

Sister Citizens: Women in Syrian Rebel Governance

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In the rich literature on women and conflict, many scholars have assumed that the outbreak of civil war suppresses women's political involvement. However, during Syria's civil war, there was significant subnational and temporal variation in the involvement of women in the institutions established by armed groups and civilians in rebel-held areas. Why were some Syrian women able to secure a place for themselves in insurgent governance? How were they able to influence the form of local institutions to secure a role for women? Bringing together the scholarship on social movements and rebel governance, this article argues that two factors determine whether women were able to mobilize politically during conflict: the organizational capacity of women and the strength and ideology of locally active armed groups. The article leverages data on local organizations and institutions in Syria, Syrian news sources, and correspondence with several women's organizations operating in Syria in 2017. By doing so, this article strives to bring attention to the role of gender in the expanding literature on rebel governance. It also highlights the significance of armed groups' ideologies, an aspect often dismissed in the literature in favor of a focus on material factors.

Keywords: Women, gender, rebel governance, insurgent governance, civil war, conflict, institutions, institutional design, Middle East, Syria, conflict processes, comparative politics

In countries as varied as Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain, women played important roles in the Arab Spring as organizers of and participants in

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popular protests for regime change, driving scholars to hail the Arab Spring as a watershed moment for feminism in the region (Dastgeer and Gade 2016; Khamis 2011, 694; Moghadam 2014; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). However, the peaceful protests of the early days of the Arab Spring gave way to sustained armed conflict in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. To some observers, the emergence of armed struggle meant the end of women's political involvement. Once the guns came out, it was presumed that women's political involvement had come to an end (Johansson-Nogués 2013, 401–3; Moghadam 2014, 141). However, in Syria, many women were able to defy these expectations and institutionalize roles for women in local governance. They played significant roles in institutions that provided essential public goods and enforced laws for communities caught in the crossfire. This was not true for the many Syrian women who did not have opportunities to hold political positions. This study strives to explain this variation in the incorporation of women into insurgent governance by focusing on women's organizational capacity and the characteristics of local armed groups. I argue that women are able to attain positions in these new governing institutions when (a) they possess the organizational capacity to push for a seat at the table and (b) local armed groups possess liberal gender norms *or* lack the ability to enforce conservative gender norms.

In the rich literature on women and conflict, many scholars have found that the emergence of armed conflict suppresses women's political activity. During the Lebanese civil war, the movement in pursuit of greater political rights for women ended as women's organizations directed their focus toward the provision of necessities (Khatib 2008, 446). After the fall of the Libyan regime in 2011, women who strove to engage in politics were met with harassment and violence and run out of public spaces, including polling centers (Johansson-Nogués 2013, 401–3). The assumption that picking up guns ends or limits women's political engagement may explain why the literature on women and conflict has focused on women as combatants, victims, or peacemakers, rather than as political actors and institution builders (Alison 2004; Cohen 2013; Jenichen 2010; MacKenzie 2009; Thomas and Bond 2015; Turshen 2002; Wood 2006; Zuckerman and Greenberg 2004).

This assumption may also explain why the emerging literature on insurgent governance has not paid explicit attention to gender. Works on rebel governance have focused on explaining how rebels rule, the conditions under which rebels rule, and the roles that civilians as well as armed groups play in the provision of local governance in areas outside

the control of the state (Arjona 2016; Kasfir 2005; Mampilly 2011; Menkhaus 2006/2007). As yet, little attention has been paid to the roles of women in the governing institutions that can emerge in the state's absence. Considering the lasting effects of insurgent governance on postconflict politics and institutions, attention should be paid to the roles that women can play in building institutions and providing governance during civil war. The literature suggests that what rebel governance looks like has an impact on postconflict institutions (Huang 2016; Müller 2012, 794). Huang (2016) argues that greater civilian involvement in wartime political institutions makes postconflict democratization more likely. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that, just as demands for greater political involvement may lead to democratization after civil war, greater political involvement by women during conflict may also create demands for greater representation of women in postconflict institutions.

In addition, there is evidence that the involvement of women in local governance can have a significant impact during and after conflict. In their study on the inclusion of women in local development councils in Afghanistan, Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov (2013, 540–43) find that requiring the presence of women on these councils led to significant changes in women's involvement in governing their villages, the local economy, and "community life" and fostered more positive attitudes toward the involvement of women in community deliberations. Women's political behavior during conflict may also have significant ramifications for women's participation in politics after the fighting ends. Some work suggests that the ability of women to mobilize at a conflict's end determines whether women get to play a role in postconflict negotiations (Anderson and Swiss 2014; Kang 2015; Kaufman and Williams 2010, 74; Moghadam 2013, 397).¹ In Afghanistan and elsewhere, involvement in insurgent politics provided women with the organizational capacity needed to secure a place for women in subsequent political transitions.

The involvement of women in conflict resolution and political decision-making has been widely accepted by practitioners as well as academics as an important stepping-stone in the pursuit of gender equality. The inclusion of women should not be predicated upon assumptions regarding specific characteristics, such as the belief that women are

1. In an example of a peaceful transition, women mobilized immediately after the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia, and it was women's rights organizations that ensured that women had a role in the transition to democracy (Moghadam 2014, 140).

inherently more peaceful and therefore should be deemed useful to conflict resolution (Cohn, Kinsella, and Gibbings 2004, 132; Rooney 2007, 176). If women are involved in postconflict transitions, then the outcomes are more likely to be beneficial to women (Hughes 2009, 180; Moghadam 2013, 397; Tripp 2016; Viterna and Fallon 2008). The exclusion of women from negotiations at the end of conflict makes the reproduction of discriminatory gender hierarchies more likely, while the inclusion of women increases the likelihood of a legal and political postconflict framework that is relatively more equal in respect to gender (Byrne and McCulloch 2012, 576; Rooney 2007, 175).² Since women's mobilization at the end of conflict plays an important role in shaping postconflict outcomes for women, it is important to understand which features may promote, permit, or hinder women's involvement in local politics *during* the conflict.

