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Winning Hearts and Minds for Rebel Rulers: Foreign Aid and Military Contestation in Syria

Allison Carnegie[1]* (ID), Kimberly Howe[2], Adam G. Lichtenheld[3] (ID) and Dipali Mukhopadhyay[1]

[1]Columbia University, New York, NY, USA, [2]Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford MA, USA and [3]Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA
*Corresponding author. E-mail: allison.carnegie@columbia.edu

Abstract

A primary objective of foreign aid in conflict zones is to help political actors win citizens' 'hearts and minds'. Previous studies have focused on assistance provided to state actors; however, this article examines aid's impact on rebel governance. It argues that aid only bolsters opinions of rebel governors where military control is uncontested. In contested areas, rebels lose credibility if they cannot offer protection, and they have difficulty delivering – and receiving credit for – services in insecure environments crowded with competitors. Using novel data from the Syrian civil war, this article shows that aid improves opinions of opposition councils in uncontested areas but not in communities experiencing intra-rebel conflict. It also explores the underlying mechanisms using in-depth interviews with residents of Aleppo City and Saraqeb. The findings reveal a more nuanced relationship among aid, military competition and governance than prior studies have suggested, which has implications for both scholars and policy makers.

Keywords: foreign aid; Syria; civil war; rebel governance

A primary goal of international aid in conflict-affected countries is to help political actors build public support by winning the 'hearts and minds' of the civilian population. However, it remains unclear whether – and under what conditions – aid can achieve these objectives. Most studies of foreign aid in war zones have focused on assistance provided to states, often as part of counterinsurgency operations. This research has yielded mixed results regarding the impact of aid on governance outcomes.[1] In this article, we examine the effects of external assistance designed to bolster the authority of *rebel* governors, who have also been recipients of aid in conflict-ridden countries.

Building on insights from the literatures on civil war and state formation, we theorize that foreign aid's ability to enhance popular support for rebel governors critically depends on whether military control is contested between different armed actors. In uncontested areas, aid helps rebel governors demonstrably deliver much-needed services to the population and garner public support as a result. In contested areas, we argue that aid cannot bolster opinions of opposition governing institutions for three reasons. First, rebel governors lose credibility if they cannot offer the most valuable public good during war: protection. Secondly, the delivery of efficacious, sustainable services is complicated, if not stymied, by competition from rivals. Thirdly, contestation creates a significant attribution challenge for institutions that seek credit for providing public goods.

To test our theory, we focus on non-military US aid provided during the Syrian civil war. This conflict is a protracted, internationalized struggle between multiple warring parties, and thus shares key features common to many modern armed conflicts. Moreover, the Syrian context allows us to assess the role of local institutions that developed as part of a popular civilian

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[1]For a review, see Findley (2018).

uprising, evolved into agents of governance, and became targets of humanitarian and development assistance from international donors. Since 2011, donors have provided non-military aid to members of the Syrian opposition in an effort to bolster 'good' rebel governors, funneling more than a billion dollars in 'politically oriented assistance' to local governing councils in rebel-held communities (Brown 2018, 2). The Syrian case therefore enables us to examine the effects of this assistance on public perceptions of rebel governing institutions.

We utilize a novel dataset that combines information on aid provided by the US Agency for International Development's Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID/OTI) with civilian perceptions data collected from residents of twenty-seven opposition-held communities in Syria. The data include more than 13,000 surveys and 1,000 in-depth interviews, which provide a unique opportunity to examine public opinion in an area that has been virtually inaccessible to researchers. We combine this data with detailed, community-level aid data to test our theory both quantitatively and qualitatively. We supplement these data sources with information gathered during fieldwork that we conducted in Syria along its border with Turkey between 2013 and 2019.

Our analysis yields several results. First, we find that in communities unmarked by intra-opposition conflict, aid provided by USAID/OTI had a positive effect on public support for local opposition governing councils. However, it did *not* boost support for councils in communities experiencing contestation (see Tao et al. 2016) – when the presence of one rebel group was challenged by at least one other rebel group. These results hold in a variety of robustness checks, including an instrumental variables specification to address potential selection issues. We also find a similar result at the national level of governance: contestation between the Syrian regime and rebel forces conditioned the impact of aid on public perceptions of both the councils and the national opposition body, the Syrian Interim Government. Finally, our qualitative analysis of opposition politics in Aleppo City and Saraqeb allows us to trace the mechanisms by which violent contestation can condition the influence of aid on public support for institutions that aspire to govern during conflict.

