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C O N T E N T S

From the Editors' Desk

1

ARTICLES

The 'India Factor' in Bangladesh Politics: Implications for Bilateral Relations	<i>Smruti S Pattanaik</i>	3
Indonesia's (Uneasy) Battle with Terrorism	<i>Saman Ayesha Kidwai</i>	38
Politics of Disaster Management: A Critical Analysis	<i>Niharika Tiwari</i>	54
Sectarianism in Indian Islam: Historical Trajectories, Global Currents and State Politics	<i>Premanand Mishra</i>	73
From Autocracy to Uncertainty: Syria's Transition through a Neo-Realist Lens	<i>Mussaib Rasool Mir</i> <i>Santosh Kumar &</i> <i>Srishti Sharma</i>	97

OPINION

Delhi Terror Attack and the Misuse of Faith: Confronting Radicalisation and Restoring Moral Clarity	<i>Imran Khurshid</i>	110
Between Resurgence and Revisionism: Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami's Post-Hasina Strategy	<i>Ankita Sanyal</i>	118

BOOK REVIEW

<i>India Turns East: International Engagement and US-China Rivalry</i> by Frédéric Grare	<i>Faiza Riwan</i>	128
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From Autocracy to Uncertainty: Syria's Transition through a Neo-Realist Lens

Musssaib Rasool Mir*

Santosh Kumar**

Srishti Sharma***

Abstract

Conflicts and wars have been a recurring feature of the international system, and contemporary conflicts involving state and non-state actors continue to challenge assumptions about a peaceful and stable global order. International Relations scholarship has sought to explain these conflicts through multiple levels of analysis: individual, state, and systemic. Drawing on a Composite Neo-realist framework, this paper examines the political transformation of Syria following the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, focusing on the interaction between internal fragmentation and external power dynamics. It critically interrogates the notion of post-Assad "stability," arguing that it masks deep structural vulnerabilities within the war-ravaged state. By situating Syria's transition within the broader context of power and security, the paper highlights the need to reassess and refine realist frameworks to capture better the complexity of contemporary conflicts and fragile post-war environments.

Keywords: Post-Assad Transition; Myth of Stability; Composite Neo-Realism; International Anarchy; Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Introduction



Kenneth Waltz's seminal work, *Theory of International Politics* (1979),¹ marked a decisive shift in

International Relations scholarship by offering a systemic explanation of the causes of war and peace. When read alongside his earlier text, *Man, the State and War* (1959),² which laid the conceptual foundation for

*Musssaib Rasool Mir & ***Srishti Sharma are Research Scholars and **Santosh Kumar is an Assistant Professor at the Department of South and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, India - 151401

Defensive Realism, Waltz's intellectual project provides a critical entry point into the neo-realist tradition for understanding the enduring conflictual dynamics of world politics. In his later work, Waltz sought to recast classical realism by arguing that the behaviour of sovereign states is shaped less by human nature and more by the constraints imposed by the anarchic structure of the international system. His formulation of the "three images of war" – the individual, the state, and the international system – asserted that wars persist because no overarching authority exists to prevent them, even in an age of nuclear deterrence.³

On both practical and theoretical grounds, Waltz's structural analysis illuminated patterns of power competition and international dominance, while simultaneously rescuing realism from stagnation at a moment when it risked becoming theoretically redundant.⁴ However, Defensive Realism, as an offshoot of neo-realism, does not offer a comprehensive solution to the complexities of international politics. Scholars such as Barry Buzan, Richard Little, Osiander, Teschke, Ken Booth, and Nicholas J. Wheeler have highlighted its conceptual and empirical limitations. Echoing Ashley's critique of the "poverty of

neo-realism," this⁵ paper argues for a more sophisticated analytical framework that draws upon multiple strands within the neo-realist tradition.

Despite sustained critique, neo-realism continues to command scholarly relevance because it offers analytical leverage over the fundamentally conflictual nature of an anarchic international system. This paper contends that sub-theoretical synthesis within neo-realism can sharpen our understanding of both long-term transformations in global politics and emerging future trajectories. Rather than treating the theory as a disciplinary panacea, the study acknowledges its limits and the value of theoretical pluralism. In particular, it challenges the neo-realist tendency to marginalise leadership, diplomacy, and domestic politics by arguing for a synthesis of Waltz's three images.

