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Resisting Radical Rebels: Variations in Islamist Rebel Governance and the Occurrence of Civil Resistance

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ABSTRACT

During the Syrian civil war, different types of Salafi-Jihadi rebel groups controlled territory and established governance over civilians. Their governing strategies have been markedly diverse. In this study, we explore how this governance variation can help to explain the occurrence of civil resistance. We suggest that different types of rebel governance structures provide political opportunities for civilians to mobilize against those rebel groups through public demonstrations. In particular, we argue that it is middle-ranged opportunity structures of rebel governance that strongest incentivizes civil resistance, by giving enough space for civilian mobilization but fewer alternative channels of expressing discontent. This argument is explored through an analysis of the variation between the three main Salafi-Jihadi rebel groups in Syria—IS, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham. We show how differences in the groups' four rebel governance dimensions—rebel collaboration, civilian inclusion, alliance structure, and repression—impact the political opportunities for civilians to mobilize against these groups. We find that HTS, the group that is in the middle range across these four governance dimensions, provided greater opportunity for civilian protests. This study uses a new dataset of civilian resistance events in Syria as well as interviews with civilians governed by these groups.

Introduction

Research on terrorist groups and non-state actors using political violence has increasingly recognized that beyond engaging in warfare, many groups also tend to engage in rebel governance.[1] This is particularly the case for groups, termed terrorist state-building groups by Revkin,[2] and who fight over radical Islamist goals and have increasingly engaged in various attempts of rebel governance in which they have established different manifestations of "jihadist statelets."[3] While there is a growing debate on the strategies of rebel governance employed by non-state armed groups in general,[4] and jihadist groups in particular,[5] we still know relatively little on the effect it has on the civilians' capabilities and incentives to challenge jihadist groups in power.

During the Syrian civil war, very different types of Salafi-Jihadi rebel groups have been in control of various parts of the territory and there sought to establish governance structures. The civilian population under their control have responded differently to the jihadist governance attempts. In particular, civil resistance—through active, manifest but nonviolent acts of discontent and disobedience—against jihadists was more common against some groups than others. In this study, we set out to explore this variation in the occurrence of civil resistance against Salafi-Jihadi groups. For example, when *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (*HTS)* entered the town of Saraqib in July 2017 they were met with

approximately seventy-five civilians staging demonstrations in an attempt to block their advance,[6] whilst in contrast, when the *Islamic State (IS)* advanced across northern Syria seizing six towns near to Aleppo, they were met with no such resistance.[7]

Our entry point for this discussion is that civilians and rebel groups are in a strategic, interdependent relationship with each other. Rebel groups seek to establish territorial control and receive the consent of the people under its domination, by the use of force or through other means. Civilians, on the other hand, can withdraw their consent and chose to resist rebel groups. While there are many different response strategies that civilians can employ, including obedience, taking up arms, and taking refuge, we are here interested in a particular type of civil action: taking up nonviolent but active opposition, that is, civil resistance. In the study of political violence, there is a growing scholarly attention being paid to studying the conditions for civil resistance.[8]

The rebel governance literature, on the one hand, and the civil resistance literature, on the other, have been largely studied in isolation from each other. While an emerging literature has tried to bridge these two fields in order to understand the strategic and interactive relationship between civilians and rebel-groups, we still lack knowledge as to how the governing strategies of jihadist groups impact on the prospects for civil resistance.[9] Comparative analysis of different types of jihadist groups has been lacking (a recent exception is Svensson and Finnbogason[10] which is discussed more below), in particular in terms of the different conditions that they create for civil–rebel relationships and how this shapes the possibilities for civil resistance.

In this study, we develop a political opportunity argument: Different types of Islamist governance structures provide different political opportunity structures that enables civilians to mobilize against those rebel groups through public protests and demonstrations. In particular, we argue that it is middle-ranged opportunity structures of rebel governance that strongest incentivizes civil resistance, by giving enough space for civilian mobilization but fewer alternative channels of expressing discontent.

Our interest here lies in trying to understand how different forms of "proto-states" governance establishments by Salafi-Jihadist groups in the context of the Syrian civil war impacted the response by civilians. Through a systematic comparison of the governance strategy of three main Salafi-Jihadi groups operating in the Syrian civil war, Islamic State (IS), HTS and *Ahrar al-Sham*, we demonstrate how differences in four central governance dimensions—groups' rebel collaboration, civilian inclusion, alliance structure, and repression—impacted the political opportunities for civilians to mobilize against these groups. We find that HTS, the rebel group that is in the middle range across these four governance dimensions, provided greater opportunity for civilian protests, in comparison to both IS and Ahrar al-Sham that were on opposite ends in terms of their governance structures.

Syria provides an analytically used context to study subnational variations in Islamist governance and its impact on rebel-civilian relationships. Since the inception of the 2011 civil war, Syria has been a breeding ground for different types of military-based non-state governance structures. Beyond the governance structures established by the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, the Free Syrian Army, and Syrian local councils, Syria has also seen a plethora of Islamist factions and rebel groups. In this paper, we focus on comparing IS, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham that either emerged or developed in the Syrian Salafi-Jihadi milieu. Although these three groups are broadly defined as Salafi-Jihadi, the ideological differences, as well as practical considerations between the groups have resulted in different types of governance structures.

This study makes a number of contributions. Firstly, we make a novel contribution and link between the rebel governance and civil resistance literature by finding that the middle-ranged inclusionary governance structures of rebel groups have the strongest impact in terms of affecting the frequency of protests against them. Empirically, we contribute by presenting new sub-national data from the Syrian civil war, drawing from a recently collected dataset as well as an in-depth interviews in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. In this study, we also show that the political opportunity framework has broader applications and can provide insights into both the rebel governance and civil resistance fields. Our study is also part of a larger line of research seeking to understand how

civil agency manifests itself in the context of violent settings and wars.[11] In Syria, civilians living under different types of rebel institutions have been suffering as victims, but as we demonstrate here, they have not only been victims. Civilians have also actively resisted the Islamist rebel rulers and their governance systems and have strategically tailored their responses to the contexts under which they have lived.

