attacks within the country, as the counterterrorism officials highlighted Khan (2024). Hence, a challenge for Pakistan in the event of a Syrian regime change would be to prevent any backlash by the Shia militants that could turn into a sectarian conflict in the country.

On the other hand, the morale of Sunni jihadists could be boosted due to the assumption of a win in Syria. While Pakistan's own Taliban (TTP) is relevant to the Afghanistan/Pakistan situation, the message of an Islamist insurgency overthrowing a secular despotic regime can spur religious radicalization across the region. According to the Pakistan Daily Dawn, some factions of the Pakistani Taliban have been providing support for the anti-Assad factions, rationalizing it as the fight of jihadists against the US and its allies. Although those numbers were not very large, their impact on the ideologues was immense.

An HTS and allies' victory in Damascus may be cheered by jihadist promoters from Idlib to Islamabad and could increase the recruitment and funding for various militant groups. Any foreign successes would likely be expected to produce domestic gains, and Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies are well aware of the Afghan jihad experience of the 1980s. They may also try to court the new rulers of Syria and regional allies to ensure that any surviving jihadist organization (like the Islamic State), which had been operating across the border in the post-war environment, does not export terrorism to Pakistan, which the latter has regrettably witnessed through Afghanistan in the past.

In political terms, Pakistan would also have to decide when to congratulate a new authority in Syria and the extent of its contribution to rebuilding Syria. Owing to its tight economic position and problems at home, Pakistan cannot contribute significantly to the reconstruction of Syria. However, diplomatically, it could serve as a bridge, while Pakistan has friendly relations with all of them (Turkey, the Gulf Arabs, Iran, and it also kept communication with Damascus. Islamabad may use multilateral organizations like the OIC or the UN to, on the one hand, call for foreign assistance and, on the other, appeal to the new Syrian authorities not to follow the path of isolating

the country, as this could bring more harm. This aligns with Pakistan's general stand of promoting the peace process in different conflict-prone regions (Imran, 2023). To note, even while Assad's overthrow was still an option on the table, Pakistan expressed its concerns about actions that would make Syria even more unstable – for example, it called the Israeli airstrikes in Syria in 2021 'unacceptable', which did not contribute to turning its back on any aggression against sovereignty else (Arab News, 2021).

Such positions seem to be strategic reasoning applicable to Pakistan: the recognition of Syrian sovereignty and the fear of instability that crosses the border, whether in the form of refugees, terrorism, or sectarian conflict. In this regard, Pakistan also has to manage public opinion at home. It divides Pakistani sectarian attitude; for Sunni militants, Assad with Iran is an oppressor of Sunnis, while Shiites see the war in the context of the protection of shrines and the Shia arc.

The fall could become a club for sectarian players in Pakistan: It is interesting how Sunni extremists will try to use it to boost anti-Shia sentiments in Pakistan. Here, the role of the state of Pakistan would be to avoid any push to Syria's sectarian situation that can escalate sectarianism in Pakistan as well. In this regard, Islamabad has recently quickly acted to ban groups, such as Zainebiyoun, while keeping a strict eye on sectarian outfits hostile to Shiites, thus indicating it is ready in two ways to smooth that equation (Khan, 2024). Thus, the consistent continuation of such an even-handed and security-first strategy will also be necessary for the Syrian endgame.

Finally, an analysis of the rapidly growing body of commentary and analysis of a prospective collapse of the Assad regime suggests a wide-ranging picture of impacts relevant to Pakistan. It is argued that although Assad's regime has not completely crumbled, it exists on very fragile grounds, suffering from economic crises, severe erosion of its military forces, and full dependence on one or two sponsors (Gebeily et al., 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2022). If those pillars were to be removed, the initial impact would go through the intricate strategic map of the Middle East, upsetting existing dynamics. As Orlov (2024) asserted, it would be a strategic defeat for Iran that possibly affected its regional aspirations and a victory for Turkey and Arab states that were against Assad.