This study focuses on the varied roles played by women in insurgent governance in Syria between 2012 and the end of 2017. As the Syrian conflict intensified in 2012, people residing outside the control of the Syrian regime engaged in building their own institutions, including, but not limited to, local councils (*majalis mahaliyya*). In cities such as Douma, Dera'a, and Qamishli, these new institutions included Women's Offices or Offices for the Support of Women — institutions that were part of the local council, run by women, and were intended to both promote the involvement of women in local councils and address the needs of local women (member, Women's Office al-Marj, correspondence with the author, October 2017; Enab Baladi 2016a). In predominantly Kurdish northern Syria, quotas and the election of male and female pairs to fill positions were also used to ensure the involvement of women in insurgent governance. However, in other areas, women found themselves completely shut out of participating in or designing local institutions. What drives this variation? Why, during the conflict, were Syrian women able to institutionalize governing roles for themselves in some locations and not in others? Indeed, how were any women able to expand their political representation under some of the worst conditions imaginable?

Drawing on the scholarship on social movements and civil wars, I argue that two factors determine whether women are able to play a role in rebel

2. The interest in ensuring the involvement of women in conflict resolution as a pathway to gender mainstreaming is also evidenced by the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 (Cohn, Kinsella, and Gibbings 2004).

governance. First, women have to develop the organizational capacity to push for roles in insurgent governance. During conflict, as during peacetime, this often takes the form of organizations run by women and dedicated to supporting women in spheres that are not necessarily political. By working together and organizing as women, even if a group's goals are not explicitly feminist, women may acquire a new understanding of how their societies are structured and may find themselves capable in ways which they did not realize before (De Volo 2003, 97). The connections and organizational groundwork established by groups with apolitical goals provide important connections and skills that make it possible for women to successfully campaign for involvement in insurgent governance. In this regard, Syrian women faced unique challenges. The Syrian state prevented the emergence of independent civil society organizations — as a result, the organizations considered here were only able to emerge after the control of the state weakened in 2011. In Syria women have proven themselves capable of building organizational capacity under violent conditions where deprivation and hardship were the norm.

The second factor shaping the involvement of women in rebel governance is the local armed group. Here the focus is on the gender norms held by the locally dominant armed group as well as its capacity to impose these views upon the local population. Armed groups that possess traditional views on women's political roles and play a significant role in local governance can present an obstacle to the involvement of women in insurgent governance. However, armed groups with strong capacity and less conservative gender norms or armed groups that are too weak to play a prominent role in local governance both create more permissive conditions.³ While the character of these groups places limits on the emergence of women's organizations or the behaviors of these organizations as well as of women in governance, weak armed groups or armed groups with liberal gender norms are not sufficient to explain the institutionalization of governing roles for women. Indeed, at the early stages of the Syrian conflict, when few armed groups were strong enough to impose gender norms on local populations but women also lacked organizational capacity, women were conspicuously absent from local

3. Several factors may prevent an armed group from taking an active role in local governance. Mampilly (2011) considers a number of factors that influence the ability of an armed group to provide governance and that are relevant to the different armed groups considered here. These include (but are not limited to) competition from other armed actors (including the state) and the availability of material resources.

governance. I argue in this article that for women to attain roles in local governance, they also need the organizational capacity to push for seats at the table.

There are several reasons to focus on the Syrian conflict. The first is the almost unprecedented amount of information available about an ongoing conflict, in no small part because of the technological knowledge and access possessed by ordinary Syrians (Lynch, Freelon, and Aday 2014; Power and O'Loughlin 2015). The analysis presented here used a variety of sources in an effort to paint as complete a picture of women's local political engagement as possible. This included comparing data on the timing and location of the formation of civil society organizations focused on supporting women, the use of local media outlets, and correspondence via WhatsApp with several women's organizations and a women's office that was part of a local council.

To explore the role of women's organizational capacity as well as the importance of local armed groups, this study looks at subnational variation within Syria, making comparisons across locations and time to better understand how some Syrian women were able to secure a seat at the table for themselves under unimaginably challenging conditions. This article leverages temporal and spatial variations within Syria to look at the factors that influenced the capacity and opportunities available to women.⁴ Focusing on the Syrian case allows for many factors (such as preconflict gender norms) to be held constant while considering the variety of roles taken on by women in different times and places. In doing so, it rejects assumptions that such variation is driven strictly by preconflict gender norms or urban-rural divides. It pays particular attention to the involvement of women in rebel governance in Idlib Governorate, Eastern Ghouta, Deir az-Zor, and the predominantly Kurdish north. These areas varied in terms of the number of women's organizations in the early days of the conflict as well as the strength and ideologies of local armed groups. I argue that where women were able to build organizations that were not necessarily political, and when the ideology of powerful armed groups did not impede women's involvement, women were involved in insurgent governance. Although this study focuses on the Syrian conflict, I conclude with a brief discussion of the generalizability of this argument.

4. According to Abdo-Katsipis (2017, 414), the literature on women in Arab states has focused more on the factors that damage women's position and has not looked at the organizational capacity of women and the creation of "political spaces" for women.

