

India-Syria Bilateral Relations

Political

India and Syria enjoy friendly political relations based on historic and civilizational links. India's traditional support for just Arab causes notably the Palestinian cause and for the return of the occupied Golan Heights to Syria is appreciated by the Syrians. Mahatma Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru and Indira Gandhi are remembered with great respect in Syria.

India has stressed on Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process, in line with UNSC Resolution 2254, with a firm commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic.

There has been excellent cooperation with Syria in multilateral forums. Syria has always supported Indian candidatures at international platforms.

India has been monitoring the situation after the departure of President Assad on 8 December 2024. We hope that the new constitution, due to be drafted takes into account the interests of all the sections of the Syrian society. In the immediate aftermath of the political change in Syria, India carried out the evacuation of 77 Indian nationals from Syria on 10-11 December 2024.

Bilateral Visits:

1. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited Syria in November 2003, during which 9 agreements in diverse fields were signed.
2. President Bashar Al-Assad paid a State Visit to India from June 17-21, 2008. BIPPA, DTAA and a Work Plan on Cooperation in Agriculture were concluded during the visit.
3. In the first Presidential visit from India to Syria, President Smt. Prathibha Singh Patil, accompanied by large official and business delegations, visited Syria from November 26-29, 2010. During the visit, number of training slots offered to Syria under ITEC Programme was increased from 45 to 90. MOU for Cooperation in Media field, and a Cultural Exchange Programme were signed. India-Syria Joint Business Council was launched. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met Syrian Prime Minister Wael Al Halki on the side-lines of the NAM Summit in Tehran in August 2012. Our PM conveyed India's support for a Syrian-led political process to resolve the crisis.
4. Syrian Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr. Fayssal Mekdad visited India in July-August, 2011 to thank India for its support to Syria during the ongoing unrest in the country.

5. Syrian Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs & Expatriates Walid Al Mouallem paid an official visit to India on January 11-14, 2016 and met EAM Sushma Swaraj and the two sides agreed to further enhance bilateral cooperation in diverse fields.
6. Shri M.J. Akbar, Minister of State for External Affairs, visited Syria on August 19-20, 2016 and called on President, Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and other dignitaries.
7. Syrian Minister of Higher Education Atef Naddaf visited Delhi in April 2018 and met Minister of HRD to further enhance mutual cooperation in the field of Education.

Recent Visits and interactions:

1. Hon'ble Minister of State (MoS) for External Affairs and Parliamentary Affairs Shri V. Muraleedharan paid an official visit to Syria from 12-13 July 2023, the first Ministerial-level visit from India to Syria since August 2016. During the visit, MoS called on President Dr. Bashar Al Assad and Prime Minister Eng. Hussein Arnous and discussed ways to further strengthen bilateral ties, including development partnership assistance, education and capacity building. He also met Foreign Minister, Health Minister and Higher Education Minister.
2. On 17 November 2023, H.E. Dr. Fayssal Mekdad, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Syrian Arab Republic participated virtually in the 2nd Voice of Global South Summit in the Foreign Ministers' Session chaired by External Affairs Minister, H.E. Dr. S. Jaishankar.
3. On 17 August 2024, H.E. Dr. Fayssal Mekdad, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Syrian Arab Republic participated in the 2nd Foreign Minister's Session of the 3rd Voice of Global South Summit in virtual format. He shared his valuable views on working together towards a better shared future.
4. On 19-22 August 2024, MEA organised a visit of Senior Officials from Health Ministries of 25 countries. Two Senior officials from Syria visited India. During the visit, the officials met with their Indian counterparts at Indian Pharmacopoeia Commission (IPC), Ghaziabad (New Delhi). As part of industry engagement, the delegation also visited Janaushadhi Kendra and AMRIT store in Agra and the state-of-the-art vaccine/drugs manufacturing units and R&D facilities at Genome Valley in Hyderabad city.
5. On 6 September 2024 H.E. Ms. Rania Ahmad, Deputy Minister of Economy and Foreign Trade, Syrian Arab Republic participated in the inaugural edition of the CII-India Mediterranean Business Conclave that was organised by CII in partnership with Ministry of External Affairs of India in New Delhi.

6. In September 2024, EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar met the Syrian FM Bassam Sabbagh on the sidelines of the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. They spoke about the cooperation in health, education and capacity development and shared views on the ongoing developments in West Asia.

7. On 29 November 2024, the Syrian delegation led by Mr. Ayman Raad, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Syria visited India to lead the 6th round of the FOC. The Indian delegation was led by Dr. Suresh Kumar, Joint Secretary (WANA), Ministry of External Affairs.

