

**Embassy of India
Damascus**

India-Syria Bilateral Relations

Political:

India and Syria enjoy friendly political relations based on historic and civilizational links. Both countries have a secular, nationalist and developmental orientation, share similar perceptions on many international and regional issues and are a member of NAM. 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.

There have been regular bilateral exchanges at the highest levels since the establishment of diplomatic ties. In recent past, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited Syria in November 2003, during which 9 agreements in diverse fields were signed. President Bashar Al-Assad (PBA) 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. 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. Syria reiterated its support for India's permanent membership of UNSC. 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.

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 county. As part of the IBSA initiative, an IBSA delegation visited Syria in August 2011 and held meetings with President Assad and FM Mouallem. Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban, Presidential Media and Political Advisor visited India in March 2013 and thanked India for its stand on the Syrian conflict. Joint Secretary (WANA) paid two visits to Damascus in December 2013 and February 2015 for the Syria-India Foreign Office consultations.

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. 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. Secretary (ER) accompanied by JS (WANA) visited Damascus in June 2017. 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.

More recently, Secretary (ER) accompanied by JS (WANA) visited Damascus from May 19-21, 2019 and had fruitful discussion on further enhancing bilateral relations in diverse fields, with the Syrian leadership including Prime Minister, Deputy PM & Foreign Minister, Head of Planning & International Cooperation Commission, Ministers of Electricity, Industry, Petroleum & Natural Resources, Grand Mufti and Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs & Expatriates.

India's friendly relations with Syria stood the test of time when the Syrian crisis broke in 2011. India took its principled stand in resolving the conflict in a non-military and through an inclusive Syrian-led political process, which has been much appreciated by the Syrian Government and people alike. India continued to maintain its Embassy even during the peak

of the crisis. Syria continued to unconditionally support all Indian candidatures at the international platforms. In March 2018, India delivered humanitarian aid worth US\$ 6 million in form of pharmaceuticals and food stuff (*tea, sugar, palm oil*). Under the “Study in India” scholarship programme of the GoI, 393 Syrian students were placed in several Indian Universities for UG, Masters and Ph.D programmes during the academic year 2018-19, and another 600 scholarship slots have been allotted for the academic year 2019-20. The Foreign Training Institutes of the two countries signed an MOU of cooperation in January 2018. Two batches of the Syrian diplomats have since availed training in India.

Economic & Commercial Engagements:

An LoC of US\$ 240 million was extended to Syria for part financing (52%) of the 2x200 MW Tishreen Thermal Power Plant Extension project costing US\$ 430 million. The Government of Syria (GoS) is financing 48% of the project cost. The project was halted force-majeure by BHEL when the crisis began, leading to many corresponding issues of demurrage charges on the imported equipment, accumulated interest on outstanding payments and soon. All such issues have been amicably sorted-out and the Syrian request of restructuring of the line of credit acceded to, during a series of meetings between officials of the two sides. BHEL is expected to resume the extension work soon.

India-Syria Centre of Excellence in IT was set up at Damascus with the assistance from Government of India through C-DAC in Dec. 2010, but could not be operationalised due to premature recall of the Indian experts on security grounds when the crisis broke. During the visit of Secretary (ER) in May 2019, the issue was again discussed with the Syrian authorities. The Indian side has now offered to resume the Centre with up-gradation to a NextGen Centre of Excellence in IT. India will be sponsoring the necessary equipment for two classes of 20 students each, a lab for 32 students, along with the services of 3 IT experts for a period of one year, and training of 3 Syrian master trainers in India. A draft MoU for the NextGen CEIT, suggested by India has already been approved by the Syrian side. The Syrian side is keen on getting this Centre operational at the soonest possible.

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

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. India is presently looking into further cooperation with Syria in this sector as normalcy is returning. An MOU on Cooperation in Fertilizer sector was also concluded in October 2010. The MOU will facilitate Indian involvement in the development of phosphatic fertilizer sector in Syria. Further, cooperation in this field has to resume post crisis Syria.

India has two significant investments in Syria in the oil sector. Firstly, an agreement signed in January 2004 between ONGC and IPR International for exploration of oil/natural gas in Block 24 near Deir-ez-Zour in northern Syria. Secondly, investment by ONGC India and CNPC China to jointly acquire the 37% stake of PetroCanada in the Syrian Al Furat Petroleum Company. OVL is currently facing difficulties in its operations due to the sanctions imposed by US & EU on the Syrian oil sector. (*Suspended activity is sought to be resumed once the sanctions are removed*)

The two countries have a mechanism of Joint Commission Meeting (JCM); the 2nd Session of JCM was held in June 2010 and the 3rd JCM is scheduled to take place soon.

Syria-India Joint Business Council (JBC) was inaugurated in November 2010 during the Presidential visit. The JBC is headed by Mr. V.R.S. Natarajan, CMD, BEML from the Indian side and Mr. Ali Mehran Khwanda of Khwanda Group from the Syrian side. Proposal to constitute a new JBC post-crisis is in the pipeline.

Bilateral Trade Exchange between Syria & India for the period from 2010-2018

Year	Exports from India (in million Euros)	Exports from Syria (in million Euros)
2010	319	8
2011	404	11
2012	381	6
2013	257	6
2014	255	6
2015	221	14
2016	167	17
2017	58	15
2018	172.76	9.77

* Source – Directorate of Foreign Trade of Syria

Major commodities of Export to Syria before 2011 were Textiles and yarn, petroleum products, transport equipment, machinery & instruments, drugs, pharmaceuticals & fine chemicals and after 2011, are Rice, Pharmaceutical raw materials and pharmaceuticals, Yarns and Textiles, Blankets, chemical raw materials and frozen buffalo meat.

Major commodities of Import from Syria, before 2011, were Petroleum, crude & products & minerals, machinery except electric & electronic, leather, pearls, precious and semi-precious stones and after 2011, are Almonds, wool, leather, cumin, black sesame.

Cultural Relations:

The Cultural Exchange Programme, in effect since 1975, provides the framework for bilateral cooperation. A number of cultural exchanges have since taken place. An Executive Programme for Cultural Cooperation is now proposed to be renewed from 2018 to 2021. Literary exchanges between the Arab Writers Union of Syria and the Sahitya Akademi, through an MOU signed in 2003, 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.

India is seen as the most active country in Syria doing the peaceful 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. The IDY is celebrated every year in various parts of the country with participation of large number of Syrians. In 2017, the Grand Mufti of Syria visited India under ICCR's Distinguished Visitors' Programme. ICCR has further extended an invitation to noted Syrian Academic and Head of the Higher Education Cell of the Ruling Baath Party to visit India in the month of November 2019 under DVP.

Indian Community:

The size of the Indian community in Syria has shrunk significantly due to the on-going crisis. Presently, the number of Indians in Syria is less than 150, most being skilled workers. There are few families and their children who continue to stay in Syria despite the crisis.