WOMEN AND REBEL GOVERNANCE

Rebel Governance

Civil conflicts are times of remarkable upheaval, but this does not mean they are periods of unmitigated chaos, nor are they continuously violent (Arjona 2014, 1361; Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015, 2). Under these conditions, nonstate actors often step in to rule in the state's absence. Rebel or insurgent governance refers to "the set of actions insurgents engage in to regulate the social, political, and economic life of non-combatants during war" (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015, 3). Armed groups are by no means able to govern civilians whenever and however they choose (Arjona 2016; Kasfir 2015; Mampilly 2011, 15). What these institutions look like and the degree of civilian involvement vary significantly (Kasfir 2005, 272). In some instances, armed groups opt to build institutions themselves and are able to attain sufficient civilian compliance to govern directly. Under other conditions, armed groups may be present and expect little from civilians beyond minimal material support, leaving civilians to largely establish their own institutions and govern themselves (Arjona 2014).⁵ Armed groups may also create institutions to foster civilian participation and governance. For example, the National Resistance Army in Uganda created elected local councils in the areas under its control in the 1980s, pushing civilians to take on roles in local governance even though civilians had not called for involvement (Kasfir 2005, 285–86). This article strives to explain under what conditions women attain positions in insurgent governance. These institutions can be established by armed insurgents themselves or by civilians who build governing institutions in areas where armed groups are active and the state is absent.

When considering rebel governance, the main focus is on institutions that operate at the local level. The difficulties of moving people and material from one place to another during a civil war fragment the state space, which has a localizing effect on political dynamics (Kalyvas 2006; Arjona 2014). Local political dynamics also shape on-the-ground realities during civil wars, although they often receive less attention than national and regional dynamics (Kalyvas 2003). Thus, this study considers institution building and the development of organizational capacity

5. Arjona (2014) refers to situations in which armed groups govern as *rebelocracy*. Instances in which civilians build institutions while local armed groups play an extremely limited role in governance are called *alioocracy*.

taking place at the local and regional levels and the gains made by women at these levels, rather than on the national stage.

This article focuses on the formation of institutions or institutional design choices intended to ensure a role for women in insurgent governance. Designing institutions to safeguard women's involvement (e.g., through the establishment of quotas) has improved women's representation in many contexts and has been associated with other improvements in women's positions in society (Anderson and Swiss 2014; Burnet 2011, 305; Bbush 2011; Fallon, Swiss, and Viterna 2012; Krook 2004, 2006; Tripp and Kang 2008; Waylen 2006). Therefore, looking at instances in which institutions were designed to ensure a role for women functions as a tangible indicator of women possessing roles in rebel governance. In Syria, this has largely taken two forms. The first is the allocation of seats for women in local governing bodies through quotas, and the second is the creation of distinct bodies run by women and designated to focus on women's concerns. In some instances, particularly in the predominantly Kurdish areas of northern Syria, both means of institutionalizing women's involvement in local governance were used simultaneously. Both arrangements represent a significant shift from the preconflict status quo, in which few women were active in politics (Totah 2013, 3) and there were no institutional mechanisms for ensuring women's representation at the national or local level (Jung 2016, 18–19).⁶

To explain the involvement of women in insurgent governance, this study draws upon literature not only on rebel governance and civil war but also on social movements. The latter provides essential tools for thinking about political mobilization more broadly. This work reflects McAdam's (1982) interest in a model that brings together elements of opportunity as well as organizational capacity.

Organizational Capacity

Under conventional circumstances, to understand how groups pursue political aims, we must consider the factors that influence organizational capacity as well as the factors that limit opportunities (Tilly 1978, 7).

6. In 2015, Syrian women occupied 12.4% of seats in parliament. While this was higher than some other states in the region, it was not as high as other states that have instituted quotas, including Algeria, Iraq, and Sudan (Jung 2016, 17–18). In addition, fewer than 10% of women were members of the government in 2015 (Jung 2016, 20).

Political movements are often built upon existing organizations that are not necessarily political. Charities, religious groups, unions, and social organizations can all provide important organizational building blocks that can be mobilized in the pursuit of a shared political objective (Hartshorn 2019; McAdam 1982, 125; Safa 1990, 358–59; Wood 2003, 89–93; Zald and McCarthy 2017). Other work has explored the role of women's groups in the mobilization of women in response to sexual violence during conflict (Kreft 2019). The involvement of women in preconflict society, economy, and politics has also been connected to the decision of rebel groups to deploy women in combat (Wood and Thomas 2018). Thus, the organizational capacity of women has been connected to the mobilization of women during peacetime as well as conflict.

The women's organizations discussed here emerged during and following the 2011 Syrian uprising. This was in large part because of limits placed on preconflict civil society. In Syria, Under the Ba'athist regime, independent political organizations had to be secret and social groups were only permitted to operate in fields that were considered apolitical (Khatib 2013, 321). While in other instances of rebel governance, we can consider the preconflict organizational capacity of women, these constraints on Syrian civil society mean that we must focus our attention primarily on organizations that emerged during the 2011 protests and the subsequent conflict.⁷

Conflict can fundamentally transform the organizational landscape, providing new or different opportunities, particularly for women. During times of strife, men, the traditional political leaders and breadwinners, are often removed because of combat or imprisonment. In general, this absence leads women to take on responsibilities that they were not granted or permitted during peacetime (Berry 2015, 141; Enloe 2014, 99–100; Kaufman and Williams 2010, 69, 74; Nassar and Yasin 2016; Saleh 2016), or it may give tasks traditionally assigned to women new political significance (De Volo 2003, 97; Enloe 2014, 99–100). Some organizations may present women with opportunities to be part of armed groups (Henshaw 2017; Thomas and Bond 2015). Times of strife present contexts in which women's roles are in flux and they may be able to engage in organizations in ways that they could not in peacetime. I argue

7. The short time frame that is considered here suggests that women's organizations do not need to be present for more than a year or two to have an impact on women's opportunities in rebel governance. More research and more cases will be needed to confirm this, but the data from the Syrian case suggest that capacity building need not require a significant period of time.

that the formation of Syrian civil society organizations by and for women created a network that women used in the pursuit of greater involvement in rebel governance. Indeed, the skills and connections acquired by women as a result of their involvement in such organizations provided women with the organizational capacity that they needed in order to push for greater roles in rebel governance. While essential, organizational capacity alone does not explain variation in the involvement of women in rebel governance.