Therefore, the paper integrates structural realism and classical realism to offer a sophisticated view of the changing power relations as it examines Syria's post-Assad transition through a composite neo-realist lens. The interplay of internal factionalism, regional rivalry, and international power dynamics has shaped Syria's journey from war to a shaky fiction of peace. The paper

examines how state and non-state actors employ balance-of-power tactics, how foreign powers pursue strategic interests, and how they manage conflict while maintaining a semblance of stability. While providing insights into possible avenues for lasting peace, the study exposes the shortcomings of neo-realism in handling intricate intra-state transitions by challenging the frequently brittle and deceptive nature of post-conflict stability in Syria.

The Context of the Study

Engagement with defensive neo-realism in the context of the 8 December 2024 events, when rebel forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) under its commander, widely known by his nom de guerre Mohammad al-Julani (born Ahmed al-Sharaa), launched a swift offensive from their Idlib base. It culminated in the collapse of the Assad dynasty's more than five decades of authoritarian rule in Syria. National, regional, and global media, especially social media, were inundated with images and videos of jubilation as opposition forces entered the capital, Damascus. Crowds filled the streets, chanting "The Syrian people are one," singing revolutionary songs, and celebrating what was widely perceived as a long-awaited moment of liberation.

Among the most searing images were those of political prisoners being released from some of the world's most notorious detention facilities, particularly Sednaya Prison. For many observers committed to peace and opposed to autocratic rule, these scenes offered a fleeting sense of relief that another entrenched authoritarian regime had fallen.

Yet this initial euphoria was short-lived, as scepticism quickly replaced celebration, with deeper concerns emerging about the trajectory of the nascent post-Assad state. The possibility that Syria would once again descend into violent competition among rival militant factions, or become an intensified arena for proxy rivalries, loomed large. Such apprehensions are rooted in the historically conflictual nature of West Asian politics and the persistent instability that often accompanies abrupt regime⁶ transitions.

Within this broader context, this study situates its analysis. By examining Syria's domestic political transformation alongside the constraints and incentives generated by the international system, the paper employs a Waltzian framework grounded in defensive neo-realism to assess the fate of the Syrian state. While acknowledging the limitations of any single theoretical approach,

the analysis seeks to offer a balanced understanding of both the profound changes that have reshaped Syria and the plausible futures that may yet unfold.

Syria: Sandwiched Between Allies and Enemies

Syria's geopolitical location and alliance choices rendered it vulnerable to sustained external manipulation, turning the country into a battleground shaped more by competing regional and global interests than by Syrian agency. As a result, for decades, it served as a theatre for external powers to pursue strategic rivalries far from their own territories, devastating its economy, social fabric, and infrastructure, and leaving the state institutionally fractured and economically exhausted.

Bashar al-Assad's regime was sustained by Iran and Russia, becoming its indispensable guarantors of survival, particularly after the 2011 uprising mutated into a decade of civil war.⁷ Both states supported Assad not solely out of ideological affinity, but also to advance their own regional and international objectives. Russia's decisive military intervention in 2015 reversed Assad's battlefield losses at the hands of political rebels and transborder Islamic State of Iraq and

Syria (ISIS) militant caliphate, thereby preserving Moscow's strategic foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, Russia's protracted war in Ukraine since 2022 has gradually diverted its military and diplomatic attention away from Damascus, which weakened Assad's position and contributed significantly to his eventual ouster. Following his flight to Russia, Moscow shifted toward diplomatic bargaining, particularly through Turkey, which maintains strong influence over Ahmed Al Sharra, to preserve its military bases in Tartous and Latakia. It therefore underscored how its primary interest lay in sustaining regional influence rather than defending Assad personally.

Similarly, Iran viewed Syria as fundamental to sustain its "Axis of Resistance", including Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas, and hence invested heavily in Assad's survival. It mobilised dozens of Shia militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Lebanon, besides its own Revolutionary Guards, to defend the regime after the 2011 uprising turned into a civil war in 2012. As such, Assad's overthrow represented a major strategic setback for Tehran as it disrupted its land corridor to its non-state militant actors in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, thereby greatly diminishing its regional leverage.⁸

While Iran publicly blamed Israel, the United States, and indirectly Turkey, it also adopted conciliatory rhetoric, calling for an inclusive political order in post-Assad Syria.