This study makes three main contributions. First, we examine the multiple dimensions of competition over violence that can characterize the thorniest of civil wars and their implications for governance and intervention. In doing so, we advance the burgeoning literature on the relationship between foreign aid and governing authority. There is no consensus within this body of research (reviewed below) over whether aid-funded service delivery can bolster legitimacy – defined here as 'social acceptance of the right to rule' (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018). We argue that the effect is conditional: for non-military aid to have a positive effect on popular perceptions of governing institutions, we theorize that it must be provided in uncontested spaces. Moreover, we demonstrate the precise mechanisms driving this effect. Secondly, the article underscores the oft-obscured distinction between civilian and military institutions in the work of insurgent rule, demonstrating the importance of each and their relationship to one another for counter-state-building. Finally, we contribute to policy-oriented debates about the utility of attempts to 'win hearts and minds' and advance governance aims in conflict-affected environments, as our results suggest that territorial control should be seen as a prerequisite for effective foreign assistance in war zones.

Theory

Despite the enormous amount of development aid directed toward conflict-affected countries,[2] prior research is ambivalent on the ability of foreign assistance to 'win hearts and minds'. While some studies of foreign aid in general have revealed a positive relationship between aid and public support for governing institutions, many find little evidence of sustained political

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[2]In 2016 alone, 65 per cent of official development assistance ($68.2 billion) went to fragile and conflict-affected countries (2018 OECD States of Fragility Report).

change. Some scholars argue that aid erodes the 'fiscal contract' in which states and citizens trade taxation for the accountable provision of public goods (Bates and Donald Lien 1985; Timmons 2005). While aid can provide much-needed services (Böhnke and Zürcher 2013; Gupta 1999), it may also weaken states' credibility when governments make unfulfilled claims about their capacity to provide for their constituents (Gubser 2002; Lake 2010).[3] Additionally, citizens may detect favoritism, inefficiency or corruption in the distribution of aid (Ahmed 2012; Böhnke and Zürcher 2013; Brass 2016; Fishstein and Wilder 2012; Jablonski 2014).[4] Moreover, donor-branded aid is often attributed to foreign actors rather than their local clientele, though governments sometimes succeed at claiming credit for it (Cruz and Schneider 2017; Guiteras and Mobarak 2015).[5] Indeed, many empirical studies have found either a negative or null relationship between aid and legitimacy, particularly in conflict settings (Beath, Christia and Enikolopov 2015; Humphreys, de la Sierra and Van der Windt 2015; King and Samii 2014; Nixon and Mallett 2017; Nunn and Qian 2014).[6]

While foreign aid can influence citizens' perceptions of governance in multiple ways, the primary pathway explored in previous research – and the one on which most donor programs are predicated – is its ability to boost support by helping to increase service provision. Focusing on this theory of change, we argue that there is more room for optimism than the existing literature suggests when considering the effects of aid on public support for rebel *governors*, which are rebel groups that take up the project of governing.[7]

We theorize that aid can boost the opinions of these actors for at least three reasons. First, the delivery of basic services is often an exceptionally high priority for populations living in conflict-affected territories that are no longer privy to the government's distribution of public goods. By helping rebel governors provide these services, aid may enhance their support among the public and help rebels signal their viability as a governing alternative to the state. In many instances, aid is one of the only ways that rebels can fund service delivery and other core governmental functions, and the public is unlikely to expect otherwise given the limited extractive capabilities and difficulties associated with taxing war-affected populations that most insurgencies face.[8] Secondly, rebels frequently govern sympathetic communities whose disgruntlement with their government served as the very basis for the insurgency. As a result, these populations may be more inclined to support aid-facilitated efforts to build an alternative to the political status quo. Finally, because counter-states lack, and therefore seek, the juridical sovereignty that states enjoy, their constituents may view the successful receipt of aid not as a sign of weakness, but rather as an achievement in the form of international recognition (Bob 2005; Coggins 2011).[9] Thus, in our context, we anticipate that aid can enhance public support.

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[3]Though see Mikulaschek, Pant and Tesfaye (2019) for the argument that expectations of future service provision can increase support.

[4]Research on the effect of aid on insurgent violence points in both directions (Berman, Shapiro and Felter 2011; Bush 2017). More generally, development aid may not improve overall governance (Mansuri and Rao 2004; Wong 2012).

[5]For an overview of the concept of legitimacy in areas with 'limited statehood' see Risse and Stollenwerk (2018). For interesting work on whether aid increases support for combatants, see Lyall, Zhou and Imai (2018). Aid may simply magnify a state's insufficient capacity (Carnegie and Dolan 2020).

