

India-Syria Relations

Political:

India and Syria enjoy friendly political relations based on historic and civilizational ties, experience of imperialism and of being colonized, a secular, nationalist and developmental orientation and similar perceptions on many international and regional issues and membership 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 Syrians. Mahatma Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru and Indira Gandhi are remembered with great respect. The relationship at the political level has always been good. Details of exchange of visits at HOS/HOG/EAM/MOS(EA) levels are given in the following chart:

Bilateral Visits at HOS/HOG/EAM/MOS (EA) Levels

From Syria to India

	Dignitary	Date
1.	President Dr. Bashar Al Assad	June 2008
2.	President Hafez Al Assad	1978 & 1983
3.	President Shukri Al Quwatli	1957
4.	Vice President, Mr. Zuhier Masharqa	1991
5.	Deputy PM Dr. Khalid Raad	July 2000
6.	Deputy PM & Foreign Minister Mr. Farouk Al- Shara	August 2002
7.	Deputy PM Dr. Abdullah Dardari	January 2008
8.	Foreign Minister Mr. Farouk Al- Shara	1988
9.	Foreign Minister Mr. Walid Al Mouallem	August 2007
10.	Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Farukh Taha	April 2006
11.	Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Fayssal Mikdad	July-August 2011
12.	Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban, Political and Media Advisor to President Bashar al-Assad	March & November 2013

From India to Syria

	Dignitary	Date
1.	President H.E. Prathibha Singh Patil	November 2010
2.	Prime Minister Shri A.B. Vajpayee	November 2003
3.	Prime Minister Shri Rajiv Gandhi	1988
4.	Prime Minister Pt. J.L. Nehru	1957 & 1960
5.	External Affairs Minister Shri A.B. Vajpayee	1979
6.	External Affairs Minister Shri Pranab Mukherjee	1995
7.	External Affairs Minister Shri Jaswant Singh	Jan/Feb 2001
8.	External Affairs Minister Shri Yashwant Sinha	August 2003
9.	Minister of Commerce & Industry Shri Anand Sharma	June 2010
10.	Minister of State for External Affairs	1992
11.	Minister of State for External Affairs Shri E. Ahamed	September 2005
12.	Minister of State for External Affairs Shri E. Ahamed	March 2008

Prime Minister Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Syria in November 2003. 9 agreements in diverse fields were signed during the visit. Establishment of Centre for Biotechnology in Damascus with Indian technical assistance and a grant of US \$ 1 million, and the announcement of a credit line of US \$ 25 million were the two most significant developments in the field of bilateral cooperation.

President Bashar Al-Assad paid a state visit to India on 17-21 June 2008. He was accompanied by Mrs. Assad and several ministers including FM. Bilateral BIPPA and DTAA were signed during the visit and came into force in 2009. A Work Plan on Cooperation in Agriculture was also signed during the visit. India's offers to set up an IT Center of Excellence and to carry out a feasibility study on utilisation of phosphatic resources of Syria were accepted by Syria.

President H.E. Prathibha Singh Patil paid a state visit to Syria from 26-29 November, 2010. She was accompanied by Union Minister of State for Power Shri Bharatsinh Solanki, two Members of Parliament, senior officials and a large business delegation. This was the first Presidential visit from India to Syria and was a highly successful one. During the visit, an offer of credit line of \$100 million was made by India to Syria. A contribution of 2 million Syrian Pounds was made to a Syrian NGO- AAMAL and over 1 million Syrian Pounds to Missionaries of Charity, Aleppo. The number of training slots offered to Syria under the ITEC programme was increased from 45 to 90. Two MOU's for cooperation in the field of Media and a Cultural Exchange Programme were signed during the visit. The India-Syria Joint Business Council was launched. Syria reiterated its support for India's permanent membership of UNSC.

Bilateral Relations during the current unrest:

Syria has deeply appreciated the support received from India and others members of BRICS at the UNSC.

Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh met the Syrian Prime Minister Wael Al Halki on the sidelines of the NAM Summit in Tehran in August'12. During the meeting, PM Halki briefed PM Singh on the situation in Syria and PM Singh, on his part expressed concern over the continued violence in Syria and conveyed India's support for a Syrian led political process to address the crisis.

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Fayssal Mikdad 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. The delegation was briefed on the measures announced and initiated by the govt. to address the current unrest.

Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban visited India in March, 2013 and thanked India for its stand on the Syrian conflict. And during her visit to India in November 2013, she met Minister of External Affairs and National Security Adviser and discussed about the latest developments on the Syrian arena.

Economic & Commercial:

The 1st Meeting of the **India Syria Joint Commission** was held in New Delhi in January 2008. The 2nd Session of the Joint Commission was held in Damascus in June 2010, with the Indian co-Chairman being Commerce and Industry Minister and the Syrian one being Minister of Trade and Economy.

