

# The Three Images of the Syrian Civil War

Written by Torgeir Pande Braathen

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For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the major topic in international relations was the causes of interstate wars. One of the most classical writings on this topic is Kenneth Waltz' *Man, the State and War* (1954) (hereafter *MSW*). This work has arguably attracted little attention for the past decades as the spotlights shifted first towards Waltz' more famous piece, *Theory of International Politics* (1979), and since the end of the Cold War, the spotlight has remained focused on the causes of intrastate wars. However, can *MSW* help us understand the causes of intrastate wars?

This paper will argue that Waltz' *MSW* can illuminate *how* to study civil wars which can bring additional insights to our understanding of the causes of civil wars. This paper will test the applicability of Waltz' *MSW* to understand the causes of the Syrian civil war. The findings suggest that the three images of international politics as outlined by Waltz is a useful framework for studying civil wars that highlights the importance of considering multiple variables at multiple levels of analysis. Single-image explanations of the causes of inter- and intrastate wars are rarely sufficient. The causes of civil wars can be as messy as the wars themselves, but structuring the causes into the three images is a useful analysis tool that can complement existing theorist on the causes of civil war.

However, considering the amount of research that has been done on civil wars in the past two decades, certain aspects of *MSW* may rightfully seem somewhat passé compared to more sophisticated theories. But it must also be noted that *MSW* is not an attempt to construct a theory, it can more accurately be described as an analytical framework in which one can fit several theories and different logics both within a single image and across images.

### Literature Review

The major focus in Kenneth Waltz' *MSW* is a thorough examination of Western philosophical thought, spanning from Thucydides, St. Augustine and Machiavelli to Kant and Rousseau whose ideas and logical reasoning are related back to the causes of interstate war and the related prescriptions for peace.

Waltz introduces in *MSW* the idea of three images of international politics: man, the state, and war, which can be translated directly to micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. The third image, war, refers to the international level which Waltz sees as analogous to the relations among men in Rousseau's state of nature, which is characterised by the lack of an overarching authority and a war of all against all.[1]

In each image Waltz outlines two logical stands, which he names optimists and pessimists. Within each image, these two logics agree on the causes of war but disagree on the prescriptions for peace. For instance, in the first image, both the optimists and pessimists agree that the causes of war can be found in the nature and behaviour of man, but they disagree over whether man can improve and progress to the extent that war becomes extinct as a social phenomenon. [2]

*MSW* is sometimes confused with Waltz' later work *Theory of International Politics*. But *MSW* is not neorealism, and neither is it a theory of international politics. For instance, Gideon Rose, a distinguished scholar on International Relations theory makes this mistake when he discusses neorealism but interchangeably cites both *MSW* and *Theory of International Politics*. [3] *MSW* can more rightfully be labelled an analytical framework rather than a theory.

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When it comes to top-down vs. bottom-up approaches on the causes of war, whether interstate or intrastate, *MSW* is indiscriminate and can rightfully accommodate both approaches. To give an example, in the first image one can include theories that explain war and conflict in terms of elite decision making (top-down) and theories that explain the same by looking at popular uprisings motivated by greed or grievance, (bottom-up). The third image, which is perhaps most commonly associated with systemic theories (neorealism) and deterrence theory (Robert Jervis, Thomas Schelling), which are purely top-down approaches, can also encompass bottom-up approaches, such as Marxist theories on transnational proletarian revolutions.

With regards to the literature on the Syrian civil war, which will be outlined within the framework of *MSW*, this paper will connect the arguments of three different authors to each of the three images. The article that corresponds with the first image is *Syria: From "Authoritarian Upgrading" to Revolution?* By Raymond Hinnebusch. This article focuses on the internal matters of the Ba'ath regime in explaining the uprising against the regime. The decisions of President Bashar al-Assad are treated as the primary cause of the Syrian uprising and the escalation of the conflict is a result of Assad's response to peaceful protesters.[4]

With regards to second image explanations, the article *Syria's Torment* by Christopher Phillips will be of primary focus. This article assigns primary importance to long-term structural factors in the Syrian state as the main cause for the Syrian civil war. The structure of the regime is also used as an explanation for why the Assad regime has survived the rebellions while the regimes in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen did not.[5]

In relation to the third image the main focus will be on *Syria and its Neighbours* by Emile Hokayem. Hokayem focuses not on first or second image explanations for the causes of the Syrian civil war, but rather on regional and international factors, especially the role of Syria's neighbours, allies, and foes. Geopolitics is used to explain the outbreak and developments of the Syrian civil war.[6] In this analysis Syria is not assigned much agency, and its faith is to a large extent determined by external factors.