8. On 05-06 February 2025, two professors from Syria namely Prof. Ahed Khezam, President of Al-Wataniya Private University, Hama and Prof. Nasser Thallaj, President of Al-Rachid Private University for Science & Technology, Rural Damascus participated in the 1st India-Arab Universities' Presidents' Conference held in New Delhi.

Development, Humanitarian and Capacity Building Assistance

India has been extending development and humanitarian assistance to Syria in different forms over the years. In wake of the devastating earthquake in Syria on 06th February, 2023, Government of India had sent two special flights containing 30 tonnes of relief material. The consignment also contained specialized anti-cancer medicines which were handed over to the Ministry of Health, Syria on March 09, 2023. State of Kerala, India also donated an amount of 20 million Indian Rupees (INR) as financial assistance to the 2023 earthquake victims of Syria.

Government of India sent another consignment of anti-cancer medicines weighing around 1400 kgs as humanitarian assistance to the Government and people of Syria. The consignment was formally handed over to Ministry of Health by Ambassador Dr. Irshad Ahmad on 26 August 2024.

At Brussels conferences on Syria, India pledged USD 2.5 million in 2013, USD 2.5 million in 2014, USD 2 million in 2015 for developmental assistance. The funding was routed to Syria through UN offices. In 2016, India chose to extend assistance of USD 6 million bilaterally in the form of food items and medicines.

In response to a request from the Syrian Government for emergency humanitarian assistance, GoI gifted 2,000 MT of rice to Syria in Feb-March 2021.

Assistance during COVID pandemic: On July 2, 2020, India sent a 10 MT consignment of medicines to Syria to assist the country in the fight against COVID pandemic. This was the largest ever medical assistance from any country to Syria in the pandemic time and also the

first humanitarian assistance since the imposition of US sanctions Act on Syrian government on June 17, 2020. Earlier in March 2018, India had delivered humanitarian aid worth US\$ 6 million in the form of pharmaceuticals and food stuff (tea, sugar, palm oil).

Limb Camps: Under 'India for Humanity' initiative launched by MEA as a part of the Gandhi150 celebrations, an Artificial Limb Fitment Camp was organized in Damascus in Dec 2019 – Jan 2020. During the 38-days camp, a total of 515 limbs were fixed to 483 beneficiaries from different parts of Syria. The 2nd Artificial Limb Fitment Camp in Damascus was inaugurated by Secretary (CPV & OIA) Dr. Ausaf Sayeed on October 2, 2022 on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti. 531 Syrian nationals benefited from the services of the camp. We have also offered training of Syrian nationals for fitment of limbs in India under ITEC.

Next-Gen Center for Information Technology (NexGen IS-CEIT): The Centre was set up in Damascus with the assistance of C-DAC in Dec. 2010. An agreement was signed between Gol and Government of Syria in October 2019 for upgrading it into a Next-Gen Center at an estimated cost of Rs 4 crore. The project has been completed and handed over to the Government of Syria on 20 October 2021.

India has been actively involved in capacity building of the Syrian youth in different ways. Under the "Study in India" programme, a total of 1500 seats have been offered to Syrian students for UG, Master and Ph.D. programmes in four phases since 2017-18 with emphasis on technical and managerial capacity building of Syrian youth.

Currently, Gol is offering 25 ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Relations) scholarships to pursue various bachelors, masters and doctorate programmes in reputed Universities in India. Also, some seats are offered to Syrian nationals to pursue courses in Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy under the AYUSH Scholarship Scheme of ICCR. Scholarships for Syrian students to learn Hindi are also offered under the Scheme of Propagation of Hindi Abroad at Kendriya Hindi Sansthan Agra.

A total of 90 training slots are offered to Syria annually under ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme), which are short-term professional training programmes. India made a tailor-made training programme, under ITEC, for 13 Syrian Officers from Supreme Audit Institution, Syria and that too in Arabic language in September 2024 at International Centre for Information Systems and Audit (iCISA), which is the International Training Centre of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG).

The Foreign Service Institutes of the both countries signed an MoU of cooperation in January 2018. Three batches of the Syrian diplomats have since availed special trainings in India successively in (26) 2018, (40) 2019 and (19) 2020 and total Syrian diplomats trained by FSI are 85. 2nd Global South Young Diplomats Forum was held at Sushma Swaraj Institute of

Foreign Service (SSIFS) from 09-20 September 2024 in which a Syrian diplomat also participated.

