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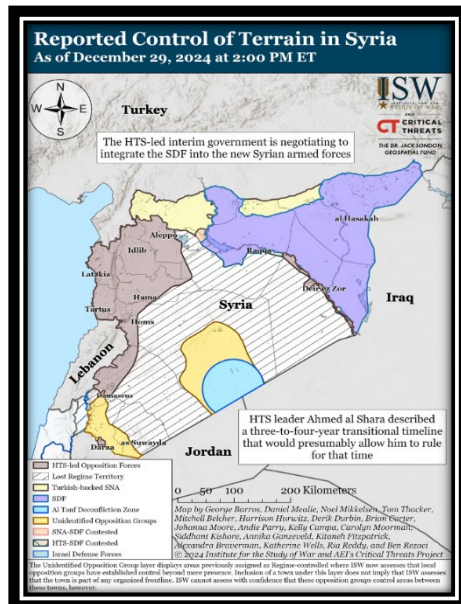
**Evolving Security Situation in West Asia**

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## Evolving Security Situation in West Asia

After ousting Syria's President Bashar al-Assad on 8 December 2024, the Syrian Transitional Government (STG) was formed by Syria's current provisional governing body. It emerged following leadership changes in which Ahmed al-Sharaa, who leads Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and serves as Syria's present leader, designated Mohammed al-Bashir as head of the caretaker government to succeed Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali as Prime Minister. This transition occurred in the aftermath of the Assad regime's collapse and President Bashar al-Assad's departure into exile.



In a significant development, Ahmad al-Sharaa (formerly known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), reached an agreement on 24 December 2024 with former opposition faction chiefs to dissolve all armed groups and unify them under the defence ministry, according to the new administration's statement. This move aims to bring stability following the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime on 8 December 2024. On 20 December 2024, the United States removed a \$10 million bounty on Al-Sharaa following a high-level US delegation meeting in Damascus. Iran's foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, remarked on 25 December 2024 that it is too soon to judge Syria's

future as many developments can affect it. This remark was in response to Syria's new foreign minister, Asaad Hassan al-Shibani's comment that Iran must respect the will of the Syrian people and the country's sovereignty and security.

The recent developments in the Syrian refugee situation show a complex interplay of return movements, security challenges, and regional policy adjustments across multiple countries. According to UNHCR monitoring, approximately 58,350 Syrians, with children comprising nearly half of this number, have returned to Syria from 8 December to 27 December 2024. Though significant security concerns persist, these returns are primarily concentrated in regions including Ar-Raqqa, Aleppo, Dar'a, and Homs.

The regional response to this situation has evolved significantly, with neighbouring countries implementing various measures to manage refugee movements. Türkiye has announced a structured approach to temporary returns, implementing a program from January to July 2025 that will allow Syrian refugees to conduct go-and-see visits while retaining their temporary protection status. Lebanon has maintained active monitoring through UNHCR's network of 570 Outreach Volunteers from the Syrian refugee community, who help address concerns regarding education, housing, and transportation costs for potential returnees. Such policies can be viewed as a balanced approach to facilitating refugee movement while maintaining protection frameworks.

Jordan and Iraq have also adapted their policies to address the evolving situation in Syria. Jordan has recently updated its border regulations at the Jaber-Nassib crossing, specifically accommodating Syrian investors and their families, as well

as Syrians holding Jordanian citizenship. In Iraq, the Peshkhabour border crossing has seen consistent movement, with approximately 400 people crossing daily, primarily consisting of Kurdish Syrians engaging in temporary family visits or permanent returns.

With regards to updates on Israel's operations, on 19 December 2024, surface-to-surface missile attacks by Houthis resulted in damage to a multi-storey school building in Ramat Gan, Israel. The damage is estimated to be around \$11 million. The same day, Israel's military carried out a series of intense airstrikes as dozens of IAF aircraft, including jets, refuelers and spy planes, targeted and struck Hodeidah port (already struck twice earlier) and Sana'a (targeted for the first time).

These strikes aimed to paralyse all three ports and targeted power stations as well as the Ras Isa oil terminal on the Red Sea. It also needs to be noted that on 26 December 2024, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) conducted intelligence-based strikes on military targets belonging to the Houthis on the Western coast and inland Yemen. Targets included military infrastructure in both the Sana'a International Airport and the Hezyaz and Ras Kanatib power stations. Additionally, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) struck military infrastructure in the Al-Hudaydah, Salif and Ras Kanatib ports on the western coast. According to IDF, these military targets were used by the Houthis to smuggle Iranian weapons into the region and for the entry of senior Iranian officials and, hence, become an example of the usage of civilian infrastructure by Houthis for military purposes.