It must be noted that none of these three arguments adhere fully to a pure single-image explanation of the causes of the Syrian civil war. They all include contributing and complementing factors, as well as distinguishing between the cause and the trigger of the civil war. However, this paper has categorised them into the three images according to what they consider as the primary cause of the civil war. The arguments from the various articles will therefore to some extent blur the distinction between the three images. It will therefore not be assumed *a priori* that each author belongs to one particular image only. As authors may be logically inconsistent in relation to the three images, this paper will instead extract the ideas and arguments from the articles and assign it to the correct image.

## Theory and Methodology

To test the applicability of each of the three images in the particular case of the Syrian civil war, this paper will study the case of Syria from the assumption that each single image explanation provides the single most important explanation of the outbreak of the war. When doing so, one will see that for each level of analysis one moves up, i.e. from first image to second image and from second image to third image, the explanations that derive from the previous image are not sufficient to adequately explain the causes of the Syrian civil war.

This eclectic approach to the study of the causes of civil war might be criticised for being indecisive and ambiguous about the causes of civil war. However, this is not an attempt to construct an all-encompassing theory; it is rather an analytical and methodological framework which helps illuminate the various variables that may operate at various levels of analysis. This approach is not making any *a priori* predictions; it will be up to the analyst to decide on the relative importance of the various single-image explanations as well as to reveal the relationship between them.

## Context

In March 2011 in Syria a wave of protests started which called for political reform and democratisation. Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian President, responded to the protesters violently and oppressively. His security forces opened fire and killed hundreds of protesters, which made the protesters no longer call for reform but for regime change. The

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uprising was largely triggered and inspired by the Arab spring and the successful toppling of the dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia. This trigger was further intensified when the Syrian opposition saw the robust backing the opposition in Libya received from NATO.[7] The death toll in Syria has recently exceeded 200,000, and it is by far the worst humanitarian crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in addition to the tragically high number of casualties, the civil war in Syria has also led to 6.5 million internally displaced people and 2.5 million have fled to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.[8] However, the Syrian regime has been far more resilient to the uprising than in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. More than 4 years into the devastating civil war in Syria, Assad remains in power, and despite that his legitimacy as a leader has been greatly deteriorated both externally and internally, there is no immediate end to the humanitarian crisis in sight.

Such events tend to attract a great deal of scholarly attention in the international relations literature. Just as the causes of World War I have been a major source of scholarly disagreement, major consensus exists on the *trigger* of the war, and the same seems to be the case in Syria. Few would disagree that the Arab Spring triggered protests in Damascus, however, few can agree on the underlying causes. Following, three causes that relates to Waltz' three images will be discussed.

## Man

In the first image Waltz' discussion on the behaviour and nature of man as the cause of war may seem somewhat passé compared to today's theories of decision making, whether from a rational choice or political psychology perspective. Waltz points out the limitations of such human nature explanations of war; "[Human nature] cannot by itself explain both war and peace, except by the simple statement that man's nature is such that sometimes he fights and sometimes he does not." [9] In other words, human nature is the cause of war only in the sense that if men were somehow entirely different wars would not occur. Explaining the outbreak of particular wars with human nature makes therefore little sense.

But first image explanations do not necessarily have to include archaic assumptions about human nature, although this is the primary focus for Waltz. Waltz also talks about the first image in terms of the behaviour of man. As such, one might just as well include explanations of war that considers the actions of key actors to a conflict. This brings us the first discussion of the causes of the Syrian civil war, which will consider the actions of key actors in bringing about the civil war, primarily those of Assad.