Arguably, Pakistan's stance on the issue is ambivalent; Pakistan is directly involved in Syria, but at the same time, it is not directly involved at all. According to the literature, Pakistan would want to grasp hope for change, for instance, getting a friendlier government in Damascus that is in cahoots with Pakistan's friends while avoiding the negative at all costs, such as terrorism escalation or sectarian conflict overflow. It seems that the Pakistani policymakers have some consensus on the fact that stability in Syria, whether with Assad or without him, is preferable to continued anarchy. That is why the official policy of Pakistan focuses on the political process, the participation of the Syrian opposition and the Syrian leadership as the primary actors of change, demanding a reasonable regime that can put an end to the war in Syria and prevent the transformation of the country into a stronghold for jihadists (Shabbir, 2024). It means that for military-diplomatic reasons, Pakistan may use the Syrian civil war experience or internal weakness and international intervention.

On the other hand, if the conflict in Syria is resolved, it will contribute to the idea in favour

of Pakistan's foreign policy that long-term conflicts in Muslim countries such as Afghanistan or Yemen can be solved only with political solutions and democracy – principles that Islamabad promotes at international level (Imran, 2023). In terms of ideology, an overthrow of an authoritarian government through violence also echoes issues of liberation in Pakistan about the suitability of force in politics rather than compromise; however, Pakistan's setting is altogether distinct. From the long-term strategic perspective, the two countries' adjustment to the Syrian situation would be strategic in three respects: security, diplomacy, and ideology.

There is no simplistic view of the nature of the main interests of Pakistan in post-Assad Syria. Thus, despite increasing internal threats to security, the country wins in some geopolitical aspects. In the best possible end, the replacement of the Assad regime – if and when it happens – would be a landmark for regime security in the region and a challenging occasion for shifting the Pakistani foreign policy that has to serve its strategic interest in that volatile region and stability. With such an event, Pakistan will be compelled to be more active in the Middle East while, at the same time, not losing sight of the principles of diplomacy and Political Realism as it seeks to leave behind one era in Syria and wait for the dawn of another.

### **3.0 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This research uses a secondary method of data collection. It employs a qualitative approach that takes a critical approach to gather an immense amount of data from scholarly articles, institutional reports, and expert analyses of the possible terms for the fall of the Assad regime and its consequences on Pakistan. Secondary research is befitting here since it provides a broad synthesis of various published studies, giving a good overview of the rapidly evolving regional environment where the organization will operate without the temporal and practical constraints of primary field research (Johnston, 2017). Due to accessibility concerns, political relevance, and sensitive issues of the primary environment, secondary research is a proper, efficient, and ethical way of data collection.

#### **3.2 Sources of Data**

The most important sources used in critical analysis were abstracted and indexed journals, books, and monographs. To source the most recent literature, Scopus, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis Online, and Wiley Online Library were searched for publications from 2019-2024 focusing on Middle Eastern geopolitics, military sociology of insurgencies, Pakistani foreign policy, and regional security threats. The emphasis was placed on the articles from the academic papers of political science, international relations, and security studies to avoid using unreliable information (Snyder, 2019).

When using only the sources published in peer-reviewed publications, the research work ensures increased reliability and validity of the findings, given that the papers analyzed have been put under scholarly scrutiny.

The information from international organizations like the International Crisis Group, the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), and the Institute for the Study of War were



also analyzed in the present study by examining their report and working papers. These documents provided current information about the conditions in the field, the state of the factions, and new security threats.

Due to the geopolitical system changes after the Assad regime's ousting, fresh and near real-time information from policy research centres could be valuable for supplementing academically slower-producing material.

Where pertinent, indexes obtained from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and the Asian Development Bank concerning CPEC advancements, capability era, and area statistical data were injected individually. Foreign fighter movements, humanitarian access, and conflict-induced demographic change were among the most dependent sources of information from official UN reports.

The inclusion of official statistics permits the factual data as the backup for qualitative observations and prevents several speculative arguments – statistical data acts as a kind of reality check (Bryman, 2016).

### **3.3 Data Collection Methods**

An overall approach was used while selecting the articles with the help of keywords like "Syria regime collapse," "Assad military structure," "Pakistan regional security," "Zainebiyoun Brigade," "Chabahar Port geopolitics," and "CPEC security implications." In addition, limiting functions (AND, OR, NOT) were employed; the date function (2019–2024) and the peer-reviewed articles were included.

A systematic search also reduces the chances of the researcher coming across only a selected source that supports a particular stand rather than an inclusive study of other sources within a field (Booth et al., 2016).