[6]Though see Carnegie et al. (2021a). On the limits of the 'hearts and minds' approach to counterinsurgency more generally, see Hazelton (2017).

[7]These groups can have both civilian and armed components (Kasfir 2015, 34, 60) (see also Suykens (2015), 140) and Kalyvas (2015), 127)). For example, the moderate opposition in Syria, the focus of this article, was a rebel group with armed and civilian components that governed, thus becoming rebel governors.

[8]A potential exception would be a case in which a rebel group gains control of territory with valuable resources and a taxable population, such as ISIS (Johnston et al. 2019; Revkin 2020).

[9]While citizens might also approve of their government's ability to attract and manage external support (Sacks 2012; Winters, Dietrich and Mahmud 2018), we argue that this is especially true of rebel governors. On the distinction between juridical and empirical sovereignty, see Jackson and Rosberg (1982).

However, drawing on lessons from the state formation and civil war literatures, we expect any positive effect of aid to be conditioned by the level of contestation in areas where it is administered. In contested areas, it is difficult for rebel governors to use aid to win 'hearts and minds' for three key reasons. First, governing bodies in such areas cannot rely solely on service provision to improve their credibility. While aid may help governors provide better services, people are primarily concerned with their security in the face of violent conflict. Hard forms of assistance – military and otherwise – are required under such circumstances; other kinds of assistance may be helpful, but their import pales in comparison. Control is often described as the *sine qua non* for insurgent success, since it 'signals credibility' and enables conflict parties to deploy a wide range of measures – including aid – that facilitate the civilian collaboration necessary to advance their cause (Kalyvas 2006, 114). The civil war literature recognizes insurgency as a kind of 'competitive state-building' and stresses the paramount importance of territorial control over violence for those on the rebel side. Indeed, the state formation literature has also long conceived of government as requiring concentrated control over violence. Meanwhile, the counter-insurgent motto of 'clear, hold, and build' suggests the need for control, even as in practice, governments and donors tend to employ aid 'to help *establish* control of contested areas' (Sexton (2016), emphasis added).[10]

A second and related reason we do not expect aid to improve public support in contested areas is because contestation undermines the efficacy of aid-enabled services, particularly when they are delivered by civilian institutions that lack the coercive capacity to protect those services in a conflict-affected environment. For example, an aid-funded electrical grid may be destroyed, or a water tank blown up or contaminated (Crost, Felter and Johnston 2014). In contrast, when armed groups provide services directly, they tend to defend them, making aid provided by civilian governing bodies look especially unreliable by comparison.[11] In contested areas, aid may also be siphoned off by competing actors. In uncontested spaces, we expect armed actors to avoid disrupting services and to even lend their support to civilian opposition institutions engaged in public goods provision. Many rebels perceive a political pay-off from governance projects and recognize the value of service provision. As Mampilly (2012, 54) argues, 'since civilians in rebel-controlled areas can and do enjoy these goods without directly participating in the insurgency, the provision of public goods can be viewed as part of a broader program to generate legitimacy and support for the rebel regime'.

The third reason it is difficult for rebel governors to win 'hearts and minds' using aid is that attribution challenges that can arise with all forms of foreign aid grow more acute in violent contexts, making it especially difficult to establish claims as an authoritative governor. The 'correct attribution of governance success and failure' is a crucial aspect of translating governing effectiveness into political legitimacy (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018, 413). When multiple groups share space in uncoordinated terms, local residents may struggle to accurately attribute the goods and services on offer to the entity that supplied them. In contested communities in the Syrian province of Idlib, for example, administrative bodies run by Salafi Islamist rebel groups Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham took credit for services provided by US-funded civilian local councils aligned with factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), diverting reputational benefits away from these councils.[12] Given evidence that populations have ambiguous responses to branded aid (Winters, Dietrich and Mahmud 2017), even equipment marked with a client institution's insignia may not prove adequately clarifying.[13] In the absence of armed contestation, we expect dominant armed groups to coalesce around, invest in, and even promote the work of their

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[10]Some scholars have demonstrated a decline in insurgent violence with an influx of aid (Berman, Shapiro and Felter 2011), while others have argued that aid can produce an uptick in contestation (Sexton 2016).

[11]Armed actors often obtain resources for their services and arms from oil revenues, taxation and foreign backers.