Raymond Hinnebusch argues that while the Arab Spring fuelled the Syrian civil war, it was caused primarily by Assad's policies and actions. Firstly, Hinnebusch points to the failed policies of Assad since he inherited power in 2000 from his father. When Assad assumed office he attempted to consolidate power through "authoritarian upgrading" while liberalising the economy which would serve a minority ruling elite. However, the conservative military establishment and senior members of the regime were not favourable to Assad's reforms, which forced Assad to retire such senior personnel in order to further consolidate his power. But Assad struggled to appoint new and loyal staff, his Ba'athist regime became increasingly like a sectarian family clan, and the consequences was an overconcentration of power in a small ruling elite in the capital and a weakening of the regime's network that connected the regime to society.[10] These policies led to a weakening of the regime's constituencies and strong hold in rural Syria which sowed the seed for rebellion.[11] Secondly, and more importantly, Hinnenbuch points to Assad's response to the peaceful protests that called for democratisation as a primary reason for why the protests turned into a full-fledged civil war. Certainly, there is nothing inevitable about protesting turning into political violence and civil war, and Hinnebusch explains this development as a result of Assad ordering his security forces to open fire against the young protesters. To make democratic concessions in the form of holding elections, which could have avoided the escalation of the protests, would undoubtedly have weakened the regime due to Assad's poor policies and the regime's decreasing popularity. He thus opted for the hard-liner way, and as the conflict escalated hard-liners in the regime and among the opposition were empowered, which further intensified the conflict and made compromise by either side less and less attainable.[12]

Although that narrative may seem convincing in isolation, it only provides part of the whole picture. For instance, an important question with regards to the protracted civil war in Syria is why has the Assad regime survived while the

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pre-Arab Spring regimes in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt have not? A second image analysis can shed light on this.

## The State

Although the analysis in the previous image did not exclude the role of the state, the influence of the behaviour and action of the key leader were considered primary to other considerations. The behaviour of the leader is not entirely independent of the state structure either, and the two can arguably be said to be mutually constituted. The decisions of the leader can shape the structure of the state, and the structure of the state can constrain or enable the leader to do as he pleases. From Waltz' discussion on Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant with regards to second image explanations of war one can extract one core idea: that by reforming states according to an ideal war can be reduced or for ever eliminated.[13] However, what that ideal is depends on through which ideology or theory one sees the world. In terms of civil war, much is being written on the relationship between the internal structure of the state and outbreak of civil war. In the Article *Syria's Torment* Christopher Phillips looks at how the internal structure of the Assad regime can explain the roots of the uprising as well why the civil war has lasted as long as it has.

Beginning with the roots, Phillips argues that Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, president from 1970-2000, had encouraged social and economic inequalities as a means of divide and rule.[14] Hafez had created a coalition of diverse groups to secure his power. Hafez had the backing of most of the Syrian people with the exception of certain excluded groups, such as the Sunni Arab elite which ruled before him and Syria's Kurds (12% of the 20 million population). With the exception of the Muslim Brotherhood's attempt at rebellion against Hafez' regime in 1976-1982, which failed and ended with brutal response from the regime leaving over 10,000 civilians dead, Hafez managed to maintain popularity among the larger population and maintain a stable regime.[15] When Assad inherited power the regime was stable but had significant below-the-surface divisions which had been skilfully managed by Hafez.[16] But as already mentioned in the previous analysis, Assad did not manage very well to navigate Syria in the right direction – he lost popularity, and detached the regime from the Syrian people, including the Muslim working class and peasantry, which his father had managed to stay in cahoots with. Bashar al-Assad did not succeed in managing the broken ship he inherited and steered the regime into rougher seas.[17] The rebellions in 2011 started indeed in typical working class cities with a Muslim majority, the group that had been increasingly excluded by the regime and suffered the most from the declining economy.[18]

The reason why the civil war has been so long lasting compared to the other rebellions in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen is also attributed by Phillips to the structure of the regime. In the period between Syria's independence in 1946 and the Hafez coming to power in 1970, Syria had been politically unstable, with eight governments toppled by coups, and numerous failed attempts.[19] To avoid coups and rebellions, Hafez created a "coup-proof" regime with four overlapping intelligence agencies to spy on the population, the army and one another to ensure that no independent power could challenge him. This prevented what happened in Tunisia and Egypt; that the military makes internal moves to topple the president.[20] In addition, the Syrian military has been immensely loyal to the regime, which is in stark contrast to the case in Libya where large factions of the military not only defected on Gaddafi, but also joined the rebel forces. If major factions of the Syrian army were to join the rebel forces, this could turn the tide against Assad, but pre-existing state structures have made that unlikely. However, this does not adequately explain why the rebels have been capable in material terms to fight for so long against the regime or why they have had the motivation to endure an asymmetric war with no end in sight. To explain this, one can turn to the third image.