### **3.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

#### **3.4.1 Inclusion Criteria:**

- Publications between 2019 and 2024 to ensure relevance to the contemporary post-Assad context.
- Focus on Middle Eastern security, insurgent group dynamics, Pakistani foreign and security policy, and Iran-India regional collaboration.
- English-language sources to maintain consistency and comprehensibility.

#### **3.4.2 Exclusion Criteria:**

- Opinion pieces or news articles lack scholarly validation.
- Studies focusing exclusively on humanitarian aspects without strategic, military, or economic relevance.
- Pre-2018 literature unless cited in more recent analyses for historical background.

The time-bound and thematic constraints ensure that the study remains tightly focused on its specific research objectives, maximizing its relevance and accuracy.

### **3.5 Data Analysis Methods**

A qualitative thematic analysis approach was adopted to categorize findings into three major themes:

- (1) Syrian military disintegration and its structural causes,
- (2) Regional instability and new security threats, and
- (3) Pakistan's strategic vulnerabilities and opportunities.

As mentioned, the coding was done manually to place the insights under the above general headings. The information was then compared across the different sources for consensual, contradictory, and emergent information.

Thematic analysis applies greatly in secondary research involving datasets in articles, reports, and statistics, among others, since it allows a researcher to emerge with significant patterns from a large and diverse data set (Nowell et al., 2017).

### **3.6 Critical Analysis and Triangulation**

All the findings about source bias, geopolitical perspective, and organizational viewpoint were critically reviewed. This was done by obtaining data from at least three sources before adopting that specific fact or data analysis.

Due to the controversy of the political processes in the Syrian and Pakistani countries, the author had to follow the criteria of fragmentation of the information and triangulation to minimize subjective interference and produce more objective conclusions (Flick, 2018).

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

As this research study is secondary, it was conducted without much violation of any standard ethics for conducting research. Since data was collected from secondary sources and online resources, journals, and news articles, no participants were involved in this research. Thus, no need was found to seek ethics approval. Nevertheless, all academic malpractice measures involving plagiarism were observed to ensure that all works of other authors used in the proposal were cited appropriately as per the standards of the American Psychological Association (APA Ethics Code, 2020). Researchers should adhere to ethical practices while conducting secondary research to increase the research's reliability and accuracy.

### **3.8 Theoretical Framework**

This study utilized the realist paradigm as the theoretical foundation that informs the assessment of Pakistan's strategy in light of post-Assad Syria. In the premise of realism, priority is accorded to the state, national interest, and power relations in a system described as anarchic (Waltz, 1979). From this perspective, Pakistan's actions, such as managing sectarian threats, reacting to Iranian Indian collaboration in Baluchistan, and dealing with militant bleeding, are considered measures to protect sovereignty and strategic state autonomy (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Furthermore, the study relies on Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which looks into how related security threats in geographically neighbouring states influence and are interrelated (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Divisions in the geography of Syria, the appearance of such players as HTS and the Zainebiyoun Brigade, and changes in alliances on the Middle East region level can all be noted as contributing to the realization of the entwined security environment. In this regard, Pakistan's response is not unique; rather, it forms a part of the environment of threats and opportunities that emerged from regional developments. Thus, integrating realism and RSCT, this framework offers a more profound analytical approach to Pakistan's realistic and security-

driven policy towards Syria and the Middle East instability.

#### **4.0 Findings and Results**

##### **4.1. Internal Military Decay and Coup-Proofing Backlash**

In this politically diverse country, which, together with Iran and Hezbollah, became subjects of Washington's 'axis of resistance', the long-term coup-proofing carried out by the Assad family since Hafez al-Assad and deepened by his son Bashar destroyed the Syrian military. Because Assad cared mostly about the loyalty of the officers rather than their competence, he shaped an organization unfit for unified action, especially during emergencies, which are inherent to the nature of a nation-state (Ford, 2023). Hafez al-Assad's failure to merge the nine army divisions and trusting only five of them laid the foundation for the long-term division that was to occur (Heydemann, 2022).