Opportunity

The ability to build organizational capacity is not the only factor that shapes women's involvement in rebel governance.⁸ Conflict creates constraints as well as opportunities. While in conventional contexts, the state is one of the factors that shapes political opportunities (Tilly and Wood 2013), during civil war, the state is unable to play such a role, at least not throughout its entire territory.⁹ Under these circumstances, armed groups play an important role. The ideologies of rebel groups have arguably been neglected in the academic literature (Sanín and Wood 2014). Although the participants in civil wars often consider their ideological commitments to be important, academics have largely focused their attention on material factors and their influence on rebel groups (Sanín and Wood 2014). Material considerations are not unimportant in the argument made here — an armed group must be able to exert a significant level of influence or outright control to shape civilians' behaviors — but the ideology of armed groups plays a key role.

The beliefs of armed actors have several potential ramifications for the political opportunities available to women.¹⁰ Armed groups that embrace conservative gender norms and have the capacity to limit civilians' actions constrain the opportunity of women to mobilize politically.¹¹ In the Syrian case, many of the armed groups that held conservative gender norms were Islamist groups. Armed groups that have a similar capacity

8. When it comes to other political behaviors, such as political violence, it is not women's motivations to participate that differ, but rather the opportunities afforded to women (Thomas and Bond 2015, 490).

9. Following the Arab Spring, it was generally militaries and armed groups that stymied populations' political aspirations (Moghadam 2014, 140).

10. Political ideology has been indicated as one of many factors that impacts women's political representation in conventional institutional settings (Paxton and Kunovich 2003) as well as their involvement as combatants (Henshaw 2017).

11. Thomas and Bond (2015) argue that the organizational characteristics and preferences of armed groups play a significant role in determining whether women take up arms.

but do not adhere to an ideology that includes conservative gender norms will not present an obstacle and may even support women's involvement in rebel governance. Groups that lack the capacity to limit civilians' lives will not be able to shape the opportunities available to women to mobilize politically regardless of their ideological perspective. I argue that we must consider the ways in which the ideologies and capacities of armed groups limit women's opportunities to push for a seat at the table, just as we must consider the role of women's organizations in making the pursuit of greater representation feasible.

METHODS AND DATA

The availability of information sets the Syrian conflict apart from other civil wars (Lynch, Freelon, and Aday 2014; Power and O'Loughlin 2015). While in many ways, there is an unprecedented amount of information available about local dynamics in Syria, the ongoing conflict has made it important to triangulate, using different types of sources to paint as detailed a picture as possible. To evaluate the existence of women's organizations and institutions, I used a database of civil society organizations created by the organization Citizens for Syria. As of 2018, the database included 314 Syrian civil society organizations, 41 of which were based in Syria and mentioned women in at least one of their top three objectives. While these groups were primarily charities focused on supporting women coping with the economic challenges of war, there were also a few groups that were focused on combating sexual violence and promoting women's rights. Citizens for Syria also employs multiple levels of verification before adding organizations to its database, making it a relatively reliable and valuable resource for those interested in the emergence of Syrian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The database is by no means complete, which is unsurprising given the difficulties of acquiring information on the myriad new organizations that have emerged since the conflict began in 2012. Therefore, I have supplemented this database by seeking additional information on women's groups, their work, and their connections to other women's organizations. As the database focuses on civil society organizations, it does not include information on local institutions such as women's offices. These data, along with the information from the Citizens for Syria database, were used to build a gender-specific list that included information on when and where groups were established. (Appendix 1,

available in the on-line supplementary material, provides information on the number of women's organizations in the database located in different Syrian governorates.) This made it possible to conduct an initial comparison of the density of women's organizations in different governorates and to look at how the timing of the establishment of these groups varied across locations and time.

A second source of information about women's groups was the women's groups themselves. The social media accounts and websites created by women's organizations, as well as the Facebook pages of local institutions with which these organizations have interacted, were analyzed. There are concerns that with social media, one is getting information that fits the "agenda" of the group producing the information (Lynch, Freelon, and Aday 2014, 15). However, in this case, the agenda of the group is one of the key characteristics of interest. Five interviews were also conducted by the author with representatives from a number of women's organizations in Idlib and Aleppo governorates and a women's office that was operating under a local council in the Damascus countryside. Initial requests for interviews were sent via social media,¹² and the interviews were conducted during the fall of 2017 using WhatsApp, a popular means of communication among Syrians. These semistructured interviews focused on the local institutions and organizations established by and for women in several locations in rebel-controlled Syria. Because of safety concerns, I did not ask respondents questions about their personal lives or their own political views and have left out any names if they provided them during the interview.