Theoretical framework

This study is situated in the ongoing debate in the rebel governance literature regarding the different political governance institutions that rebel groups form when taking over territory.[12] An aspect of the rebel governance literature that remains understudied is the impact of a rebel group's religious ideology on its governance strategy, particularly in relation to Salafi-Jihadi rebel groups.[13] Although the specific tenets of Salafi-Jihadism do not have a commonly accepted definition[14] all three Salafi-Jihadi groups in this study believed that *jihad* (religiously sanctioned warfare) is an individual obligation for all Muslims and reject existing political systems and the international order.[15]

Amongst the most prominent attempts to define governance by Salafi-Jihadi groups is Lia,[16] who describes proto-states created by Salafi-Jihadi groups as having four characteristics, those being "intensely ideological, internationalist, territorially expansive, and irredentist."[17] However, this one fits all approach to Salafi-Jihadi groups has been criticized by authors including Schwab,[18] and Stenerson[19] who state that this does not reflect the broad range of governance established by Salafi-Jihadi groups. Instead, Stenerson devised two scales to show the range in Salafi-Jihadi groups governance: "*takfirism*," the relationship to society in which the group operate, and "pan-Islamism," defining what the group fight for either the local nation or the international Muslim community (*Ummah*).[20] Schwab uses Stenerson's scale to argue that HTS would be considered integrationist and fighting for the Syrian nation, in comparison to IS's separation stance that fights for the Ummah.[21]

In this study, we are interested in comparing those rebel groups with Salafi-Jihadist ideologies as they are manifested in their governance structures. Jihadism is a transnational social movement, that was ideologically developed in Middle East but gains its traction through the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan, although to describe the trajectory of the jihadist movement is beyond the scope of this study.[22] Political Islam is a broad term for a set of ideological movements, sharing the idea that Islam and Islamic law should have primacy as the basis for state governance. Political Islam is therefore an ideology of governance, although different groups and movements have very different perspectives on how such governance should be designed, constructed and implemented. Salafi-Jihadist groups can thus be seen as a sub-set of the broader ideological movement of Islamism, but that it is distinct and cannot be equated with the same.[23]

Recent comparative studies of the governance established by Salafi-Jihadi groups in Syria suggest that this variation in governance is the norm and that the governance strategy of Salafi-Jihadi groups can differ along several criteria. Furlan developed a typology of rebel governance that she applied to several Salafi-Jihadi groups which included variation in their treatment of civilians, other rebel groups and governance goals.[24] Moreover, the governing strategy of Salafi-Jihadi groups do not necessarily remain static; both Berti[25] and Drevon and Haenni[26] use detailed case studies of HTS in Syria to show that competition between Salafi-Jihadi groups, resources scarcity and the need to survive altered the governing strategy of HTS in Syria.

An element that is missing in this discussion is the explicit role of Salafi-Jihadi governance strategy on the impact of civil resistance. Although the topic of civilian inclusion in the case of IS has been studied extensively[27] and the broader rebel governance literature has focused extensively on the varied role that civilians play when interacting with rebel groups[28] few works have focused on the role of governing strategy's impact on civilian resistance. While Masullo shows how ideational factors shape

the civilian responses to armed groups, we focus on the opportunity structures of rebel governance strategies and argue that different types of rebel governance structures provide different possibilities for civilians to mobilize through protests.[29]

The literature on civil resistance is built on the premise that civilians have it in their hands to withdraw support from leaders and regimes, a support which is ultimately necessary for maintaining power over time.[30] Whereas most of the research in the civil resistance literature has revolved around how civilians challenge leaders of states[31] including studies on why resistance groups take up violent strategies,[32] or how violent flank effect impact the trajectories of civil resistance campaigns.[33] There is also a growing literature on civil resistance strategies against rebel groups.[34] This literature has also demonstrated that rebel groups, which have taken control of a territory and its population need civilian support, and that civilians can use many different ways of countering or managing the rebel-groups' attempts to assert control over them. So far, this line of literature has not examined the context of jihadist groups, although this is now starting to change.

Building on insights from the social movement literature, the civil resistance literature has focused on the role of grievances, resource mobilization and political opportunity in creating conditions for civil resistance.[35] While these explanations may carry different weights, they speak to the fact that people who are unsatisfied with the status quo, need to have a sense of urgency to motivate them to act (*grievances*). At the same time, the opposition needs to have possibilities in terms of strength and resources to mobilize resistance (*resource mobilization*), as well as acting under some structural possibilities in terms of (temporal) openings or weaknesses on the challenged regime's side (*political opportunity*). Thus, while we see these as three compatible, rather than rival, explanations to the occurrence and outcome of civil resistance, we develop here the political opportunity argument.

Political opportunity theory suggests that would-be challengers of a regime in power carefully consider the political and social context in which they live and estimate their chances of success before launching mobilization efforts.[36] Tarrow defines political opportunities as "dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting people's expectations for success or failure."[37] Thus, the main drivers behind the occurrence of civil resistance are factors outside the control of a movement or civil society actor. What these dimensions are, exactly, is somewhat debated, but they relate to internal characteristics of the regime, in particular the degree of unity or divisions amongst the challenges elites, the political access for the opposition, the alliance-structures of the regime, and the regime's capability and motivation for repression.[38]

Political opportunity theory is commonly framed in terms of changes over time and explanatory factors are seen as dynamic: It is openings over time, through temporally limited weaknesses of the challenged regime that can provide windows of opportunity that movements or activists can capitalize on. While changes over time are definitely important, so are the differences between different opportunity structures. Here, we focus on comparison between cases. We expect that middle-ranged rebel governance structures will combine insufficient repressiveness with a lack of enough foreign support through external alliance-structures to be able to deter civil resistance. At the same time, such structures will have insufficiently developed civil-rebel institutional relationships and channels to create alternatives to mass-mobilization and civil resistance. Here, we will build on insights from the study of the effect of political structures on civil war and political violence, and see this as a local-level representation of a larger, already established finding of political structures in the cross-country analysis of political systems: the inverted-U shaped relationship between risk of violent manifestation of social conflict and degree of democracy, where the middle-ranged semi-democratic countries have been at the greatest risk of political violence.[39]

Bridging these two literatures, we focus on the opportunity structures of rebel governance strategies and argue that different types of rebel governance structures provide different possibilities for civilians to mobilize through protests. We adapt the four dimensions in Schock's framework—elite unity/divisions, political access, alliance-structures and repression—to the context we study here: rebel-civilian relationships.[40] In terms of elite unity and divisions, when there are domestic rebel coalitions and collaboration, then we would expect the space for civil resistance to be generally higher—the

plurality of the rebel rulers would allow for more room of dissenting voices to be heard. In terms of political access, when there is civilian inclusion we would expect higher tolerance for protests and demonstrations. The alliance-structure of the rebel groups is an important dimension of their governance strategies—in terms of reliance on external alliances—and can affect the opportunity structures for civil resistance—if the rebels appeal to a broader, international constituency it should be more attuned to the grievances of the local communities under its reach. Whilst the higher the degree of repression in a governing strategy—and with repression we do not mean violence against their external enemies (such as the state, its military forces and even against civilians living under the control of a challenged state), but rather the attempts to assert control through violent and coercive means over the civilian population under its control—civilians would have less opportunity to resist through protests. While we see these as four different and distinct dimensions of rebel governance, they are not necessarily independent of each other, because rebel coalitions, civilian inclusion, alliance structures and repression are dimensions that may interact and shape each other. This is something we return to in the discussion at the end of the article.