On the other hand, actors like Turkey, Israel and the US welcomed the fall of Damascus – albeit for their divergent motivations. Yet, despite such differences in interest, all shared a common aversion to Iranian and Russian influence in the country. Ankara emerged as the most immediate geopolitical beneficiary due to its decade of support for various anti-Assad groups, including the Syrian National Army. A favourable regime in Damascus has allowed Turkey to pursue its core objectives, including preventing Kurdish autonomy near its borders, facilitating the return of Syrian refugees, and positioning itself as a central actor in Syria's political reconstruction.⁹

For the United States, Assad's collapse reinforced longstanding strategic goals of constraining Iran and Russia while enhancing Israel's security environment. Although Washington was not directly responsible for Assad's final downfall, the Biden and now Trump administrations portrayed it as validation of US policy. Moving forward, however, the United States

faces strategic dilemmas, particularly in managing its partnership with Kurdish forces now exposed to heightened pressure from Sharaa-led state forces and Turkey.

First- and Second-Image Analysis of Post-Assad Syria

For many Syrians, the collapse of the Assad regime and the symbolic "Morning of Freedom" (*Sabah al-Hurriya*) marked the end, at least temporarily, of a thirteen-year civil war. The opposition forces, most prominently led by Al-Julani's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and assisted primarily by Turkey and reportedly by Qatar, rapidly expanded their military operation against the Assad government forces' unexpectedly weak defences, who largely surrendered without much resistance.¹⁰ HTS chief, Al-Julani, who rebranded himself as Ahmed Al-Sharaa from his Jihadist identity, emerged as the most influential actor to lead the transition, declaring their Syrian Salvation Government, previously limited to Idlib, as a nationwide transitional authority. HTS-led rebel forces swiftly consolidated control of the transitional administration and reorganised dozens of these groups into a government force. Though these measures signalled an attempt

to project order and administrative competence, governing the entirety of Syria remains a challenge.¹¹

Nevertheless, many observers have noted signs of tactical pragmatism. As Ben-Ami Sholomo argues,⁹ Sharaa's decision to allow Prime Minister Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali to oversee state institutions temporarily reflected a calculated effort to avoid institutional collapse. Notably, the victorious opposition refrained from large-scale retaliation against former regime loyalists that many feared was in the offing, thereby suggesting an awareness of the risks associated with revenge politics.

Yet a first-image analysis reveals deep structural vulnerabilities within Syria's domestic political landscape. HTS does not represent the entire armed opposition that fought the Assad government. Numerous factions, some newly reorganised in southern and central Syria, operated independently of Julani's command. Even in Idlib, HTS had relied on auxiliary groups rather than exercising total control.¹² Unless all of these groups are properly integrated into the state force under a unified command structure, and the leaders get their due share of power, the risk of factional infighting plunging the country into an internal conflict remains highly probable. Its

experience with the US-backed SDF reflects the limitation of Sharaa's authority, as is the case with Druze forces in southern Suweyda.

Likewise, second-image dynamics further complicate the situation as post-Assad domestic politics of Syria remain deeply entangled with external actors like Turkey, Israel and the US, trying to influence the dynamics. Moreover, concerns persist about the sincerity of Sharaa's ideological moderation and potential adoption of a Taliban-style trajectory; the more immediate danger lies in the presence of armed groups which are yet to mark their allegiance with the state.

There is little evidence that external actors will abandon proxy strategies. Historically, major powers have prolonged conflicts when costs remain low and strategic gains, such as geopolitical leverage, resource access, or arms sales, outweigh the risks. Practically, decision-makers operate under conditions of uncertainty shaped by misperception, the "problem of other minds," and the dual dilemmas of response and interpretation inherent in the security dilemma.¹³ This "anarchy problematique" produces persistent mistrust and limits prospects for sustained cooperation.¹⁴ This insecurity about the other players' intentions is a recurring

feature of international politics and can never be eliminated, only mitigated to a certain level. This “unresolvable uncertainty” of the conflict will downplay any cooperative endeavour on the part of the external actors (both state as well as non-state) to trust the other actors.¹⁵

Synthesising Domestic Politics with the First and Second Images

Given the inherently conflictual dynamics shaping post-Assad Syria, maintaining peace and internal security remains an exceptionally fragile endeavour. Analyses of Syria's transition often privilege either domestic factors or international forces, treating them as analytically distinct. A similar limitation exists within Waltzian neorealism, which, particularly in its structural variant, tends to underplay human agency and domestic politics in favour of systemic explanations rooted in international anarchy. While the structure of the international system undeniably constrains state behaviour, the role of leadership and internal political processes cannot be dismissed. There exists a significant, albeit difficult to measure, possibility that domestic agency can mediate, reshape, or even partially offset structural pressures.