This negatively affected watering down the hierarchy system and, hence, professionalism. They also insisted on settling intra-military matters, some of which were physical fights, which added to the dysfunction. Bashar al-Assad inherited this flawed organization and deepened it by imposing limitations on urban training and separating intelligence activities (Sayigh, 2024). Its consequences were a military system pervaded by coup fears and internal purges rather than an institution developed to defend the country or maintain internal order.

##### **4.2. Sectarian Stratification and Resentment Within Ranks**

The consistent employment of Alawite officers among Sunni-majority enlisted men also led to sectarianism that was unprecedented over the years. Consequently, the ordinary soldiers, mainly Sunni, became bitter towards the regime's elite after observing that the latter held leadership positions. Hence, disaffection was central to the breakdown of loyalty during the Syrian uprising of 2011. Seeing the demonstrators as a manifestation of the overall Syrian public's discontent, many Sunni soldiers identified with the protesters (Nasr, 2023). The failure of a proper response from Assad's forces up to the early stages of the civil war could be largely attributed to internal frustration and low morale.

##### **4.3. Foreign Military Dependence and Hollow Victories**

Due to the civil war, the shortcomings in the Syrian regime's military were increasingly being exposed. However, the Assad regime secured a significant territorial ground back in the later period of the 2010s without really commanding popular support inside the country and with the help of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia. Iranian Revolutionary Guard units conducted a pincer movement and night raids, which are basic tactics hardly ever achieved by Syrian forces (Sayigh, 2024). This showed not only the ineffectiveness of the national army but also the fact that Assad has had to turn to foreign allies.

Russian aviation demonstrated a great influence in changing the odds in favour of the regime, especially in the Aleppo campaigns. At the same time, Iran-supported militias offered boots on the ground and depth in addition. However, the case of these foreign actors affected the Syrian regime's independence and Assad's ability to solely govern the country with his resources

(Lister, 2022). The case with the so-called elite armies of the Syrian military was sometimes even worse, as many of the units from the pro-regime militias aimed independently and self-funded mostly by criminal activity.

#### **4.4. Fragmentation of Opposition Forces**

Thus, after the fall of the Assad regime, in Syria's political map, fragmentation became a characteristic. This contest was fragmented on the ideological and territorial basis of the two major contestants and their supporters. HTS, under the leadership of Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, tried to present itself as a competent government. Notwithstanding, aspects such as ideological stance and authoritarian features remain critical in questioning its governance competence (International Crisis Group, 2024).

There are other factions, such as the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, that further divide the control or influence over parts of the country. Syria News Agency states that the Syrian National Army (SNA) has an estimated number of seventy thousand soldiers; on the other hand, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has sixty thousand soldiers. This kind of opposition structure has had many groups, and they often fight each other, thus complicating governance and humanitarian interventions. According to the United Nations reports, after Assad's downfall, inter-factional fighting has increased by 30 per cent and access to humanitarian aid by 40 per cent (Institute for the Study of War, 2024).

#### **4.5. Emerging Threats to Regional Stability**

The decentralization of power in Syria has brought a series of consequences to the region. It is agreed that the main issue is the struggle for oil reserves, especially in the north of the country, where Kurdish authorities act as the main owners of 80% of the oil production. It has not only fueled conflicts between Kurdish factions and other factions, but also attracted the attention of other parties, which means that the risk of renewed proxy conflict is quite high (Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2024).

In addition, it is amplified that governance in key cities, such as Aleppo, is still fragmented among various militias and security forces that apply their laws. This shambolic security structure has prevented some basic services from being restored, not to mention given rise to many criminal organizations and networks. A plan for a joint military council in April 2024 never materialized due to internal conflicts, thus the challenges that come with trying to create a central security pillar (Nadimi, 2024). Currently, for instance, Syria lacks a proper military or police structure that compels the nation to be open to internal friction, cross-border terrorism, and the revival of radical factions.

#### **4.6. Pakistan's Strategic Security Concerns**

In this regard, the changing environment to the removal of Assad poses several severe security threats to Pakistan. Among them is the Zainebiyoun Brigade – an organization supported by Iran with many Pakistani citizens on board. It has enjoyed improved experience, strength, and

coordination after recruiting around 2,000 members of the KSA's Yemen battalion and now has nearly 10,000 armed men (UNDOC, 2024). These recruitment attempts in Parachinar, Hangu, and the southern Punjab region have raised ISIS's alarm among Pakistan's security apparatus.