In response, Houthis statement noted that it fired a missile at Israel's Ben Gurion airport on 27 December 2024 and also launched drones at Tel Aviv and a ship in the Arabian Sea. According to IDF, previously, on 25 December 2024, Houthis launched a UAV into Israeli territory that triggered sirens in southern Israel.

### **Territorial Gains of Myanmar's Ethnic Armed Groups and Escalating Tensions on the Myanmar-Bangladesh Border**

The Bangladesh-Myanmar border has become a focal point of geopolitical and humanitarian tensions due to escalating conflicts in Myanmar's Rakhine State. In December 2024, the Arakan Army (AA) achieved a significant milestone by asserting control over strategic locations, including the town of Maungdaw. This development has underscored the strategic importance of Maungdaw, which serves as a vital hub for cross-border trade and migration. The AA's consolidation of power in northern Rakhine State marks a significant shift in the region's dynamics and has further complicated relations between Myanmar and Bangladesh. Reports of confrontations between the Arakan Army and Bangladeshi forces along the border have emerged, though claims of territorial intrusion into Bangladesh have been dismissed. The AA's control remains confined to areas within Myanmar's Rakhine



State, emphasizing the strategic and contentious nature of the border. This situation has compounded security and humanitarian challenges for Bangladesh, which is already grappling with the Rohingya refugee crisis.

The spillover effects of the conflict, including stray bullets, mortar shelling, and violence, have disrupted life in southeastern Bangladesh, particularly in regions like Cox's Bazar and St. Martin's Island. Transport across the Naf River has been suspended, further heightening insecurity. Additionally, incidents such as the unauthorized entry of Myanmar Border Guard Police into Bangladeshi territory in early 2024 reflect the increasing volatility along the 271-kilometer shared border. As the Arakan Army continues to consolidate its dominance, the implications for regional stability and humanitarian efforts remain severe, necessitating urgent international attention.

Bangladesh has adopted a cautious approach to these border tensions, aiming to avoid direct confrontation with Myanmar. Diplomatically, Dhaka has focused on expressing protests and engaging regionally, including its participation in a recent meeting in Bangkok with six countries. During the meeting, Bangladeshi officials underscored the challenges arising from the loss of control over its border by Myanmar's central government, with non-state actors like the Arakan Army playing a growing role in the region. Dhaka has also emphasized the need for Myanmar's government to address its internal conflicts and restore stability, as ongoing border instability threatens to escalate into a broader regional issue. However, the increasing influence of the Arakan Army complicates Bangladesh's position. While Dhaka has refrained from formal talks with the AA, reports suggest that informal channels are being explored to address immediate security concerns. This approach, though, is fraught with complexities as Bangladesh must balance its commitment to sovereignty with the need to secure its borders in the face of rising instability.

Beyond security concerns, the continued influx of Rohingya refugees has placed immense strain on the country's resources, infrastructure, and public services, particularly in southeastern Bangladesh. Bangladesh is currently hosting over 1.2 million Rohingya refugees, most of whom fled Myanmar during the 2017 military crackdown. Despite Dhaka's official stance against allowing further refugees, the deteriorating situation in Myanmar has forced approximately 60,000 Rohingya to cross into Bangladesh over the past two months. The Rohingya crisis remains a pressing concern for Bangladesh, as the ongoing conflict in Myanmar has derailed efforts to repatriate those already in Bangladesh.

In the meantime, the Arakan Army's control of critical land and maritime trade routes along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border has created a situation that poses a significant challenge to regional food supply chains. Myanmar has historically been a key supplier of rice to Bangladesh, but the group's control over strategic areas, including the port of Mongdo and associated customs operations, has substantially reduced rice shipments to Bangladesh. As a result, Bangladesh is now facing an intensifying food shortage. Given that rice is a staple in the country and constitutes a major portion of its food imports, the nation is particularly vulnerable to such supply chain disruptions. In response to the escalating crisis, Bangladesh has sought alternative solutions, including an urgent appeal to India for an

additional 50,000 tons of rice. This development highlights the severity of the situation and underscores the pressing need for coordinated regional efforts to address the growing concerns over food security.