The third source used to triangulate my interpretations of these sources was local news outlets. Following the start of protests in 2011, a wave of new national and local media outlets were established. Many areas which had not received much attention in Syria's preconflict media environment had new news outlets of their own, largely published and shared online (Wall and el Zahed 2015, 721–24). This made it possible to attain

12. Only women's organizations that have significant resources and/or have offices outside Syria generally have websites. Far more groups have social media accounts, such as Facebook pages, as less expertise and fewer resources are required. I reached out to women's organizations with active Facebook pages that were based in areas outside of the control of the state in the fall of 2017. An emphasis was placed on groups located in Aleppo and Idlib Governorates, as there was more local media coverage on local governance in Eastern Ghouta and the Kurdish north. Many of these organizations did not respond. A few initially responded and agreed to be interviewed but did not answer the questions sent over WhatsApp and therefore are not counted toward the number of interviews presented. Given the violent circumstances of the respondents, the author was surprised that anyone was willing to take the time to respond to their questions.

information on local debates and political developments in different parts of Syria and verify shifts and dynamics observed in data collected from other sources.

This article proceeds with a discussion of the role of women in the early stages of the Syrian uprising, followed by an analysis of several subnational cases in Syria. The discussions of Idlib Governorate and Eastern Ghouta, Deir az-Zor, and the predominantly Kurdish north highlight the roles that women's organizations and the ideology and capacity of armed groups played in shaping women's involvement in rebel governance.

WOMEN IN THE SYRIAN UPRISING

In the early stages of the Syrian uprising, women often played significant roles as participants in and organizers of public protests. According to Waylen (1994, 338), women are seen as relatively harmless and are often largely absent from the public sphere, which can make it possible for women to operate under authoritarian regimes in ways that men would be unable to do. In Syria, despite societal norms that largely protected women, many female political organizers were imprisoned as a result of their involvement in the protests (Moore and Talarico 2015, 228). In response to an inquiry regarding women's involvement in protest events, a representative of the Syrian Women's Council replied, "after the introduction of battles and weapons their [women's] role and participation has been limited" (correspondence with the author, October 2017). Additional anecdotal evidence indicates that women faced increasing pressure from loved ones to stay home and avoid involvement as the conflict grew increasingly violent (Nassar and Yasin 2016).

During this time, women became involved in numerous NGOs and civil society institutions but were largely barred from leadership and decision-making roles (Enab Baladi 2016g). It was perhaps this early state of affairs that led women to develop their own organizations. Many of these groups were charities dedicated to supporting the women who had been forced to take on new roles and responsibilities as a result of the conflict and did not necessarily have an explicitly feminist agenda or ideology. While most of the Syrian women's organizations had a more economic focus, some were dedicated to promoting women's engagement in politics and society, advocating for women's rights, and, in some cases, raising awareness about sexual violence. Therefore, I

consider women's organizations with varied objectives that were not all dedicated to explicitly feminist objectives.

Despite their early involvement in the uprising as well as their involvement in civil society organizations, women rarely held positions in the *majalis mahaliyya*, the local councils that emerged in communities across Syria. As government forces retreated or were pushed out by armed groups, civilians were forced to find ways to provide essential public goods. While these civilian institutions varied in size and scope, they often included a local council that oversaw offices providing public goods such as water, electricity, and garbage removal (Angelova 2014; al-Shami and Yassin-Kassab 2016, 69). Courts or dispute resolution bodies were also often created (al-Shami and Yassin-Kassab 2016, 70; Darwish 2015b, 75). While in some parts of Syria, local institutions remained under civilian control, in others, armed groups took control of or established their own governing institutions. In many areas where armed groups were not strong enough to provide governance, they interfered with civilian institutions or controlled a single institution, such as the local courts, while local civilian councils continued to function (Darwish 2015b; Gilbert 2019). Although women had played a role in the initial 2011 uprising, few held positions in early local councils or their affiliated offices. However, not all women were prevented from participating in local governance, and significant variation in women's involvement in rebel governance was evident across Syria and over the course of the conflict. I argue that it was not until women built their own civil society organizations, thereby attaining organizational capacity, and simultaneously did not encounter effective opposition from local armed groups that they were able to institutionalize roles for themselves in local governance.

GRADUAL CAPACITY BUILDING AND WEAKENING ISLAMIST GROUPS IN EAST GHOUTA AND IDLIB GOVERNORATE

Two factors played important roles in making the development of this organizational capacity possible — support from outside organizations and the capacity and gender norms of local armed groups. Outside actors are an important provider of material support as well as training and organizational aid. The involvement of outside entities such as international NGOs has been considered a game changer in the realm of women's postconflict rights (Bush 2011; Hughes 2009, 181). Funding

by NGOs and international NGOs has been similarly valuable to numerous women's groups during the Syrian conflict (member, Syrian Women's Council, correspondence with the author, October 2017). In Idlib Governorate, groups such as Women Now in Ma'arat a-Nu'man received support from organizations outside Syria (Women Now Ma'arat a-Nu'man). Other NGOs within Syria or Syrian groups based in neighboring countries also provided support to women's organizations. For example, Mazaya, a group established in the town of Kafr Nabl in 2013, thanks the Forum organization, Syrian Women Now, and the Kafr Nabl Media center for support on its Facebook page.¹³ All of the women's organizations and offices interviewed claimed that connections exist between women's groups within their general geographic area.¹⁴ Umbrella groups, such as the Syrian Women's Gathering, emerged to coordinate the involvement of women throughout Syria in "building their society."¹⁵

The second factor was armed groups' attitudes toward women's organizations and their ability to impose their views on the civilian population. Being perceived as apolitical allows groups to function as safe spaces for political speech when public space is constrained or prohibited (Johnston 2005, 137). Conservative armed groups tolerated women's groups as long as they did not engage in behavior that these armed actors deemed inappropriate or overtly political. Mazaya primarily focused on education rather than politics, providing opportunities for women to learn foreign languages or to read, acquire technological skills, and attain basic medical training (Syria Untold 2014).¹⁶ Women Now, a group in the nearby city of Ma'arat a-Nu'man, also focused much of its attention on education after the center's formation in March 2014 (member, Women Now, correspondence with the author, October 2017). Interestingly, the group was formed at a time when Islamist actors such as Jabhat a-Nusra were at their strongest in the city. In Idlib City,

13. See Mazaya's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/mazaya.kafranbel.mm/timeline>.

14. According to the Syrian Women's Council, connections and cooperation existed not only between women's groups within the Aleppo area but also between these groups and others based in Turkey (member, Syrian Women's Council, correspondence with the author, October 2017).