Variation in resistance across different groups

This study draws on data on local-level demonstrations and protests against Salafi-Jihadist armed rebel actors in the context of the Syrian civil war. The data is gathered by screening English and Arab-speaking social media platforms and coding open civil resistance against jihadist groups. The procedure for the collection of the data and a comprehensive analysis of the data is done elsewhere in Svensson et al.[41] Whereas the full dataset includes all jihadist armed groups, we here limit focus to only the three main Salafi-Jihadist groups.

Civil resistance in the form of demonstrations and protests was not distributed equally across the territories of the three jihadist armed groups studied here. As we can see in Table 1, there were marked differences in terms of the occurrence of protests. Thus, in terms of occurrence of resistance, there is a falling scale across the three groups, with HTS standing out and experiencing significantly more civilian protests than both Ahrar al-Sharm and IS. Protests did occur against IS, but were relatively rare, with only thirty-one protest events being recorded within the time period. One such example occurred in 2014, where a group of students, their relatives, and their teachers demonstrated in an IS held-neighborhood in Deir az Zur demanding that their schools be re-opened so that they could continue their studies.[42] In comparison, Ahrar al-Sham experienced twice as many protests, with sixty-one recorded in total. One notable example occurred in 2017, when approximately 250 demonstrators protested in Kafr Nobol, Idlib governorate, demanding that Ahrar al-Sham leaves the town.[43] In contrast, HTS experienced far more protests than either IS or Ahrar al-Sham, with a total of 357 recorded. Among these, the protest movements in Maarat al-Numan against HTS, is the most well-known and comprehensive campaign of all the protests against jihadist groups.[44] Beginning as a reaction to HTS's treatment of the locally rooted rebel group, the 13th Division, the protests continued over an extensive time period and constituted a total of seventy-eight events (Figure 1).

The type of civilian demands that were raised against all three groups varied. In some cases, civilians demanded the unification of rebel groups or the ceasing of hostilities. For example, in 2017, following intense hostilities between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham, the city of Saraqab's people demonstrated, calling for a ceasefire between the two groups to avoid civilian casualties.[45] A large number of the protests were aimed at challenging the governance of the jihadist rebel groups. For example, in

Table 1. Number of protests by group

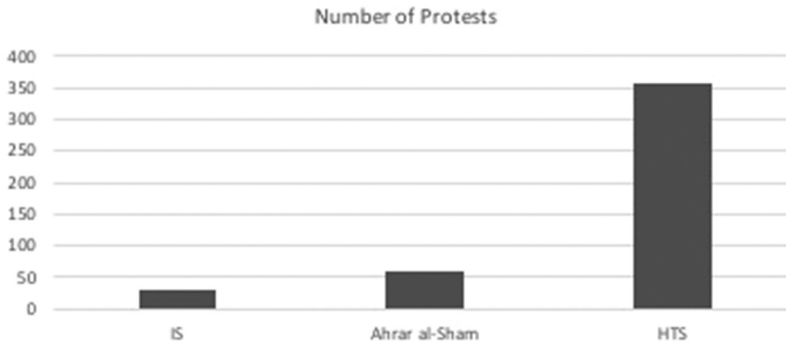|	Number of Protests
IS	31
Ahrar al-Sham	61
HTS	357

Figure 1. Occurrence of local-level protests against jihadist-groups in Syria.

2018, protesters in Saraqab occupied the city's main power plant and effectively managed to prevent HTS from dismantling it.[46] In July 2018, in As-Suwayda, dozens of civilians rallied outside the IS governorate building for a sit-in to demand the release of several women and children, following the execution of one of them the day before.[47] At other times, the protesters adopted maximalist demands, protesting against the group's presence itself, rather than its specific actions or policies. In 2014, in the town of Quriyeh, in Deir az Zur province, a local Islamist militia posted a video denying reports that its members had pledged loyalty to IS whilst local residents staged a demonstration demanding that IS be expelled from the province.[48] In Jarablus in 2018, following the killing of a civilian, local residents demonstrated against the presence of Ahrar al-Sham, demanding their exit whilst chanting slogans, including "Jarablus is free, free, the factions go out."[49] In this study, however, we do not focus on the variation in protest demands, and in line with other studies on civil resistance, we study the occurrence of civil resistance as the dependent variable.[50] All public protests and demonstration are thus counted and treated the same irrespective of their demands.

The frequency of protests is one indicator of civil resistance, but this measurement does not take into consideration that the number of people protesting may vary at different occasions. Thus, it may be valuable to also examine the size of protests. Previous research has pointed to the role of mass-participation as a particularly important dynamic in nonviolent campaigns.[51] In order to gauge the extent of variation in not only the frequency of protests but their magnitude, we distinguish the protests in terms of size (number of people participating), where size is known. Table 2 shows that it there is a marked difference between HTS and the other two groups, consistent with the observation made above. HTS is particularly overrepresented when it comes to major- and medium-sized protests, compared to Ahrar al-Sham and IS (Figure 2).