Economic & Commercial Engagements

An LoC of US\$ 240 million was extended to Syria in May 2009 for part financing (52%) of the 2x200 MW Tishreen Thermal Power Plant Extension project costing US\$ 430 million. The project was awarded to BHEL with a total disbursement of US\$ 100 million so far. The project was halted force-majeure by BHEL when the crisis began in Syria in 2011.

India has facilitated the development and modernization of the Hama Iron & Steel Plant in Syria under a LOC of US\$25 million, which was extended in 2008. Indian company Apollo International Limited in tandem with GECOSTEEL under the Syrian Ministry of Industry has completed the project in May 2017.

India assisted Syria in carrying out a feasibility study on augmentation of its phosphate production. A consortium of Indian companies, comprising of PDIL, RITES and MECON carried out the study. An MOU on Cooperation in Fertilizer sector was concluded in October 2010 to facilitate Indian involvement in the development of phosphate fertilizer sector in Syria. Further, cooperation in this field has to resume post crisis Syria.

Indian companies have long association in the Syrian oil sector since 2004, which includes two significant investments of US\$ 350 million. ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) entered Syria with a 60% participating interest (PI) in an Exploration Block-24 in 2004 near Deir-Ezzor in Northern Syria. Subsequently, OVL acquired a stake of 37% jointly with CNPC China in Al Furat Petroleum Company (AFPC) in January 2016. Due to the challenging security situation, the operational activities are suspended in Block-24 since 2012.

Himalaya Herbals has a joint venture providing technical know-how and materials for manufacture and marketing of herbal drugs and cosmetics in Syria (further progress suspended on account of the ongoing crisis). Mahindra & Mahindra signed a 10 year contract with M/s Al Furat Tractor Company for supply of tractors with a provision for Assembly Joint Venture in the future that could amount to over Euro 30 million (Progress halted due to sanctions on Syria).

Bilateral Trade Exchange between Syria & India for the period from 2015-2023

Year	Exports from India (in million USD)	Exports from Syria (in million USD)
2015	103,6	28,8
2016	92,1	45,2
2017	137,0	47,5
2018	142,4	35,3

2019	196,8	35,9
2020	151,7	17,3
2021	120,1	10,034
2022	244,5	6,83
2023	20,335	1,95

* Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, Syria

Major commodities of Export to Syria include cereals (especially rice), pharmaceutical products, man-made filaments, cotton yarns and textiles, organic chemicals, etc.

Major commodities of Import from Syria include almonds, wool, leather, cumin, black sesame, minerals (phosphate), olive oil, tobacco, dry fruits, etc.

Cultural Relations

India features as an influence in Syrian culture historically through the Silk Route and in particular through the adaptation of the Panchatantra into the Arabic '*Kalila wa Dimna*'. More recent influences have been Tagore and the eminent Syrian poet and Ambassador to India Omar Abu Rishah (1954-59). The Cultural Exchange Programme, in effect since 1975, provides framework for bilateral cooperation. A number of cultural delegations from India have visited Syria and vice versa, under the programme.

Syrian people are fond of Indian culture. Bollywood movies are very popular among them. India is seen as the most active country in Syria involved in organizing cultural activities even during the crisis period. Indian cultural week was observed in Damascus and Latakia in April 2017, with screening of Bollywood films in both cities and performances by a 6-member Odissi Dance troupe, sponsored by ICCR. In January 2018, a Rajasthani Folk troupe rendered four performances in different cities. More recently, a 15 member Bhagra Group "Bhola Panchhi" visited Syria from 30 January - February 03, 2022 sponsored by ICCR.

Literary exchanges between the Arab Writers Union of Syria and the Sahitya Akademi, through an MoU signed in 2003 has led to translations of works of Syrian and Indian writers into Arabic and Indian languages and regular exchange of delegations between Sahitya Akademi and Arab Writers Union.

Under the Distinguished Visitors' Programme (DVP) of ICCR, senior leader of the ruling Ba'ath Party and Head of the Higher Education Bureau Dr. Mohsen Bilal visited India in November 2019. Earlier in 2017, the Grand Mufti of Syria visited India under the same Programme. He has always been a vociferous admirer of India.

Since 2016, Syria has been a regular participant in the Surajkund International Crafts Mela held annually in Faridabad. In 2019, Syrian artist Iskandar Istrefan Alhalaby from Syria won the Kala Ratna award for Mosaic craft.

Indian Community

The size of the Indian community in Syria has been very small for a long time owing to the Syrian crisis. It further shrank significantly due to recent developments in the country including the departure of Bashar Al-Assad on December 8, 2024 by Syrian opposition forces. Presently, the number of Indian nationals in Syria is 39 including 13 who are working in various UN Organizations and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Syria.

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