## War

The third image of international relations relates to the condition in which states coexist, which is international anarchy, or the absence of an overarching authority to enforce law among the sovereign states.[21] . The logic of this image is that war occurs because there is nothing to prevent it, and the prescription for peace is consequently the imposition of something to prevent war among states, in which this "something" refers to a world government. But this logic seems obscure, because if it is the absence of world government that allows wars to occur, then it must follow that the presence of world government must abolish the phenomena of war completely, because if wars would still occur under world government then it would make little sense to say that it is the absence of world government

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that allows war to happen, because war may still occur anyway. As little is known about the consequences of a world government, because it has never existed, it is dubious to make an argument based on the unknown consequences of a world government. However, in intrastate wars the third image may make more sense. Because we do know that governments with the ability to enforce the rule of law across their territories tend to be able to avoid civil war, it can be more rightfully concluded that the absence of a government's ability to do so may lead to civil war. Of course, this can be said to be necessary but far from sufficient condition to predict the onset of civil war. As such, it could be said that civil wars may occur when there is nothing to prevent it. But the third image of civil war can also be extended to include external factors, such as the influence of regional and international politics on a civil war.

The most obvious external factor that contributed to the onset of the Syrian civil war is the Arab Spring that first started in Tunisia in the early spring of 2011. The Syrian rebellion was directly influenced by what was happening in Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, which can be seen by the Syrian rebels copying slogans and strategies from these other rebel groups. However, this can only be considered a triggering factor, although it can also be argued that there was nothing inevitable about the uprisings in Syria, so such a trigger was a necessary condition in sparking the protests which then escalated out of proportions, but again, not a sufficient one.

Emile Hokayem, in *Syria and its Neighbours*, points out external factors that have contributed to the particular violent character of the Syrian civil war. These include the backing of the two sides in the conflict by regional actors as well as the US, which has contributed to providing the material means necessary to sustain the conflict on both sides as well as to intensify it, and the external event of NATO intervening in Libya to support the rebels in overthrowing the Gaddafi regime arguably increased at least the initial motivation of the Syrian rebels to continue the asymmetric fight in the hope of eventually receiving Libya treatment. Iran, which is Syria's long-time strategic ally, would lose from seeing the Assad regime fall to the rebels, both because the consequences of such an outcome is highly uncertain and because the head of the main Syrian opposition group stated that the special relationship between Syria and Iran would end if they were to assume power.[22] Surely, Iran has no interest in having an antagonistic regime as its closest neighbour, and has therefore opted for supporting Assad in his fight against the rebels by providing material support, helping Assad circumventing sanctions, and mobilising their common allies.[23] Just as Iran has supported Assad, Turkey has supported his opposition. As the leading opposition group in Syria consists of the Muslim Brotherhood, which has close ties to Ankara, its victory could therefore help Turkey asserting itself in the region. But too much support to the opposition will not come without risks, as other regional players may oppose such measures, especially Russia, Iran, Iraq, and some of the Gulf states, as they remain divided among themselves on the issue.[24] The fate of the conflict, Hokayem concludes, depends on whether and how Syria's neighbours intervene.[25]

Relating this back to Waltz' third image logic, it can be said that to fully understand the Syrian civil war requires a consideration of the external forces that enable or prevent the parties in the conflict to continue fighting. However, this does not mean that civil wars occur because there is nothing to prevent it, whether that "nothing" which is absent is a national government or a world government or a state which takes on the role of being a world police. One can imagine a cosmopolitan and post-Westphalian international community with the capabilities and political will to react to prevent and halt civil wars, but even in such an imaginary world there is nothing given about that the community of states' ability to prevent or immediately halt civil wars. As has been proven time and again, the consequences of military interventions are unpredictable and not always the right means to address the problems of civil war. As such, although the third image points out the importance of considering the international landscape which civil wars are embedded in, the actual logic of the third image is of limited utility to understand the causes of civil war.