It is important to note the difference in the size of territorial control over time between the three groups. The figures on protests should be interpreted in light of how much territory (and over how many people) the groups controlled. IS at its peak in January 2015 controlled over 90,000 square kilometers of territory across Iraq and Syria, and although the same level of territorial analysis has not been conducted on HTS and Ahrar al-Sham, we can reliably say both of their governance projects were far smaller as they were only concentrated in north-western Syria.[52]

In addition, when comparing protest data, we assume that Syrian civilians residing in the territory of all three groups have a similar *proclivity to protest*. This assumption is based on the fact that the territory controlled by the three groups spans a relatively small width of just

Table 2. Size of protests

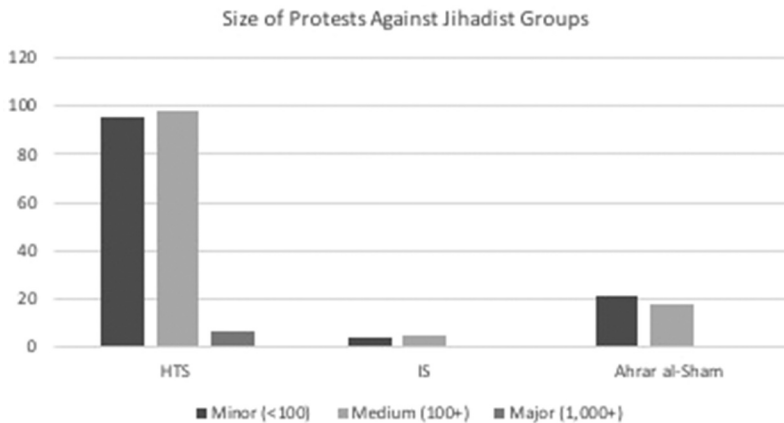|	Minor (<100)	Medium (100+)	Major (1,000+)
HTS	95	98	7
IS	4	5	1
Ahrar al-Sham	21	18	0

Figure 2. Size of protests against jihadist groups.

400 kilometers between Idlib and Deir az-Zur. This territory is ethnically relatively homogenous, dominated by Sunni Arabs (with small enclaves of Kurdish and Alawi minorities), with similar levels of urbanity and education levels amongst residents.[53] Further, this territory has been contested by multiple armed groups and the Syrian regime and each area has witnessed a high number of protest during the civil war.[54]

We further acknowledge that the repressive nature of IS may not only hinder civil resistance but also information of any such behavior to be circulated more widely. IS established stringent communication laws in Syria, amongst which the group banned mobile phones, Wi-Fi, and travel at varying times between 2013 and 2016. Punishable by death in many cases, it is likely that some civilians would have been reluctant to defy regulations, and consequently, civil resistance may have been under-reported in IS held territories. In contrast, those living under HTS were not subject to such strict regulations. We recognize this potential bias, which would under-report some of the resistance against IS compared to other groups. Still, relying on social media platforms is likely to be a more inclusive way of generating information than by, for example, just relying on international media. It is important to underline that case studies and interview-based studies on the situation under IS suggest that public protests and demonstrations were very rare.

It should also be noted that while we study public protest here, we do not mean to say that this is the exhaustive range of civil resistance strategies. Civilians may respond, particularly in high-risk situations, with the withdrawal of support, rather than through demonstrations. Civilians can also engage in low-level resistance in and through their ordinary lives (everyday resistance) by not fully abiding with the social rules and legal laws created by the jihadist groups. Dissent also manifests itself in other ways, for example, the use of satire and humor has been an important practice.

Explaining the impact of different governing strategies

Across the course of the Syrian civil war, dozens of Salafi-Jihadist groups were created, fragmented, disappeared and were subsumed.[55] Three of the most prominent and territorial successful groups to emerge from the Syrian Salafi-Jihadi milieu were IS, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham. All three groups subscribe to a Salafi-Jihadi ideology and each held a common goal to gain and govern territory in their respective territorial domains. In spite of these similarities, each group held differing governing strategies that qualitatively varied along several criteria: rebel group collaboration, civilian inclusion, repression and political goals.

This section draws on fieldwork interviews conducted with civilians that lived in HTS—controlled territories and with two groups of IS affiliated persons: civilian IS employees working in IS's federal and provincial governing institutions; and ordinary civilians who lived in IS-held territory in Iraq and Syria without any employment relationship to IS. The interviews took place during multiple trips to Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey over five months between 2018 and 2019. The interviews were conducted in Arabic or English and interviewees were located via a snowball sampling. The civilians who had lived in HTS and IS-controlled territory were initially located through NGOs and CSOs that currently run interventions and programs in post-IS and HTS areas or with refugees and IDPs from IS and HTS-controlled territory. Further details on the ethical and methodological challenges of this fieldwork have been discussed in Bamber.[56]

Islamic state

IS has a two-decade long history of governance success and decline in Iraq and Syria; IS has engaged in three governance cycles in 2004, 2008 and 2014 which have each ended in territorial failure. Although with each cycle, IS has managed to govern greater amounts of territory, more effectively, for a longer period of time. IS's governance goals, however, have changed over time; IS transformed from the local AQ province in Iraq, fixated on attacking the "near enemy" and creating an Islamic state in Iraq, to establishing a transnational Islamic caliphate under Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, headquartered in a new state stretching across Iraq and Syria. IS's most infamous governance episode occurred between 2014 and 2019 when IS at its 2015 peak possessed control of 90,000 square kilometers of territory, generated $80–$100 million per month of revenue and possessed a standing army of approximately 60,000–90,000 fighters.[57] This ended in failure, however, with IS territorially defeated and it has resorted to insurgency tactics in its traditional strongholds of northern Iraq and eastern Syria.[58]

Rebel collaboration

Although IS initially collaborated with other Salafi-Jihadist groups during the early years of its formation in Iraq, IS is distinguished by its lack of governance collaboration with other rebel groups.[59] In areas under its control, IS refused to govern with other rebel groups, with IS in Syria concentrating on targeting rival rebel groups than the Syrian regime. This is typified in IS's governance approach in Raqqa province; in February 2013, Raqqa was under the control of various rebel groups and IS had control of a small part in the center. IS targeted the leaders of other groups in an assassination campaign, and once other groups banded together to attack a Syrian army base, IS exploited the weakness of their defenses in Raqqa and took over their territory.[60] IS deliberately targeted other rebel groups throughout its history and actively worked on destabilizing rival Salafi-Jihadi governance projects by both clandestinely recruiting members and openly declaring HTS to be illegitimate and part of IS. As a soldier of IS, who previously worked for HTS stated, "I was approached by IS when I was with HTS. They offered us double the amount of money to stay with HTS secretly and to recruit new members, before IS took over an area."[61] When taking over areas previously governed by other rebel groups, IS mostly either killed, expelled the members or forced them to pledge allegiance and work for IS. As a former fighter for the FSA described: "IS decided quickly that we all had to become members. I refused as I did not agree with the ideology, we were not fighting al-Assad . . . IS tried to make an example out of me for refusing and arrested me twice."[62]