[12]USAID/OTI. 2016 (5 May) 'Community Profile: Salquin, Idlib Province'. Istanbul, Turkey: USAID/OTI, 23; Jaish al Fath Twitter Page, 6 October 2015, https://twitter.com/JaishalFathEn.

[13]As we discuss subsequently, aid provided by OTI was branded with the insignia of Syrian institutions, rather than the United States.

civilian counterparts in aid-enabled service delivery, precisely because of the presumed political dividends that accrue to effective rebel governors.[14] A coherent approach on the part of military and civilian actors is likely to be read more easily and accurately by civilian observers.[15]

We specifically consider how these mechanisms operated during the Syrian civil war, because it offers a unique opportunity to consider the effect of aid on support for governing bodies affiliated with an aspiring counter-state. The Syrian context involves a significant foreign campaign to support the establishment of 'good' rebel governance, as well as a fragmented warscape with a range of aspiring rebel governors. Indeed, the Syrian insurgency featured a 'lack of exclusive control of territories by its armed groups' (Baczko, Dorronsoro and Quesnay 2018, 37); as in other civil wars, state and counter-state forces routinely coexisted in a variety of configurations over time and space (Staniland 2012). Rebel forces not only shared space with the state (and its foreign supporters) but also with one another in ways that often precluded consolidation for all involved parties (Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour 2012; Fjelde and Nilsson 2012; Pischedda 2018; Wood and Kathman 2015). Multiple factions therefore wielded violence and, in many cases, fought, lived and governed in close proximity.

Though this provides an ideal setting in which to test our theory, we note that Syria is far from unique in this regard. Similar multi-faceted, internationalized civil wars featuring considerable rebel fragmentation continue in many countries today – including Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Libya, Ukraine and Yemen (Fjelde and Nilsson 2012; Fjelde and Nilsson 2018). Indeed, a number of rebel groups take on the work of governing civilians who live in their midst. Advanced forms of rebel governance often include what Kasfir (2015, 21) calls 'civilian administration', whereby civilians are not merely the objects of rule but are themselves part of the opposition government. Numerous rebel movements, from the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, the Ugandan National Resistance Army, and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front to Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of Mozambique, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka have included civilian actors and organizations in their governing apparatus (Huang 2016; Kasfir 2015; Stewart 2018). We discuss the generalizability of our study further in the conclusion.

The Syrian Context

Before turning to our empirical analysis, we first describe the context of the Syrian civil war and the provision of international assistance therein. In doing so, we draw on interviews that we conducted in Syria and along the Turkey–Syrian border between 2013 and 2019. We refer to each interview by number since we offered our respondents confidentiality as a condition for the interviews.

The Syrian war began in 2011 after a violent insurgency erupted in the wake of a popular uprising against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. In late 2011 and 2012, Syrian rebels – made up of Kurds, Islamists and more moderate FSA factions – seized control of many government-held locations in Aleppo, Idlib, Rural Damascus, Raqqa, Hama and Homs, sparking the establishment of rebel governing institutions in hundreds of communities by 2013.[16] These

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[14]We note that problems of attribution may still arise if competition short of violence occurs. However, our first two mechanisms would not apply, as aid projects would not be destroyed as a result of violence, and citizens' security concerns may not be paramount.

[15]While in principle local councils could hold on to the aid to wait until a more suitable time to spend the funds, this did not occur in practice. Our interviews indicated that these councils were required to develop a work plan and timeline with OTI and other donors to use the money for specific projects within a specified time frame. If they did not follow these work plans, they risked having their funds pulled or not being able to receive money for future projects.

[16]According to territorial control data collected by the Carter Center, as of January 2014 – roughly the beginning of the time period we analyze – 44 per cent of Syria's territory was held by the regime, around 27 per cent by Syrian rebel groups, around 15 per cent by ISIS, and about 17 per cent by Kurdish forces. By June 2016 – the end of our study period – 41 per cent

civilian-led local councils (LCs) aimed to fill the void left by the regime in opposition-controlled areas by delivering basic relief and restoring public services. They operated alongside local and national military opposition institutions, namely the FSA and its Revolutionary Command Council, a collection of locally organized, loosely associated militias. LCs thus coexisted with their armed counterparts as part of the larger Syrian opposition to the Assad regime.