15. Idlib Area Council Ma'arat a-Nu'man, Facebook post, May 25, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/1332618906817219/مجلسمحافظةإدلبمكتبمنطقةمعرةالنعمان/?hc_ref=ARRSuVjCmO8hw6XOnffixqYCAPvRetl3W-1XmIIYkrA5ypzWDESwDBpXaPUxdNKkxjk.

16. Mazaya's official motto is "I'm no longer a liability, I'm an asset" (Syria Untold 2014). A post on the group's Facebook page from June 7, 2017, says, "Do not wait for help from anyone, you have the power to solve all the problems!" (<https://www.facebook.com/mazaya.kafranbel.mm/timeline>). While it has continued to operate, it has not always been spared from attacks by Islamist groups such as Jabhat a-Nusra (Saleh 2016).

women's groups also emerged at a time when women's public and political roles were limited by the strength of Islamist armed groups. These groups included Women's Fingerprints and the Association of Educated Women, both of which were established early in 2016, when Islamist groups controlled the city (al-Khateb 2017; Taleb 2017).

However, the formation of these groups is not sufficient when we strive to explain when women successfully attained roles in rebel governance. After all, these women's groups were established at various times, and often years before women pushed for greater political roles for women. Although I argue that the existence of these groups and the organization of women as women was necessary, this fails to explain *when* women attained positions in rebel governance.

In many areas outside the government's control, the political fortunes of women and armed groups changed over time. In late 2011, Islamist groups such as Jaish al-Islam (JAI) and Ahrar a-Sham were founded and al-Qaeda in Iraq created its Syrian branch, which would become known worldwide as ISIS or the Islamic State (IS). These groups were followed in early 2012 by groups such as Jabhat a-Nusra,¹⁷ which was notorious for its affiliation with al-Qaeda. In 2012 and 2013, these groups grew to national significance and attained positions of local influence and sometimes dominance.¹⁸ JAI, for example, became particularly influential in the area of East Ghouta near the capital of Damascus (Alsaafin 2015). Jabhat a-Nusra stepped up its efforts to impose a conservative interpretation of Islamic law on the civilian populations living in the territory under its control, particularly starting in 2014 (Heller 2016). The group known as the Islamic State became notorious in part for its efforts to govern civilians using a strict interpretation and adaptation of Islamic law.

The aforementioned armed groups and others largely opposed women's involvement in political life. In the field of media, many women found doors closed as a result of the growing influence of Islamist armed actors (Enab Baladi 2016d, 2016f). In the city of Kafr Nabl, the managing editor for a woman's magazine, *al-Ghurbal*, was kidnapped by members of the Islamic State, reportedly because of the magazine's focus on women's issues (Enab Baladi 2016f). In addition, by controlling who

17. The group has gone through a number of name changes, with its most recent rebranding as Hay'at Tahrir ash-Shaam.

18. Before Islamist groups attained the capacity to become involved in rebel governance, during 2011 and much of 2012, we did not see institutional design being used to ensure a role for women in rebel governance. While armed groups did not have the capacity to stand in women's way, women did not yet possess the organizational capacity to campaign for the creation of quota systems or women's offices at the local level.

could preach in mosques and the messages they sent, armed groups pushed for the public adoption of conservative gender norms by listeners. In areas where armed groups exerted higher levels of control, they were able to influence women's access to education and even codes regarding public dress (Enab Baladi 2016b, 2016f). However, some of these groups proved incapable of maintaining this level of control in the long run and faced challenges from other armed actors or dwindling resources that limited their ability to enforce conservative gender norms.

Changes in the fortunes of Jaish al-Islam, which was based in the Eastern Ghouta, illustrate the relationship between the strength of conservative groups and limits to political opportunities for women. JAI was the dominant armed actor in East Ghouta in 2013 and 2014. The Ba'athist military encircled and besieged the area starting in 2012, although the fighting became significantly more intense during 2013. It was during this period of encirclement that JAI took on a more prominent role in the area and strengthened its level of control (Alsaafin 2015). However, its rise to prominence and increase in influence would not last forever. In November 2014 and early 2015, civilians protested the armed group in Douma, claiming that it had monopolized food supplies (Alsaafin 2015; Atallah 2014). In 2015, the support that JAI had received from state actors and individuals outside Syria dwindled (Lund 2017). The encirclement of the area by regime forces made it increasingly difficult for the group to obtain the supplies it needed to maintain its preeminence in East Ghouta (Lund 2017). Tensions between JAI and other armed factions also began to rise in 2015, which led to open fighting between the armed groups in November 2015 (Alsaafin 2015; a-Noufal et al. 2016). In late December of the same year, the head of JAI, Zahran Alloush, was killed in an airstrike (Al Jazeera 2015). Thus, JAI was significantly weakened in terms of its legitimacy and capacity starting late in 2014 and throughout 2015.