Civilian inclusion

IS had little to no civilian inclusion in its governance strategy. In those areas with a potentially strong competitive civilian governing apparatus—such as local councils in Syria, civil society organisations or Sunni tribes in Iraq or Syria—IS either dismantled eliminated or co-opted them.[63] In some areas, IS

did create Tribal Engagement Offices that purportedly engaged with tribes and IS also used mass pledges of allegiance from tribal elders in its propaganda and messaging in an attempt to legitimatize its rule.[64] However, the actual impact of the tribes on IS's governing structures appears to be negligible; their influence appeared to have been tied to local disputes. There appears to be remarkably little variation in IS's approach to civilian inclusion in spite of the large amount of territory IS controlled between 2014 and 2019. In the early stages of its territorial takeover in a province, IS simply took over previous institutions with little interference, however this swiftly changed after several months of IS's rule in an area.[65] As one teacher from al-Mayadin described: "IS at first left us alone. But after several months though they established the Diwan [of Education] and everything changed."[66] Although it has been documented that IS theoretically had courts in which civilians could lodge grievances against IS members, it is unknown the extent to which they were used by civilians or the number of courts actually established by IS.[67] Moreover, if civilians wanted to attain higher positions of responsibility in IS's governing institutions, better salaries or benefits, they had to become a member of IS and pledge allegiance to the caliph. IS used this forced membership strategy throughout its governing institutions; ensuring that civilians would not be included in any positions of responsibility. As an electrician from Deir az Zur province stated: "If we became members then we had to do a shorter ideological course and they offered us more money … a normal electrician got $90 USD if working in an office … However, a colleague who pledged allegiance received $600 USD and became the deputy director of the office"[68] whilst a doctor's daughter described how "IS tried to get my father to join them … they offered him a $1000 per month and preferential treatment. My father refused, but my uncle said yes to IS straight away and he became head of the Medical Office."[69]

Alliance structure

Although historically rooted in the Iraqi Sunni insurgent movement, IS's alliance structure went beyond the nation-state; it aims to create and expand its extra-territorial Islamic caliphate across the world. IS's caliphate completely rejects the modern nation-state system, aiming to reestablish the methodology (*manhaj*) of the Prophet Muhammed and his four successor Caliphs. The global perspective, in which the front in Syria is seen as one outpost of a transnational alliance, is a perspective that permeated IS governance actions in diverse ways: leading to its split from Al Qaeda, its destruction of Iraqi-Syrian border posts under its control, removal of all references to "Iraq," "Syria" and "nation" from its school curriculum and receiving eighty-one pledges of allegiance from other Salafi-Jihadi groups around the world to establish external "provinces" of its caliphate.[70] IS's transnational outlook was recognized by civilians living across IS territory, especially in relation to the local focus of Ahrar al-Sham and HTS. A civilian who worked for IS in its Raqqa tax office said "IS didn't care about the revolution, they only came to Syria to expand the caliphate—they fought against groups that were trying to defeat Assad."[71] whilst a former HTS fighter, who attended an IS re-education ideology camp in Deir az Zur said "they taught us that the only way to be Muslim is to live under a true Caliph; states are a deviation from Islam."[72]

Repression

IS's governance strategy involved violent repression of opposition to its rule. Part of this strategy relates to IS's conception of blasphemy. Any decision made by a leader of IS became a *fatwa* due to their authority in IS's governing hierarchy; as a fatwa is the desire and implementation of God's will, then to question a decision of an IS leader, is to effectively question the will of God. Abdul, a lawyer who lived under IS in Aleppo and Deir az Zur, remarked: "Any contestation of IS's decisions became blasphemous and IS violently punished any person who opposed them."[73] Although some civilians were dealt with more leniently if IS needed their skills, influence or capital, IS violently repressed most persons who attempt to contest its governance.[74] Revkin[75] has detailed the highly repressive legal system established by IS governing institutions and interviewees frequently gave examples of the

violent repression they suffered under IS: "I was stopped by a woman IS member for wearing the wrong clothes and showing some skin. They hit me on the street and both my husband and brother were lashed twenty times for allowing me to leave the house showing skin."[76]

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

HTS is a Salafi-Jihadist group who have a history of shifting goals, divergent alliances and fragmentation, which eventually resulted in it emerging as the sole most powerful rebel group in Syria from 2017 onwards.[77] HTS emerged publicly in January 2012 as Jabhat al-Nusra, the officially sanctioned branch of AQ in Syria, that originally began as a cell of fighters sent to Syria by the IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. HTS publicly split from AQ in 2016 and governed territory in formal alliances with other rebel groups until 2017. HTS then successfully implemented a hegemonic governance approach when it formed a single monolithic Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), after defeating rival rebel groups and subsuming or coming to agreement with other competitive governing actors.[78] As Al-Tamimi sums up, "By early 2019, HTS had secured its hegemony over the northwest [of Syria], which continues today."[79]

Rebel collaboration

HTS has had a complex relationship with other rebel groups; HTS at the beginning of its rule more openly collaborated and governed with other rebel groups, before shifting towards a hegemonic governing approach in its remaining territory.[80] At the end of 2012, HTS established the Aleppo Sharia Committee, with three other rebel groups, whose ambition was to "emulate the state, with offices regulating all spheres of life."[81] HTS continued this collaboration throughout its various name changes that cumulated in the Executive Administration of Jaysh al-Fateh, an alliance of six rebel groups dominated by HTS and Ahrar al-Sham, founded in March 2015 which "tested the ability of these factions to have common institutions and to provide a joint model of administration" in Idlib governorate.[82] True governing collaboration failed however as HTS and Ahrar al-Sham, "competed in governance and service provision"[83] and "maintained their own areas of control and influence in much of the northwest rather than creating a joint Jaysh al-Fatah administration throughout the entire province."[84] This uneasy alliance ended, however, when HTS began to pursue a logic factional hegemony, at both the military and the administrative levels.[85] HTS defeated Ahrar al-Sham in a series of clashes until it remained the sole rebel Jihadi rebel group in Idlib, and HTS formalized its rule under one central unified administration.[86] Although HTS still continue to collaborate with non-Jihadist factions in its territory, the group maintained its dominance over Jihadist factions in the sphere of its control, refusing to collaborate with other rebel groups as it has done previously.[87]