Some of the bilateral cooperation projects that have been implemented or are being implemented in the last few years include:

i) **A US \$ 25 million credit line** has been extended by India for the rehabilitation and modernization of the Hama Iron & Steel Plant. **Apollo International** had won the contract for the project through an international tender earlier for the same project. The project was near completion but the current unrest has halted the progress of the project.

ii) India has extended another **credit line of US\$ 100 million** (first tranche of US\$ 240 m credit) to part finance the extension of the Tishreen Power Plant. Indian public sector company, **BHEL** has signed the contract in October 2009 for installing 2X200 MW power plants. BHEL has temporarily suspended work at the project due to concerns over the security situation.

iii) **India-Syria Centre of Excellence in IT** has been set up at Damascus with the assistance from Government of India. The Centre was inaugurated in December, 2010 by the PM of Syria.

iv) India is assisting Syria in carrying out a **feasibility study on augmentation of its phosphate production**. A consortium of Indian companies, comprising of PDIL, RITES and MECON has carried out the study.

v) India has extended **US\$ 1 million assistance for the setting up of Biotechnology Centre** in Syria; the Centre was inaugurated during PM Vajpayee's visit in 2003.

vi) **An MOU on Cooperation in fertilizer sector** was concluded in October 2010. The MOU will facilitate Indian involvement in the development of phosphatic fertilizer sector in Syria.

vii) 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-e-Zor 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 has currently stopped its operations due to the sanctions imposed by US & EU on the Syrian oil sector and the current ongoing crisis.

viii) **Himalaya Herbals** has a joint venture providing technical know-how and materials for manufacture and marketing of herbal drugs and cosmetics in Syria.

ix) **Mahindra & Mahindra** has signed a 10 year contract with M/s Al Furat Tractor Company for supply of tractors with a provision for joint venture assembly in the future that could amount to over Euro 30 million.

Bilateral Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement and the **Bilateral Investment Promotion & Protection Agreement** have been signed in June 2008 during the visit of President Bashar Al Assad to India and have come into force from 2009. An **MOU for cooperation in agriculture and allied sectors** has been signed. The MOU provides for a Work Plan and a Working Group. The Work Plan is in place and has been renewed up to November, 2011.

Syria-India Joint Business Council (JBC) was inaugurated in November, 2010 during the visit of 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.

Bilateral Trade:

(Figures in US\$ millions)

Year	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-10	2010-2011	2011-12	2012-13
Export	672.78*	364.5	345.43	523.03	536.48	258.77
Import	20.24	157.92	144.69	35.61	177.86	80.76
Total	693.02	522.42	490.13	558.64	714.34	339.53

* includes onetime export of \$ 316mn HSD

Major commodities of Export to Syria

Textiles and yarn, petroleum products, transport equipment, machinery & instruments, drugs, pharmaceuticals & fine chemicals.

Major commodities of Import from Syria

Petroleum, crude & products and minerals, machinery except electric & electronic, leather, pearls, precious and semi-precious stones.

Cultural Relations:

India features as an influence in Syrian Arab culture historically through the Silk Route and in particular through the adaptation of the Panchatantra into the Arabic 'Kalila wa Dumna'. More recent influences have been Tagore and the eminent Syrian poet and Ambassador to India, Omar Abu Rishesh. The **Cultural Exchange Programme**, in effect since 1975, provides the framework for bilateral cooperation. A number of cultural delegations from India have visited Syria and vice versa, under the programme. The Executive Programme for Cultural Cooperation was last renewed in November 2010 for the year 2010-13. **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 and regular exchange of delegations between Sahitya Akademi and Arab Writers Union.

Education and Training:

An Agreement on Educational Exchange Programme (EEP) was signed in 2003 between two Governments for cooperation in the field of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Under this scheme, Syria side shall offer annually to the Indian side 15 scholarships for undergraduate study in the field of Arabic language and literature. And the Indian side shall offer 15 scholarships for Post-Graduate studies (Master and doctorate) in the various specialties. Besides EEP, India also offer about 20 ICCR Scholarship under General Cultural Scholarship Scheme each year. In 2014, 23 scholarships under ICCR and EEP were availed by Syrian side. 42 Syrian professionals went for training under Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme.

Indian Community:

Syria had a relatively small Indian community of less than one hundred due to ongoing crisis. Indian students, predominantly from the Shia community, pursuing theological studies at Shia-Islamic seminaries constitute a large majority. A 200 strong contingent of Indian Army is present on the Golan Heights as part of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). Rest of the Indian nationals constitutes professionals working in various Syrian and Multi National Companies. The size of the Indian community has shrunk significantly in the last couple of years owing to the prevailing security situation in the country and currently the number of Indians in Syria is about 60 excluding the Embassy personnel.

Useful Resources:

Embassy of India, Damascus website:

<http://www.indianembassy.com/>

December 2014