Only after JAI weakened did women attain institutionalized roles in rebel governance. Women's offices emerged in communities throughout East Ghouta in 2016 and 2017 (Facebook page, city of Da'il Women's Office; member, Women's Office al-Marj, correspondence with the author, October 2017). By the fall of 2017, 28 of the approximately 40 local councils in the area of East Ghouta (which includes the city of Douma) had women's offices (member, Women's Office al-Marj, correspondence with the author, October 2017). In addition to creating new institutions that were part of local rebel governance, women also campaigned for greater involvement and representation in Douma's local

council (Enab Baladi 2016a). These actions took place after the weakening of JAI, indicating that the capacity and gender norms held by local armed groups plays a role in shaping the opportunities for women's involvement with insurgent governance.

The weakening of armed actors with conservative gender norms also played an important role in giving women new opportunities in the northwestern parts of the country. In Idlib Province, women played a role in institution building, but only after the power of conservative armed groups was checked. Women's organizations took part in civilian efforts to wrest control from Islamist armed groups and the *shura* council that they had established to govern the city.¹⁹ Civilians established a new local council, elections for which were held in January 2017 (Taleb 2017). The new local council then established an Office of Women and Family Affairs (Idlib Local Council). Following the decline in armed groups' control of the area, other efforts were made to coordinate between women's groups to advance women's political engagement. Women's groups in the area also engaged in regional cooperation and discussed how to expand women's involvement in "building their society."²⁰ In Ma'arat a-Nu'man, another city in the same governorate, women's organizations held sessions at the local council to support the creation of strong female leaders (member, Women Now, correspondence with the author, October 2017). Thus, breaking the control of Islamist armed groups removed barriers to women's involvement in insurgent governance. In both Idlib Governorate as well as Eastern Ghouta, fluctuations in the capacity of Islamist armed groups explains *when* women had the opportunity to play larger roles as institution builders and participants in rebel governance.

EARLY ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AND THE ARRIVAL OF STRONG ISLAMIST GROUPS IN DEIR AZ-ZOR

In Deir az-Zor, unlike in Idlib Governorate and Eastern Ghouta, women played an active role in civil society early in the conflict. Armed groups moved into the city in 2012, and a local civil council for Deir az-Zor was established in February 2013 (Daher 2014). In an initial survey of more than 90 Syrian civil society organizations completed in February

19. The word *shura*, consultation, is considered an aspect of just governance in the Quran (Esposito and Piscatori 1991, 434).

20. Idlib Area Council Ma'arat a-Nu'man, Facebook post, May 25, 2017.

2014, Deir az-Zor appeared more egalitarian than several provinces in Syria. Out of the 15 civil society groups located in Deir az-Zor, 20% were entirely made up of female members, 13% were majority female, 60% were minority female, and 7% had no female members (Khalaf, Ramadan, and Stolleis 2014, 13, 23). In addition, of the six groups in the sample that were composed entirely of women, half were in Deir az-Zor (Khalaf, Ramadan, and Stolleis 2014, 22). While these samples are quite small, they indicate that early in the conflict, Deir az-Zor had a relatively higher rate of female participation in civil society than other, more conservative regions such as Idlib Province. As was the case in Idlib, many of these groups worked on providing women with skills that they could use to support their families, as well as promoting women's rights (Fikram 2016). Thus, Deir az-Zor saw capacity building at an earlier stage than Idlib Governorate or Eastern Ghouta.

This organizational capacity was accompanied by the presence of women in public life and modest involvement of women in local politics. When an education office was formed in Deir az-Zor in April 2013, women played an active role in forming it. Not long after the office was created, there were more women working in the office than men (Fikram 2016). While women did not attain positions on the local civilian council during its short tenure, they did play an active role in offices that were established or administered by the local council, including the education office.²¹

However, the picture changed dramatically in 2013 and 2014. The Islamic State took control of much of the province in July 2013 and of parts of Deir az-Zor City in 2014 (Dziadosz 2014; Enab Baladi 2016e). The Islamic State would go on to impose numerous regulations regarding individuals' everyday lives and maintained control in part by instilling fear in the local population (Enab Baladi 2016h). As in other locations, the arrival of IS also had a significant impact on the area's civil society organizations. Local and regional courts and boards were eliminated after IS took control (Enab Baladi 2016c). Civil society organizations were shut down, and many ceased operating or continued

21. The early existence of women's organizations in other governorates did seem to contribute to the involvement of women in local politics. Of the six all-women civil society organizations in the Badael study, the three that were not in Deir az-Zor were all located in Aleppo Governorate. The governorate was also one of the few to boast a local council with female members (22). When rebel-controlled neighborhoods of Aleppo established a local council in February 2013, women held position in offices and committees. One of these would go on to be elected the council's first female leader, although this took place after the council had to leave Aleppo and was operating in the Aleppo countryside (al Shimale 2018).

to operate in secret at great risk (Fikram 2016). In the Citizens for Syria data set, which was started in the same year that IS took control of Deir az-Zor, only two civil society organizations out of the database of 317 groups were based in Deir az-Zor. This significant lack of civil society groups in the Citizens for Syria database may indicate the elimination or cooptation of civil society groups by IS. Thus, the arrival of a powerful armed group with conservative gender norms seems to have had a significant impact in an area in which women had previously played active roles in public life, preventing their potential involvement in rebel governance.²²

EARLY WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS AND LIBERAL GENDER NORMS UNDER THE PYD

One of the few areas where conservative armed groups did not become prominent was the territory under the control of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The Syrian military pulled out of some predominantly Kurdish areas of northern Syria in 2012. The state retreated in many additional aspects, leaving locals to arrange governance and the provision of many (but not all) public goods themselves (Argentieri 2016). This provided an opportunity for the PYD to establish institutions of its own. This included establishing local bodies to govern affairs as well as its two armed wings, the People's Protection Units and later the Women's Protection Units.