## Discussion and Conclusion

*MSW* and the three images can be applied to the study of civil wars in the sense that it can function as an analytical framework for considering multiple variables at multiple levels of analysis. As this paper has attempted to illustrate, single-image explanations of the causes of war (whether interstate or intrastate) are rarely sufficient, and a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the conflict is acquired by combining the three images to produce a more complete picture. However, it must also be noted that the images are rarely independent of each other and may in fact be highly interconnected and mutually constitutive. But *MSW* provides few clues on what are the relations between the images or which variables in each image one should take into account. This paper has only included a

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few variables in each image, although more variables could have been included. Waltz assumes *a priori* that the third image is more equal than the others but this is a faulty assumption. The relative importance of each image may vary from case to case and is not predetermined.

Another issue to be raised is that it seems too simplistic to simply look at the causes of war in each image, as the causes of a single war may be quite separate from the forces that trigger the onset of the war and the forces that fuel its continuation. If the study of civil wars is intended to improve our understanding on how to prevent and end them, more than the causes should be taken into account. Therefore, to add more clarity and consistency, a truly comprehensive analysis of a (civil) war that uses the three images should further break each image into three parts: the causes of the war, the trigger of the war, and the dynamics during the war. In doing so the analyst is better equipped to compare and contrast the relative importance of different factors in the different *phases* of the war. Waltz is partly right in saying that to find the prescription for peace, one must first identify the cause of war, but as a war continues and escalates, interests, preferences, and goals on both sides may change. Without taking this into account one runs the risk of prescribing the wrong prescription for peace.

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## Endnotes

[1] Waltz, Kenneth, *Man The State and War*, 1954, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 159

[2] Waltz, Kenneth, *MSW*, p. 19

[3] Rose, Gideon, *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, World Politics, Issue 51, 1998, p. 66

[4] Hinnebuch, Raymond, *Syria : from « authoritarian upgrading » to revolution ?* International Affairs, 88 :1, 2012, p. 112

[5] Phillips, Christopher, *Syria's Torment*, Survival : Global Politics and Strategy, 54 :4, 2012, pp. 67-69

[6] Hokayem, Emile, *Syria's Neighbours*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 54 :2, 2012, p. 8

[7] Phillips, Christopher, *Syria's Torment*, Survival: global politics and strategy, 2012, 54:4, P. 67

[8] Syrianrefugees.eu, available from: <http://syrianrefugees.eu/> (accessed 05/06/15)

[9] Waltz, Kenneth, *Man The State and War*, 1954, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 29

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[10] Hinnebuch, Raymond, *Syria : from « authoritarian upgrading » to revolution ?* International Affairs, 88 :1, 2012, p. 99

[11] Ibid. p. 114

[12] Ibid. p. 112

Perhaps theories of political psychology could be used to elaborate on Assad's remarkable will to cling to power at any costs or even the significance of the fact that Bashar al-Assad had a father who had managed to successfully curb several attempted protests and uprisings.

[13] Waltz, *MSW*, p. 83

[14] Phillips, Christopher, *Syria's Torment*, *Survival : Global Politics and Strategy*, 54 :4, 2012, p. 68

[15] Ibid. p. 68-69

[16] Ibid. p. 69

[17] Assad should be accredited for the analogy, as he said himself in a rare interview in November 2014, "The state is like a ship; and when there is a storm, the captain doesn't run away and leave his ship to sink. If passengers on that ship decided to leave, the captain should be the last one to leave, not the first." Available from: <http://www.parismatch.com/Actu/International/Our-Interview-with-Syrian-President-Bashar-al-Assad-661984>

[18] Phillips, *Syria's Torment*, p. 70

[19] Ibid. pp. 71-72

[20] Ibid. p. 72

[21] Waltz, *MSW*, p. 159

[22] Hokayem, Emile, *Syria's Neighbours*, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 54 :2, 2012, pp. 8-9

[23] Ibid. p. 8

[24] Ibid. p 10

[25] Ibid. p 14

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