This does not imply that Syria's newly emergent leadership, led by

Ahmed Al Sharaa, possesses unchecked autonomy to shape outcomes. Rather, his influence operates within a dense web of domestic constraints and external dependencies. Syria's near-term political trajectory will depend not only on the intentions and capabilities of the new governing coalition but also on the behaviour of external actors willing to support stabilisation as the post-conflict recovery requires foreign investment, humanitarian assistance, sanctions relief, support for refugee returns, and coordinated efforts to disarm militias and reform security institutions. As of now, Washington has revoked some of the crippling sanctions and has welcomed Sharaa to the US. Besides regional actors like the rich Gulf monarchies, extending a hand of cooperation does show promise. Yet the failure to establish inclusive political and civil institutions could again risk international isolation, leading to renewed instability. In such a scenario, neighbouring states, particularly Turkey, would confront the spillover effects of a fragmented and impoverished Syria.¹⁶ Moreover, the Sharaa administration faces a formidable domestic challenge to manage sectarian divisions and ensure protection for minority communities. The Alawite and Shiite populations, who were closely associated with the former regime,

remain particularly vulnerable to marginalisation or revenge.¹⁷ There have already been multiple such instances of periodic violence in regions like coastal Latakia, which have killed hundreds of minority community members.

In *Man, the State, and War*, Waltz famously argued that wars arise not from the malevolence of individuals or states but from the structural condition in which states exist.¹⁸ Like Rousseau, he located the primary cause of war in the international system rather than human nature or domestic arrangements. While Waltz did not entirely dismiss domestic politics,¹⁹ his *Theory of International Politics* marked a shift toward privileging systemic explanations. In doing so, he increasingly treated domestic and individual-level analyses as "reductionist,"²⁰ thereby weakening the analytical link between internal politics and international outcomes. This conceptual separation, described by Ian Clark as "the great divide" in International Relations,²¹ presumes a rigid distinction between domestic and international spheres governed by different organising principles.²² Herein, the Syrian case challenges this divide as domestic political structures, internal factionalism, and foreign policy preferences are inseparable from international

interventions shaping the state's trajectory. A comprehensive analysis of Syria's transition would, therefore, require integrating domestic agency with systemic constraints. By granting meaningful space to internal actors while respecting domestic institutional processes rather than subordinating them to external geopolitical agendas, it offers the best prospect for long-term stability. And, theoretically, synthesising the first and second images with the systemic level provides a richer understanding of Syria's predicament, moving beyond theory for its own sake and offering a grounded framework for assessing post-conflict state transformation.

Unravelling the Nexus between the Third Image and Post-Assad Syria

Examining post-Assad Syria through the third image of systemic forces operating beyond the territorial jurisdiction of the state reveals how international structures and extra-territorial authorities continue to shape domestic outcomes. Syria's experience challenges the so-called "territorial trap"²³ and exposes the persistence of "disregarded authority,"²⁴ as multiple external actors have routinely violated Syrian sovereignty. These interventions underscore the erosion of the post-Westphalian norm of territorial

integrity in contemporary conflict zones.

While on one side, Russia and Iran functioned as allies of the Assad regime, albeit in an asymmetrical partnership, providing direct military, financial, and political support that enabled Assad to suppress opposition forces and govern a fragmented state, external actors opposed to it, like Turkey, the US and Israel proxy sought to weaken it. However, the systemic context shifted dramatically with the escalation of wars in Ukraine and Gaza, which diverted Russian and Iranian attention and resources away from Damascus. This strategic overstretch created a permissive environment for opposition forces to act decisively. While Syria's geopolitical value as Russia's gateway to the Mediterranean and Iran's land corridor to Hezbollah and Hamas had previously ensured sustained external backing, Assad's fall unravelled it. While Moscow is manoeuvring the evolving dynamics by engaging with the transitional government, including reportedly using the presence of Assad and his loyalists as a bargaining leverage, Iran confronts uncertainty regarding the new regime's orientation. Moreover, China's relative disengagement raises important questions. It looks pertinent that Beijing may have calculated that

Assad's survival was not essential to its core interests, or that strategic restraint could yield long-term diplomatic dividends.²⁵ But, seen from its behaviour, Beijing has refrained from such steps that would complicate its economic engagements.