Civilian inclusion

HTS's approach to civilian inclusion in its governance caused a huge rift in the Jaysh al-Fatah governing alliance, of which Ahrar al-Sham and HTS were the most powerful members. HTS didn't want independent civilian members to join the governing structures al-Fatah created, instead preferring to put forward civilians affiliated to HTS. As a person from Iblib stated: "HTS see themselves as rulers of the area they are based in, and they govern civilian affairs through a civil administration in quotation marks. They want a civilian body but one that is weak and completely under their control."[88] Throughout its history, HTS has cooperated with civilian Syrian local councils, although HTS has frequently tried to influence these councils by placing its affiliates in them.[89] Although following its creation of the hegemonic SSG, commentators have argued about HTS's approach to civilian inclusion; for Schwab,[90] HTS severely limited the role of civilian local councils and preferred to directly rule them, whilst for others, the SSG provides opportunities for the inclusion of educated, civilian elites as HTS are no longer worried about military factionalism.[91] Undoubtedly however, HTS allowed

civilians to raise complaints about the group's membership through formalized dispute mechanisms, a clear difference compared to IS. As several persons living in HTS-controlled areas stated "we could always turn to councils to complain against HTS and raise issues and complaints. They would listen and responded if it was justified,"[92] whilst another interviewee stated "HTS wanted to show that civilians were involved. They made it easy for us to speak to them, reach them, as we knew who they were and could speak to them as brothers."[93]

Alliance structure

HTS has successfully portrayed itself as having a sole Syrian focus, especially in relation to the explicitly transnational caliphate ambitions of IS. HTS from the beginning had a focus on Syria, with the explicitly stated aim of overthrowing the Assad regime and integrating itself within the broader Syrian revolution movement. However, HTS's floated multiple times the ambition of establishing an Islamic Emirate in its territory[94] and the group's links to AQ led to skepticism over the actual intended goals of HTS in relation to the Syrian revolution.[95] HTS attempted to overcome these concerns by embarking on a process of "Syrianization"[96] by changing its alliance structure by severing its ties with AQ, and "emphasizing its 'Syria' focus, . . . to placate concerns regarding the transnational goals of its al-Qaida organizational loyalties and heritage."[97] Indeed, several civilians that lived in areas under control of both IS and HTS highlighted the Syrian nature of HTS, as a key point of difference compared to IS: "we know who HTS are, its members are from our area, our families and they are fighting together for the revolution"[98] whilst "IS only cared about itself; HTS scarified for the revolution, they only want the revolution to succeed."[99]

Repression

There is some debate about the extent to which HTS's governance strategy permits repression of protests and demonstrations against its rule. Haid[100] quotes multiple civilian interviewees who believe that "HTS does not attack or disperse demonstrations" because HTS does not have the strength or willingness to fight directly against local communities as "they know it would be a lost battle."[101] However, Human Rights Watch documented that HTS has arbitrarily arrested and tortured civilians from Aleppo, Idlib and Hama "because of their peaceful work documenting abuses or protesting the group's rule."[102] HTS detained 184 persons in the space of three months which led Human Rights Watch to state that "HTS's crackdown on perceived opposition to their rule mirrors some of the same oppressive tactics used by the Syrian government."[103] Indeed, HTS's approach towards repression of civilians has caused schisms with other rebel groups. Heller quotes an Idlib activist stating that HTS kidnapped six activists at a protest, after Ahrar al-Sham refused to give HTS permission to break up ongoing protests in Idlib in March 2016.[104] As a result, Ahrar al-Sham took the step of publicly condemned HTS for its repression of demonstrations when both were part of the Jaysh al-Fatah alliance in March 2016.[105]

Ahrar al-Sham

Ahrar al-Sham was established in January 2012 through a merger of Salafi-Jihadi armed groups in North-western Syria. Over the following two years, Ahrar al-Sham transitioned from a group whose "stated aim was to establish a Syrian Islamic society that would adhere to Sharia law" and rejected secularism, democracy and its parliaments, to a group that signed a Revolutionary Charter that aspired to build a state of justice, law and freedom, with references to establishing an Islamic state removed.[106] Although for some commentators, "Ahrar is clearly still rooted in Islamist militancy," the success of this transformation managed to keep Ahrar al-Sham off the terrorist designation list and kept the support from its principal foreign backers Turkey, Qatar and Saudi-Arabia.[107]

Until January 2017, Ahrar al-Sham were widely considered to be "one of the strongest Salafist factions in Syria"[108] and displayed "significant governance capacities and ambitions,"[109] with between an estimated 10–20,000 fighters.[110] Ahrar al-Sham previously governed territory in parts of Aleppo, Raqqa and Deir az Zur governorates, although its stronghold was in Idlib governorate, where it shared territory in an uneasy alliance with HTS. Clashes between the former allies during 2017–2018 resulted in the territorial and materially decimation of Ahrar al-Sham in Syria.[111]

Rebel collaboration

Ahrar al-Sham are most distinguished from other Salafi-Jihadi groups by its collaborative governing approach. As Jonsson notes "in an insurgency that has been exceptionally factionalised and characterised by incessant internecine fighting, Ahrar al-Sham has been comparatively adept at collaborating effectively with others."[112] From its earliest start, Ahrar al-Sham has managed to collaborate with and subsume smaller Jihadi groups that aligned with its ideology at the time. Ahrar al-Sham formed three prominent rebel coalition organisations during the civil war; the Syrian Islamic Front in 2014, Islamic Front in 2014 and Jaysh al-Fatah in 2015.

Ahrar al-Sham's governance in Idlib was built on an uneasy alliance with HTS; the two largest members of the Jaysh al-Fatah governing coalition. The two groups split territorial control throughout Idlib, developing separate governing institutions that frequently both competed and collaborated with each other.[113] Although splits occurred over the hardline Jihadi rule that some groups wished to impose on Idlib, Ahrar al-Sham appeared to be successful collaborating positively in its alliances.[114] This came to an end when HTS broke its alliance with Ahrar al-Sham when it strived for military, political and security governance hegemony over Idlib governorate and defeated Ahrar al-Sham and its aligned groups in a series of clashes in 2017.[115] Ahrar al-Sham's collaborative approach to governance with other rebel groups therefore ended in its territorial defeat.