The crisis in Myanmar, driven by the military junta and ongoing conflict, poses significant challenges for the region, particularly for Bangladesh. Doubts over Myanmar's ability to stabilize its borders compound the issue, leaving Bangladesh to manage sovereignty, security, and the Rohingya crisis. Immediate priorities include border security, preventing further refugee inflows, and addressing cross-border violations. However, a long-term resolution in Myanmar is essential. As the crisis deepens, Bangladesh must balance diplomacy, defence, and humanitarian efforts to safeguard its interests and navigate the fallout from Myanmar's civil war.

### U.S. DoD Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (2024)

The People's Liberation Army Navy is "gradually expanding its operational reach beyond East Asia into a sustained ability to operate at increasingly longer ranges, including a continuous presence in the Gulf of Aden," the Pentagon reported in its



latest assessment of Beijing's military power in its 2024 annual report to Congress on China's military developments.

The report highlights significant transformations in China's military capabilities and strategic goals, particularly as part of its national strategy to achieve the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049. It outlines the modernization of the PLA, its growing global presence, and the implications for U.S. security and global stability while addressing challenges faced by Chairman Xi Jinping and his party.

The report highlights China's ambition to create a revised international order that reflects its governance model and national interests. Key initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development Initiative (GDI), aim to reshape global norms in Beijing's favour. Increasing tensions with the U.S., particularly regarding alliances like AUKUS and the Quad, influence China's strategic approach. Beijing seeks to reduce U.S. influence while fostering partnerships in the Global South, using coercive diplomacy, economic incentives, and military manoeuvres to assert its interests, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

The PLA has undergone significant modernization to support China's goal of fielding a "world-class military" by 2049. This transformation spans all domains of warfare—land, sea, air, nuclear, space, and cyberspace. The PLA Navy (PLAN), with the largest naval fleet by number, continues to expand its ability to project power beyond the First Island Chain, while the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) rapidly modernizes its fleet, enhancing China's integrated air defence and strategic deterrence capabilities.

The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) is central to China's nuclear strategy, developing intercontinental ballistic missiles and diversifying its nuclear arsenal. These advancements aim to strengthen China's ability to deter third-party intervention in regional conflicts and enhance its global strike capabilities. The PLA also invests heavily in emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and hypersonic weapons, to maintain a technological edge.

Despite these advancements, the PLA faces challenges, including deficiencies in long-range logistics, urban warfare readiness, and commander proficiency. Nonetheless, structural reforms and an emphasis on joint operations demonstrate the PLA's commitment to addressing these gaps and achieving a fully modernized force.

China's global ambitions are increasingly evident in the PLA's growing overseas presence. The establishment of foreign military bases, such as the one in Djibouti, and regular naval deployments in strategic regions highlight its intent to project power and protect its interests abroad. This expansion aligns with Beijing's broader strategic objectives, including safeguarding its investments under the BRI and ensuring the security of its global supply chains.

Regionally, China's activities in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea exemplify its coercive tactics. In 2023, the PLA intensified military exercises near Taiwan, increased incursions into Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ), and challenged the norms of freedom of navigation in contested waters. Such actions reflect Beijing's broader strategy to assert its sovereignty claims and undermine U.S. influence in the region.

In Taiwan, the PRC's use of diplomatic, economic, and military pressure remains a focal point of its strategy. The report highlights Beijing's efforts to prepare for potential military operations to achieve reunification while eroding Taiwan's resilience through psychological and economic tactics. Similarly, in the South China Sea, China's reliance on the China Coast Guard (CCG) and maritime militia underscores its use of grey-zone operations to assert territorial claims and counter rival claimants.

The PLA's progress is not without setbacks. Corruption investigations in 2023 led to the removal of several senior officials, including those involved in critical weapons development programs. These disruptions have hindered some modernization efforts but reflect ongoing attempts by Xi Jinping's leadership to consolidate political control over the military. Furthermore, the report notes persistent inefficiencies in PLA command structures and limited combat experience among its forces.

The document details key highlights of Chinese military build-up along with ongoing challenges that Chairman Xi Jinping and his party army are addressing with determination, and context to interpret what it all means. The report emphasises that endemic corruption and lingering personnel and organizational weaknesses must be weighed against the Chinese Communist Party's unrivalled ability to marshal resources and its ongoing production and deployment of advanced military systems on an unmatched industrial scale. The report calls for sustained vigilance and robust U.S. engagement to address the challenges posed by China's growing military capabilities and assertive policies.