As the conflict went on, the Syrian opposition became known for its ever-shifting internal alliances and rivalries, which often culminated 'in territorial skirmishes, assassinations and out-right inter-rebel civil war. Rather than coalescing into a unified rebel front, rebel groups continue[d] to compete for power amongst themselves' (Pedersen and Walther 2018, 6). During the period in which most of the data for this study was collected (2014–2016), rebel groups of varying ideological stripes clashed violently in many communities, wrestling one another for dominance of the areas in question. In some cases, they established service delivery bodies that worked as alternatives to, or competed with, LCs.[17]

In the midst of this fractured military environment, Western donors – and neighboring countries – saw LCs as key civilian stewards of the moderate opposition and supported them by pledging millions of dollars of humanitarian aid. USAID/OTI was at the forefront of international efforts to generate support for the Syrian opposition through foreign non-military aid. The office's mission is to stabilize conflict-ridded countries and to encourage long-term development 'by promoting reconciliation, jumpstarting local economies, supporting nascent independent media, and fostering peace and democracy through innovative programming'.[18] USAID/OTI began working in Syria in March 2013, providing US$17.58 million in aid to Syrian opposition institutions by July 2016. This aid was primarily in-kind assistance provided directly to LCs – goods, as opposed to cash – to supply the councils with materials and equipment that helped them deliver a wide range of services to their constituents, including education, road repair, rubble removal, emergency response, public outreach, humanitarian assistance, media service, civil society organizations, water and administrative services (for example, civil records and land titling).[19]

USAID/OTI assistance was expressly intended to bolster public support for rebel institutions through service provision. While the agency was not the only donor active in opposition areas, it was clear from our interviews that USAID/OTI was often the first one to enter a community, and that its distribution of aid generally reflected broader trends in Western donor assistance to rebel-held Syria. As one Syrian interlocutor explained, Western donors understood LCs and their work in service delivery as 'legitimizing the political opposition'.[20] According to Brown (2018, 6), the donor logic presumed that 'the popular support they earned from successful service delivery, in turn, would encourage the public to regard the councils as a legitimate, capable alternative to the Assad regime….These assumptions mirrored dominant practice in liberal state-building models and 'hearts and minds' counterinsurgency theories, where effective service delivery is seen as key to securing popular support and legitimacy'.

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of the country's territory was held by the regime, around 18 per cent by Syrian rebel groups, around 17 per cent by ISIS, and about 24 per cent by Kurdish forces.

[17]For example, in 2015 Jabhat al-Nusra attacked FSA factions in Kafranbel in Idlib Province, and arrested and exiled members of an FSA affiliate in Atarib, Aleppo Province. That same year, Jabhat al-Shamiyah, another FSA-linked group, clashed with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) while vying for control over the town of A'zaz, which the YPG aimed to incorporate into its Kurdish Federation of Northern Syria (Rojava). Douma, a rebel bastion in the Damascus Suburbs, experienced intra-opposition clashes in mid-2014, when the Islamist Jaish al-Islam forcibly expelled ISIS forces, and again in 2016, when attempts by Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and FSA affiliates to challenge Jaish al-Islam's dominance in the city resulted in a series of military battles (Lister 2016).

[18]USAID/OTI. https://www.usaid.gov/political-transition-initiatives/where-we-work. While OTI has provided democracy assistance in other contexts, this was not the case in Syria due to the particularly acute humanitarian needs.

[19]While some USAID/OTI programming provided stipends to LC workers to help cover their salaries, the vast majority of assistance (95 per cent) took the form of equipment. Our findings may therefore apply primarily to instances in which aid beneficiaries are given less liquid forms of assistance.

[20]Interview 6 with authors, 2016.

However, our fieldwork in Syria suggests that intra-rebel contestation made this support much more difficult. Multiple LC members in Northwest Syria cited contestation between armed groups as one of the most significant factors interfering with their work. Violent clashes and attacks by rebel factions forced councils to suspend or postpone the distribution of goods, and the resulting instability prevented council members from reaching some of their constituents. Similarly, insecurity stopped people from traveling to LC offices to obtain assistance, provide feedback and engage with council members, which cut civilians off from local authorities.[21] As a council leader in Aleppo Province explained, 'when we work in areas that are more stable, we face fewer problems than in other areas and are able to better meet the needs of the people'.[22]