On the other hand, Turkey emerged as the most prominent beneficiary, while Arab governments led by Saudi Arabia also finally have Damascus in the Arab sphere of influence, which eluded them for long and drove their motivations to initially back various anti-Assad armed opposition groups after the 2011 uprising. As such, post-Assad Syria illustrates how systemic pressures, great-power rivalry, and shifting strategic priorities at the third-image level decisively condition the fate of fragile states, often overriding domestic agency and accelerating regime collapse.

Analysing the Balance-of-Power Tactics in Syria

By the final phase of the Syrian conflict, the broad contours of the outcome had largely been shaped by external power calculations as structural dynamics within the anarchic international system had set in motion forces that made the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's rule increasingly inevitable. From a neorealist perspective, no individual

decision by Assad could have effectively countered the cumulative pressures generated by an unfavourable balance of power as competing states, driven by their own security imperatives, generated countervailing pressures that gradually eroded the regime's foundations. As Waltz observes, "the reproductive power of an anarchic structure is the unintended consequence of the component units endeavouring to survive."²⁶

Herein, a diverse set of actors, including Israel, the US, and Turkey, worked to weaken Assad's position and place them in opposition to Iran and Russia. This contest was not ideological but structural, rooted in survival within a competitive and conflict-prone system. Importantly, while systemic pressures constrained behaviour, state actions simultaneously reshaped the system itself. As Waltz noted, "states affect the system's structure even as it affects them,"²⁷ underscoring a two-way interaction between domestic alignments and international outcomes. These reciprocal dynamics produced consequences that neither Assad's allies nor his adversaries fully anticipated.

From the standpoint of defensive neo-realism, the behaviour of external powers in Syria can be interpreted less as expansionist

ambition and more as efforts to preserve the balance of power and safeguard their security interests. Russia's 2015 intervention, for instance, aimed to prevent the immediate collapse of the Assad regime and protect Moscow's strategic foothold rather than to pursue territorial expansion. The US, by contrast, relied on indirect means by supporting the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and imposing sanctions through the Caesar Act to constrain the Assad regime while avoiding large-scale military engagement. Turkey's military operations in northern Syria and its backing of the Syrian National Army reflected Ankara's core security objective of preventing Kurdish autonomy near its borders and countering groups it associates with the PKK. Likewise, Iran also did not nurture territorial visions but sought to secure its land route to the regional militant allies of Hezbollah and Hamas.

Collectively, these patterns illustrate the logic of defensive neo-realism, where calculated restraint, proxy engagement, and limited accommodation, rather than outright dominance, become the preferred means of maximising security in an anarchic system. Only Israel's intentions are territorial, under which it has already annexed the Syrian

Golan Heights and taken control over significant Syrian territory along the border to establish so-called buffer security zones.

Conclusion

Applying Waltzian insights alongside a composite neo-realist framework underscores the need to situate the Syrian crisis within its broader geopolitical context, without neglecting internal political realities. Conflict analysis that privileges either domestic conditions or international structure at the expense of the other produces partial and distorted conclusions. Syria's experience demonstrates that internal fragmentation, leadership choices, and institutional capacity interact continuously with external interventions, regional rivalries, and great-power competition. Any meaningful analysis must therefore accord equal analytical weight to all levels shaping the conflict.

At the first and second image levels, recognising the agency of Syria's new leadership is unavoidable. Whether welcomed or contested, the post-Assad authorities now govern the state and will decisively shape its trajectory toward either stability or renewed violence. The longstanding pattern of

powerful states treating weaker ones as instruments of strategic competition has deeply scarred Syria and the wider West Asian region. Moving forward, engagement rather than isolation offers the only viable path to stabilisation. International actors must confront the reality that Assad's rule has ended and that continued attempts to undermine Syrian sovereignty through coercion or unilateral military action risk perpetuating instability.

Equally important is the recognition that societies function according to distinct historical, cultural, and political logics. Imposing Western or European governance templates on post-conflict Syria, particularly in light of recent experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, is likely to prove counterproductive. Moreover, unless external actors do not restrain their competitive impulses and support an inclusive and gradual transition, Damascus risks sliding into renewed sectarian and factional conflict. The imperative, therefore, is collective responsibility, which balances interests without instrumentalising a fragile post-conflict state, and enables a transition that privileges stability, inclusion, and long-term peace over short-term geopolitical advantage. ■

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