Civilian inclusion

Ahrar al-Sham's governance strategy included a relatively large role for civilians and relied on indirectly ruling though local councils that were filled by civilian technocrats. This culminated in Ahrar al-Sham's establishment of the Services Administration Commission (SAC) that relied on civilians to fill the key roles, albeit under the general protection of Ahrar al-Sham 's military arms.[116] This institutional arrangement appears to meet Ahrar al-Sham's publicly stated aim to let civilians run their own cities, with some commentators stating that Ahrar al-Sham's "behavior in the areas it controls seems to reflect a higher degree of tolerance for people being involved in their own governance as well as a higher degree of cooperation with the local population."[117] Indeed, Ahrar al-Sham's governance approach to civilians is shown in its judicial institutions in Idlib that resolved arguments between Ahrar al-Sham members and civilians that "guaranteed a higher level of accountability and security for the local population."[118]

Alliance structure

Ahrar al-Sham is a group that defines itself as local Syrian movement, composed of Syrian members with no links or alliances to transnational Salafi-Jihadi groups, its "political and military aims are also limited to Syria alone."[119] Ahrar al-Sham has undergone an overhaul of its alliance structure; in the early days when it was part of the Syrian Islamic Front and Islamic Front, Ahrar al-Sham's aim was to establish an Islamic state, with Sharia law as the sole authority and non-Muslims excluded from both society and governance.[120] With the signing of a Revolutionary Charter in 2014, Ahrar al-Sham's alliance structure changed. Many Ahrar al-Sham leaders rejected Salafi-Jihadism and broke alliances with these previous Islamist group allies, as Ahrar al-Sham swore in the Charter to focus on

establishing a Syrian society with respect for all minorities.[121] Objectives that were incompatible within its previous alliance structure. Ahrar al-Sham have abided by its new alliance structure, despite the fact it caused many Ahrar al-Sham members to form a splinter group (Jaysh al-Ahrar), who ended up joining HTS.

Repression

Ahrar al-Sham's governance strategy appears to involve very low levels, if any, of repression of protests and demonstration against its rule. Rather Ahrar al-Sham has actively sought to distance itself from the repression inflicted by other Salafi-Jihadi groups. Most notably, in March 2016 when Ahrar al-Sham condemned HTS for its repression actions against civilian protests in Idlib.[122] Indeed, Ahrar al-Sham leaders reportedly even joined these protests to complain directly against HTS's repressive actions.[123]

Comparative analysis: How political opportunity structures affect the occurrence of civil resistance against jihadist governance

We will now draw the comparative analysis of the three groups together, by examining how rebel collaboration, civilian inclusion, repression and the goals influenced the political opportunity structure for Syrian dissenting voices under the jihadist groups' control (Table 3).

From the table, it is clear that the rebel group in the middle range of their governance dimensions faced greater public civil resistance, shown through the frequency and size of protests. HTS, who governed far more in the middle ranges compared to Ahrar al-Sham and IS, who are at opposite ends of extremity, appear to provide greater political opportunity for civilians to mobilize against them.

Firstly, there were clear differences in terms of rebel collaboration between the three jihadist groups; IS fought against other rebel groups and was exclusive in its aspiration of control, whereas Ahrar al-Sham sought to be build stronger rebel-coalitions and collaboration, whilst HTS was somewhere in between. Both Ahrar al-Sham and HTS frequently collaborated with other rebel groups and local councils in its territory control, although this decreased over time for HTS. Ahrar al-Sham's highly collaborative approach to other rebel groups possibly reduced the need for civilians to engage in public protests as they had other means of lodging protests and complaints. Whilst for HTS, the partially collaborative approach gave civilians both the need and opportunity to protest publicly.

There was also a clear link in terms of political opportunity structures from civilian inclusion (or exclusion) towards propensity for engagement in civil resistance. In both Ahrar al-Sham and HTS's models of governance, civilians were given the opportunity to get involved, and some form of political access, that provided opportunity for civilians to mobilize on specific issues of protests. Ahrar al-Sham however governed with more civilian inclusion than HTS. This potentially provided more opportunity

Table 3. Summary table of three groups

Group	Governing Strategy Features				Civil resistance
	Rebel collaboration	**Civilian inclusion**	**Alliance structure**	**Repression**	
IS	No rebel collaboration	No civilian inclusion	Internationalist	High	Low
Ahrar al-Sham	High rebel collaboration	Civilian inclusion	Local	Low	Low
HTS	Limited rebel collaboration	Some civilian inclusion	Ambivalent (international / local)	Middle-ranged	Extensive

for civilians to work with Ahrar al-Sham on specific issues, diminishing the need to protest publicly outside of Ahrar al-Sham's governing institutions. IS by contrast entirely excluded civilians from its governance, and forced civilians working in its governing institutions to become members, which reduced the political opportunities for civilians to resist.

We know from previous research on civil resistance, that repression can sometimes quell uprisings and protests, and in other circumstances, serve as a trigger of further, increased mobilization.[124] Repression varied across the three groups; IS had by far the most heavily repressive governing strategy, although Ahrar al-Sham and HTS had a significant conflict over the latter's repressive approach in its shared Idlib territory. In IS areas, its suffocating governing repression led to less opportunity for civilians to protest, in comparison to the more lenient HTS and Ahrar al-Sham. Still, the level of repression was not linear alongside the occurrence of civil resistance: Ahrar al-Sham was more lenient than HTS but fewer demonstrations arose against them, compared to the more repressive HTS.

The alliance structure of the groups differed: From IS's perspective, the Syrian context was a local manifestation of a global struggle and it relied on its international allies in the form of foreign fighters and supporters, both politically and practically. The constituency was not only, or mainly, the local base, but a more global outreach. Ahrar al-Sham was clearly more domestically and locally oriented: it was a Salafi-Jihadist group but focused on Syria. HTS partly disengaged from its international alliance and re-focused on the Syrian context as the conflict evolved. The need to be attentive to local audiences made HTS more receptive to protests movements and more likely that they should then listen to local voices: the chances of being successful by mobilizing protests thus affected the civilian opposition.

Alternative explanations

We will here take up some alternative possible explanations for why the occurrence of civil resistance varied across different Salafi-Jihadist groups in Syria. The first one is the issue of endogeneity. Could popular civilian resistance shape the governing strategies of the three Salafi-Jihadi groups, rather than the other way around (as we suggest in this study)? Our research design—comparing across groups rather than over time—cannot rule out this concern completely. However, 92 percent of the total protest events occurred from 2016 onwards, at which point each rebel group governing structures were already well established. This suggests that it is indeed governing structures influencing civilian public resistance, rather than the other way around. Still, the degree and type of how the different dimensions of governance is implemented can vary over time, and can potentially influence the propensity for civil resistance. With the current research design, we cannot establish this for certain, and we therefore call on future research to disentangle the relationship between governance and repression in more depth and detail. In particular by using causal process tracing and other ways to more credibly establish the causal pathways.