Syrian Survey Data

To test the effects of aid to LCs in Syria, we use new data on Syrian residents' perceptions of opposition governing institutions. We assembled the data using surveys that were administered by an independent research group contracted by USAID/OTI. The data was gathered in five collection periods: May 2014, September 2014, January 2015, August 2015 and March 2016. A total of 13,657 surveys were administered in twenty-seven Syrian communities (a community is the geographic unit used by OTI and is the level at which an LC operates). These locations generally correspond to cities and towns, although they include a few rural areas (for example, Al-Houla, which refers to a collection of small towns in a rural area). This information was coupled with in-depth interviews of roughly 1,100 people from the communities in the sample. As a result, we have unique and detailed information about residents' lives and views during an active conflict that has been largely inaccessible to scholarly researchers.[23] This represents a contribution to the literature, since much previous research on the Syrian conflict has been shaped by surveys and interviews with Syrian refugees who have fled to neighboring countries including Lebanon (Corstange and York 2018) and Turkey (Fabbe, Hazlett and Sınmazdemir 2019). Our data feature the opinions of individuals living inside Syria during the war, which offers unique insights into a range of lived experiences at the apex of the conflict. This sample covers opposition-controlled areas; OTI did not provide aid to communities in which the Syrian government remained in control. Details about the sampling process are provided in the Appendix.

We are interested in testing the effect of aid and intra-rebel contestation on public support for local governing bodies. The data contain eight measures of such support, each of which is measured on a scale from 1 (lowest level of support) to 5 (highest level of support). These measure the extent to which respondents: (1) support the LC, (2) believe it should play a role in governing Syria if Assad leaves power, (3) how well the LC communicates its activities to the people and (4) supports their needs, (5) is the best option, (6) is (not) corrupt, (7) listens to people who visit its offices or contact it and (8) prioritizes peoples' needs.[24] We average these components to create a composite variable, *LC Support*, and rescale it from 0–1 for ease of interpretation.[25]

Quantitative Analysis

Our analysis features two key independent variables. The first, *Contestation*, is a dichotomous measure indicating whether there was contestation between different rebel opposition groups

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[21]Interviews with LC members in Idlib and Aleppo provinces, 2019.

[22]Interview with LC leader, 2019.

[23]We have both the original interview transcripts, translated into English from Arabic, and the raw survey data, which allows us to cross-check responses and provide several forms of insights.

[24]Details on the questions asked are provided in the Appendix.

[25]The results are similar if we use an additive specification. Because some of the components of our dependent variable could measure slightly different concepts – for example, how well LCs perform versus how legitimate civilians perceive them to be – we also analyze each individual component separately as a robustness check (Table 5).

during each data collection period within a given community. The relevant opposition groups include ISIS, Jabat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, the FSA and affiliates, the Kurdish YPG, and several smaller or more localized factions. We categorize an area as contested when no armed group has unchallenged control. Because there is no standardized record of violent skirmishes in Syria during our study period, we constructed our own measure based on whether there were reports of one or more violent clashes between different opposition groups in each community during each data collection period.[26] This variable was coded using OTI's community profile reports, news sources, and consultations with aid workers and experts on the conflict. We used three coders; if two disagreed, additional research was conducted to verify a given coding decision. We focus on intra-rebel contestation in our baseline specification because this was the main source of contestation in these rebel-held communities.[27] However, we also employ an alternative specification in which we use rebel–government contestation in the robustness checks, and control for such contestation in other specifications, as described below.

Our second main independent variable, *Aid*, is constructed from USAID/OTI's database, which shows that 310 projects were completed during the study period. Of these, 192 projects benefitted the communities in our sample, while the others went to communities that were not surveyed. Twenty-eight projects were implemented at the national level, so we dropped them from our sample for a total of 164 projects. While the vast majority were implemented at the community level with the LC as the recipient, twenty-six activities were carried out province-wide through a provincial council. For those twenty-six projects, we divided the total amount of aid by the total number of communities in the province to obtain each community's share. As noted above, aid mostly took the form of equipment and supplies – water tanks, garbage trucks, school supplies, food and non-food items – that were branded with the logos of the LCs (not USAID/OTI) and were used by the councils to provide basic services to their communities. Projects were carried out simultaneously and varied in duration from 1 month to over a year, though since most involved supplying equipment, the duration is not particularly relevant.[28] This aid was implemented consistently across communities, though OTI often tailored the type of project to the local community's needs.

Since this aid could be used over multiple time periods, we argue that it should have compound effects, and continue to influence public support in subsequent data collection periods.[29] Thus, this variable equals the value of aggregate cumulative foreign aid from USAID/OTI, in US dollars, that a community received from the beginning of the sample until the current data collection period.[30] Within a given data collection period and community, aid ranges from $0 to $1,712,283, as shown in Table 2 (where it is divided by $100,000.) The distribution of this aid is also displayed in Figure 2, which suggests considerable variation in the location and dollar value amount given during this period. Cumulative aid to a particular community ranges from $0 to $5,382,857, which is summarized in Table 7.[31] Many Syrian opposition councils lacked

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[26]We determined that if one or more violent incidents was significant enough to reach the attention of newspaper, social media, OTI or residents, then it should be coded as a contested space. We could not use Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) data because the geographic units do not align with those in our study. Moreover, the UCDP data uses a high threshold of deaths for inclusion, and we are theoretically interested in accounting for more nuanced clashes between rebel groups.