The PYD's ideology, particularly as it pertains to gender relations, has played an important role in women's roles in rebel governance in northern Syria. The PYD has its organizational roots in the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), which was established in Turkey in 1978 and adopted a progressive stance toward the involvement of women in the organization. By the 1990s, almost a third of its members were female (Bengio 2016, 34–35). According to prominent PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, the twenty-first century “*must* be the era of awakening, the era of the liberated, emancipated woman,” adding “a country can't be free unless the women are free” (Bengio 2016, 35; see also Argentieri 2016). For Öcalan, a society is only as free as its female members (Argentieri 2016), and some form of revolution is necessary to bring about this emancipation (Bengio 2016, 35). Öcalan spent a significant period of

22. It is worth noting that when Deir ez-Zor established its first civilian local council after the removal of IS, one of the offices created was a women's office (al-Khair 2017). One of the two deputy heads of the local council was also a woman (Hassan 2018).

time in Syria, almost 20 years, as he was wanted by Turkish authorities (Bengio 2016, 37). The PYD embraced the feminist aspects of Öcalan's political ideology along with its other tenets.

Given the PYD's prominent role in northern Syria and its ideology, it is not surprising that organizations focused on women and often run by women were established earlier and with greater speed in northern Syria than elsewhere. According to the Citizens for Syria database, 20 of the 43 organizations concerned with providing support for women were established in the predominantly Kurdish north. Of these organizations, 3 were established in 2011, 7 in 2012 (the year that regime forces departed the region), 7 in 2013, 1 in 2014, and 2 in 2015. According to the same organization's report, 95% of civil society groups in the Kurdish governed area had some female members of their governing boards (32).

The early development of women's organizational capacity in the region was followed by efforts to design institutions to include women in insurgent governance. When the PYD and other groups established an autonomous and democratic system for three cantons in northern Syria, this included the "Charter of the Social Contract" (Darwish 2015a).²³ One of the Executive Council Bodies established under this charter was the Body of Family and Gender Equality. In the same year, a decree went out that pushed for advances in gender equality and included institutionalized efforts to expand women's roles in governance (Al Bawaba 2017). Women were included in open meetings held to discuss local affairs, although in some communities, separate meetings were held for men and women (Ross 2015). A quota system required that 40% of local government positions be filled by women (Van Wilgenburg 2017). For many government posts, each position was shared by a man and a woman who theoretically possessed the same degree of authority (Zaman 2017).²⁴ There was some debate about whether these changes were effective or merely cosmetic (Argentieri 2016; Enab Baladi 2016e). However, significant steps, unprecedented in Syria, were taken to incorporate women into civil and political life.²⁵

23. Democratic Autonomous Regions of Afrin, Jazira and Kobane, "Charter of the Social Contract," https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/english-version_sc_revised-060314.pdf.

24. Efforts by the PYD to create institutions that involve civilians in local governance is, in some respects, reminiscent of the Ugandan National Resistance Army and its formation of local elected councils described by Kasfir (2005).

25. While the Syrian regime said it would improve women's representation in Syria by 2005 (bringing it to 30%), women held 12% of the seats in parliament's lower house in 2005 (Al Bawaba 2017; Jung 2016).

CONCLUSION

The literature points to women's political engagement as a important factor in shaping postconflict outcomes for women (Anderson and Swiss 2014; Kang 2015; Kaufman and Williams 2010; Moghadam 2013). Why is it that women's political involvement during conflict varies? Why do some women take on roles in rebel governance while other women are barred from doing so? Some claim that the explanation is variation in the levels of violence — that higher levels of violence lead women to be kept at home over concerns for their safety (Nassar and Yasin 2016; member, Syrian Women's Council, correspondence with the author, October 2017). However, some women, particularly in northern Syria, played significant political roles in local councils in 2012 (Al Bawaba 2017), which was also one of the conflict's most deadly years. Neither subnational variation in gender norms nor the urban-rural divide appears to determine where women had a role in governance, as women's offices and quotas were instituted in rural parts of Syria and in areas of varied ethnic composition. While social norms or the urban-rural divide may have played a role in variation in women's initial organizational capacity, neither of these factors proved deterministic over the course of the conflict.

I have claimed that conflict plays an important role in shaping the organizational capacity and opportunities available to women. The development of apolitical organizations to support women during the Syrian conflict was crucial in building the organizational capacity that made women's subsequent push for political access possible. Another factor that plays a key role in conflict is the ideology and strength of armed groups. Armed groups that hold conservative views on gender and have the power to influence civilian affairs can prevent women from acquiring roles in local politics. When armed groups possess more liberal gender views or lack the capacity to impose their views on civilians, women have an opportunity to pursue political power.

Although this article has focused on variation within Syria, I believe that the factors discussed here can help us to understand variation in the involvement of women in rebel governance in other contexts. The existence of women's organizations as well as the gender norms and capacity of armed groups are factors that travel easily beyond Syria and the Middle East. For example, during the Spanish civil war, women living under the control of Republican forces enjoyed rights, freedoms, and roles denied to women living under Francoist forces (Lannon 1991, 218–19). This suggests that the ideology of armed actors does have an

impact on women's political involvement in other civil conflicts. Additional research will need to be conducted to ascertain the generalizability of the argument set forth in this article, but the factors considered here travel beyond the Syrian conflict and therefore may provide helpful insights into the variation of women's involvement in rebel governance across contexts.

The conflict is not over, so it is not possible to say whether Syrian women will be able to secure a place for themselves at the negotiating table. It is not clear whether they will be able to turn their roles in rebel governance and institution building during conflict into political power when fighting ends. Yet the current media environment provides unique insights into how Syrian women defied widely held assumptions and ruled during the conflict as well as the factors that made it possible for some of them to do so.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

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