Extensive ("full") civilian resistance to rebel governance could, according to previous research, be expected in areas where civilians perceive their pre-existing customary institutions to be legitimate and functional.[125] Moreover, more closely tied networks between local elites and the population will predispose civilians to be more likely to resist rebel governance attempts.[126] Still, customary institutions and local elites, in particular, the tribal networks in Syria, do not appear to vary significantly in effectiveness and legitimacy between the areas of the three rebel groups' control prior to their establishment of the jihadist governance.[127]

A further potential alternative explanation is the impact of *religious and ethnic mobilization* on the likelihood of protests; rebel groups who align with the religion and ethnicity of their civilian constituency might be likely to face resistance and protests as their interests align with those of the rebel group.[128] This explanation, however, does not appear relevant across these three cases. Ahrar al-Sham and HTS controlled primarily homogenous Sunni Arab territory, compared to the more diverse territory of IS that included a significant Kurdish and Christian population.[129]

A further mooted explanation is that rebel groups whose governance structures developed in *contested territory*, would potentially lead to more opportunities for civil resistance as they would have to be more responsive to civilian demands due to rebel competition.[130] While this may account for why IS experienced less civil resistance in comparison with the other two jihadist groups, given IS's relatively exclusive and uncontested governance, this does not explain the variation in frequency of civil resistance between HTS and Ahrar al-Sharm. Both HTS and Ahrar al-Sham governed in competition within the same territory. Overall, this explanation does therefore not appear to have value in explaining the variation in frequency of protests.

A potential alternative explanation is the role of *protest history*, meaning that certain areas are more likely to engage in protests because they have a history of networks, activists and civil society groups who could more easily facilitate protests. Although this cannot be ruled out, all the territory controlled by these groups have a strong history of protests throughout the civil war; Halterman et al. show that each governorate had at least twenty protest events in the first year of the Syrian civil war.[131] Further, under each jihadist group, protests did take place. Although some of these protests were multiple events, whilst others were singular, there is an assumed baseline that residents in each group's territory had the capacity to organize protests.

As for the civilians' *level of grievances*, we expect that they may have varied between the different rebel territories, however there are no systematic polls or surveys that can give a comprehensive picture of the level of grievances or popularity of governing structures. We do note however that level of grievances do not co-vary with the occurrence of civilian protests. It could be expected that IS's governance structures were the most intrusive and therefore less popular, as they were often perceived by local residents as alien or too harsh to the local population. In contrast, HTS went to great length to make its structures of governance more popular with its local communities. The anticipated varying level of grievances therefore do not co-vary with the occurrence of civil resistance.

Another explanation is the *modernization* explanation, which views the capacity for uprising as closely associated with the development of an area's economy, including its level of urbanization. However, there were few significant comparative economic differences integral to the group's territory. Moreover, while IS, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham governed both significant urban and rural demographic areas (Raqqa/Deir az Zur; Idlib/Aleppo and Idlib governorates respectively) IS, due to the size of its territory, was in fact in control of more urban areas.[132] Thus, a modernization (or urbanization) explanation would not be able to account for the sub-national variation we have identified in this study.

As stated above, we see the political opportunity argument developed here, as complementing resource mobilization—as well as grievances explanations—which are from our perspective, are both necessary (but not sufficient) explanations to account for the variation across the three main jihadist groups in Syria. That is, we see that opposition activists and movements to jihadist governance in Syria take up civil resistance because they are motivated to do so, but also because they have both the resources to mobilize and see the structural possibilities for doing so.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the governing strategies of Salafi-Jihadi groups in Syria have an impact on both the frequency and size of protests by civilians against them. Different types of Islamist governance structures provide different political opportunity structures that enable civilians to mobilize against those rebel groups through public protests and demonstrations. In particular, we argue that it is middle-ranged opportunity structures of rebel governance, like HTS, that strongest incentivizes civil resistance, by giving enough space for civilian mobilization but fewer alternative channels of expressing discontent. This study had untaken a systematic comparison of their governing structures and shown their variation across four governing dimensions.

The study helps to shed light on role of civil agency in violent contexts. As we have shown here, even in the midst of a civil war, civilians have self-organized protests and acts of disobedience against jihadist rebel-groups. This testifies to the role of civilians as an important set of actors to take into account when studying rebel governance, even when focusing on Salafi-Jihadi rebel groups. We have also demonstrated that there is a significant sub-national variation in the occurrence of civil resistance across the jihadist rebel-groups: HTS stood out from the other two jihadist groups in terms of being the most actively challenged rebel governance group.

The analysis of IS, HTS, and Ahrar al-Sham show how the four dimensions of rebel governance strategies—building on Schock's political opportunity framework—that are interrelated. The external alliance structure of IS cannot be properly understood, without taking into account the lack of civilian inclusion and rebel collaboration. Conversely, when a group relies on external alliances, the need to pay attention to domestic actors and constituencies will decrease. It is important to note that the four dimensions also carried different explanatory power in terms of occurrence of civil resistance. The use of repression is the strongest factor deterring civil resistance. Although the lack of civil inclusion, rebel collaboration and external alliance structures all played a role, it is difficult to ascertain exactly which of these dimensions provided the largest opportunity for resistance. Together, however, these four dimensions of governing strategies indicate the institutional space and structural political opportunity available for civilians to resist.

We should also acknowledge that the Salafi-Jihadi rebel group governance structures in Syria evolved over time. HTS shifted from an internationalist to a more nationalist agenda, disengaging from transnational jihadist networks. Whilst the repressive nature of IS was initially not fully implemented throughout its territory, but rather developed over time.[133] The implication is that the political opportunities for civilians to publicly protest can vary in line with these governing dimensions. While beyond the scope of this study, further studies and data collection on the temporal nature of protests and governance structures could shed light on this interesting aspect on the relationship between rebel governance and protests.

Furthermore, this paper has shown the potential for the use of the political opportunity framework to be applied to civil resistance against rebel-governance structures in general, and civil resistance against jihadist groups in particular. We demonstrate that the framework has plausibility beyond opposition groups challenging established states, which was the context in which the theory was originally crafted. Doing so, we have reconceptualized the four opportunity factors into the context of rebel-civilian relationships. This may provide a new way of studying how space for civilians to express discontent can shape the trajectory of conflict between rebels and civilians.

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Disclosure statement

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