[27]The regime reportedly continued to provide salaries to some civil servants in some opposition-held areas in preparation for eventually reclaiming its lost territories, but such efforts did not constitute an institutional alternative to those offered by rebel governors.

[28]Some of USAID/OTI's projects provided assistance to actors other than LCs (e.g., civil society organizations), but our findings are similar if we confine the analysis to activities targeted at LCs.

[29]A variety of scholars have demonstrated the importance of aggregate cumulative aid, e.g. Yuichi Kono and Montinola (2009).

[30]The correlation between aid and contestation is only 0.127. We note that another reason to use aggregate cumulative rather than per capita aid is the lack of reliable population data. However, we run robustness checks using non-cumulative aid and population estimates from 2016 reported by USAID, and find similar results.

[31]We also log the cumulative value of aid as well as drop outliers and find similar results.

Table 1. OLS regression results

	LC Support	LC Support
Aid	0.013***	0.013***
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Aid × Contestation	−0.009**	−0.011***
	(0.004)	(0.003)
Contestation	−0.057	−0.013
	(0.066)	(0.099)
ISIS		−0.230
		(0.147)
JAN/AAS		−0.026
		(0.080)
FSA		0.088
		(0.104)
Fragmentation		0.058
		(0.061)
Age		−0.000
		(0.001)
Education		0.157***
		(0.013)
Male		0.005
		(0.020)
Sunni		−0.213**
		(0.089)
Kurd		−0.068
		(0.133)
Constant	2.363***	2.232***
	(0.054)	(0.131)
Observations	12,981	12,253
R^2	0.072	0.088

Note: robust standard errors clustered by community in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.010$

alternative means to generate revenue, which, combined with the extreme needs of the war-affected population, suggests that this aid represents a large amount of assistance in this context. Indeed, as one LC member of Aleppo City explained, 'Any assistance is important…it is a challenge to provide services and help our people without donors. We have no one else to turn to.'[32]

In some models we control for the respondents' basic characteristics, and those of their communities. First, we include dichotomous indicators of the dominant armed actor in a community, which we coded using news sources, OTI's community profiles, and consultations with researchers, journalists, humanitarian practitioners and other experts on the conflict. This variable varies over time within communities. We again relied on three coders to ensure inter-coder reliability. These variables include *ISIS*, *Jabhat Al Nusra* or *Ahrar al Sham*, the *Free Syrian Army* and the Kurdish *People's Protection Units*. We also include indicators of whether a respondent is *Female*, *Employed* and a *Muslim Sunni Kurd*.[33] We then added the respondent's *Age*, *Income*[34] and level of *Education*.[35] In additional robustness checks shown in the Appendix, we also add two other groups of variables that capture: (1) overall levels of violence: whether a respondent *Feels Safe*, and the presence of *Coalition Bombing* and (2) the LC's selection process: whether it held open *Elections*, *Indirect Elections*, officials were *Appointed*, officials were selected based on *ClanTies* or whether it was a *Sharia Court*.[36]

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[32]Interview with LC member, Atareb, Aleppo Province, 2019.

[33]The vast majority of respondents were Muslim Sunni Arab; Muslim Sunni Kurds represented only about 1 per cent of the sample, and a negligible number of respondents were Muslim Alawite, Muslim Druze, Christian or other.

[34]Income was coded from 1–3 from 0–25 K SYP to over 50 K SYP.

[35]Education was coded on a scale from 1 (no formal education) to 5 (master's/doctorate).

[36]This variable indicates where the dominant court system in the area was a Sharia Commission or a court based on sharia law. We are unable to account for the effects of displacement, though we note that previous work has shown higher levels of

In our baseline model specification, we use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with community and data collection period fixed effects, as fixed effects can tackle time-invariant heterogeneity across units and thus reduce omitted variable concerns. We first present a parsimonious model with no additional covariates, before adding the controls described above. Robust standard errors are clustered at the community level.[37] We display summary statistics in Table 2, and show our results in Table 5.