These are the freely moving militants who pose two major threats: first, they may push the sectarian conflict back into Pakistan; second, some of them can be under Iran's control. According to the reports, despite a recent decline in the number of fighters, many of the Zainebiyoun fighters have close connections with the local households, hence posing a threat to the recruitment of militants and radicalization in the country (Carnegie Endowment, 2024).

According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2024), there are between 1,800 to 2,400 Pakistani origin militiamen in Iraq, most of whom are in association with Iran's surrogate organizations. These people should be considered a pool of trainers and experienced insurgents who can foment unrest once they return home. This gothic further to indicate that Pakistan needs to step up and increase cooperation with counterterrorism mechanisms within the region.

#### **4.7. The Iran-India Nexus and Balochistan's Volatility**

Developing the strategic relationship between Iran and India, especially through ventures such as the Chabahar Port and rail projects, adds another dimension to this equation. While Chinese investment in Balochistan may bring some economic advantages, it has also heightened regional tensions, posing significant challenges for Pakistan's security and stability. There are indications that the interaction and cooperation between Iranian and Indian intelligence have grown, which may intensify Baloch separatism (Ford, 2024).

Balochistan, being the strategic province of Pakistan, having insurgent and sectarian activities, is highly important for the overall security and economic progress of the entire country. For instance, the region supplies almost 48% of the country's gas and 32% of its oil, making it vital in energy security (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). External interferences or local disturbances could threaten this important supply chain.

#### **4.8. Strategic Opportunities and Economic Imperatives**

However, there are also opportunities arising out of the change in the regional environment as well. The risks are, nevertheless, considerable. Such initiatives as the China-Pakistan-Economic-Corridor promise a total overhauling of the economy. Currently, worth \$62 billion, CPEC envisages the development of a road link between Gwadar Port and China's Xinjiang province (Asian Development Bank, 2024). However, the success of this initiative depends to a greater extent on regional security.

An unstable Syria and the region at large may slow CPEC's progress by impacting the supply chain and elevating militant frequency and investors' perception. Therefore, Pakistan must try to build a two-pronged approach: raise a defensive and intelligence wall around the borders, evaluate the social and economic growth on the one hand, and improve the condition of backward areas of the country, such as Balochistan.

## 5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Pakistan is at a crossroads in the Middle Eastern geopolitical theatre, surrounded by tough challenges and opportunities amid a fundamental reframing of regional dynamics. A strategic inflexion point in Syria in the era of the fall of Assad calls for a comprehensive new, need, wide-ranging national response.

Returning 8,000-10,000 Zainebiyoun Brigade fighters poses a sophisticated security dilemma—the most immediate challenge. It leads to a situation much outside the tried counter-terrorism measures, for a thin line has to be drawn between security and sectarian emotion. Pakistan, therefore, needs to establish long-term study and diffuse and effective long-term conflict prevention, which should embrace enhanced monitoring and reintegration designed for specific sides and community-based conflict.

Such relations between Iran and India in Balochistan pose a geo-strategic issue. Unfortunately, the region is considered a focal point of national economic activities due to its contribution of nearly 40 % of the country's gas production and shelters many important installations of CPEC. The recent \$1.5 billion development package objective shows that the Centre aimed to safeguard territorial and economic sovereignty while fighting for non-marginalization of the region.

Pakistan, due to its distinct geographical location, has the following strategic advantages for any business. The country lies at the crossroads of South and West Asia; it has experience in anti-terrorism and armed power and has technological capabilities. It is why they are left with a more radical positive strategy that can be flipped from possible weaknesses into actual strengths.

For a comprehensive strategy, a multidimensional framework that considers security, economic, and diplomatic dimensions is needed. Advanced border control technologies and specialized counter-terrorism cooperation are considered security modernization. Economic repositioning ensures that CPEC investments are secured and post-conflict reconstruction opportunities are considered.

This does not just require mere traditional diplomatic manoeuvres, but a whole state of mind to make possible otherwise potential sources of friction between the nation and the regions. That Pakistan now faces the prospect of breaking from that stranglehold and becoming an important stabilizing force in an increasingly complex, often unpredictable geopolitical environment cannot be overstated.

**Nouroz Khan Bijarani:** Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

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