The addition of aid has a modest but positive effect on support for LCs in uncontested areas, as the coefficient in our baseline specification is 0.015 and is statistically significant, as shown in Table 1. Substantively, going from no aid to US$500,000 – the mean amount of aid in our sample – boosts support for rebel governance by 0.075 on a scale from 0–1. The average level of support in our sample is 0.49; thus, we find that aid can produce limited but real change in perceptions of governance.[38] However, in contested areas, the effect of aid becomes insignificant, as shown in Figure 1, in line with our predictions. We also note that the baseline level of support for LCs is large, positive and significant, indicating that, as we have argued, civilians tend to identify with and support these bodies.

Selection Effects

One potential methodological concern is that aid was not distributed randomly, which could bias our results if, for example, OTI targeted its assistance to the best-performing councils. However, while the larger goal of the aid was to win hearts and minds, accounts of US assistance in Syria suggest the absence of a consistent logic behind the communities targeted by OTI in its distribution of aid (Brown 2018, 2–3). OTI followed a general strategy to target aid to areas no longer under regime control with the aim of propping up nascent rebel governing institutions. In keeping with the logic of 'winning hearts and minds', aid was deployed with the goal of improving public opinion toward these institutions and away from the regime and, later, Islamic extremist groups. Beyond that broad goal, however, there was no consistent targeting process, except to avoid supporting so-called extremist groups. Rather, the approach was decentralized, disjointed and bottom-up. Community selection was largely driven by the idiosyncratic preferences and connections of individual program development officers. While aid was not given randomly, its distribution lacked a coherent, top-down procedure to systematically select particular communities or councils based on their capacities or political contexts.[39] We describe this process further in Appendix Section H.

Empirically, while we note that our community fixed effects should help address concerns that certain kinds of locations obtained more aid than others, we also conduct a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to determine whether aid was distributed differently in contested and uncontested areas. We find that less aid was provided to uncontested areas, implying that a potential selection bias may run against our theory. While these findings do not eliminate potential selection effects given the observational nature of the data, they help to mitigate them.

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social cohesion among those who cannot leave (Gilligan, Pasquale and Samii 2014). If such individuals are concentrated in contested areas, this may bias against our findings. Further, while displacement could suggest that a different mechanism is underlying our findings, we find evidence consistent with our preferred mechanism in our qualitative results. We also gain confidence from the fact that the demographic characteristics in contested versus uncontested areas are similar (see below). For a nuanced account of displacement, also see Holland and Peters (2020).

[37]We obtain virtually identical results when using a wild bootstrap procedure to obtain the standard errors.

[38]While the effect is modest, we note that the total amount of aid provided by USAID/OTI in Syria ($17.5 million between 2013 and mid-2016) is far less than what the agency and other donors have provided in other contexts. For example, between January 2002 and June 2005, USAID/OTI gave $46.6 million in aid to Afghanistan (USAID/OTI, 'Afghanistan Program: Final Evaluation', 15 August 2005, http://www.oecd.org/countries/afghanistan/36134063.pdf.)

[39]OTI implementer. Interview by authors. 1 December 2020.
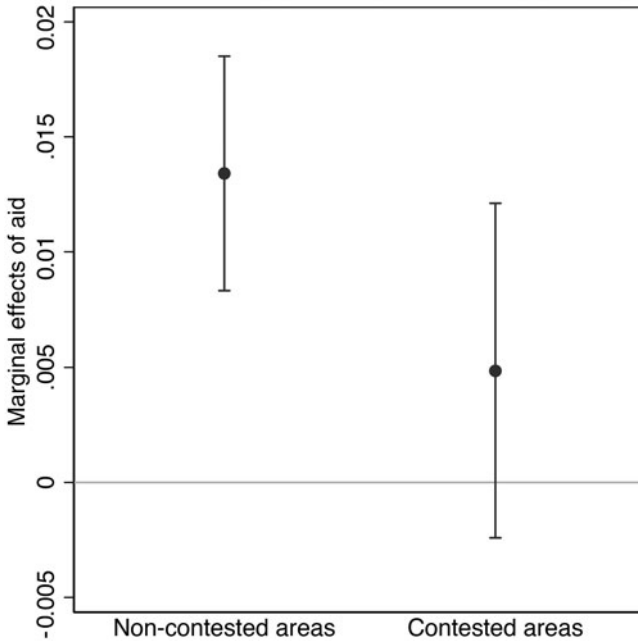
Figure 1. Marginal effects, with 95% confidence intervals

Finally, we use an instrumental variables approach. We exploit the fact that a large portion of the aid we consider was delivered across the Turkish border into Syria, from where 'it [went] where it [could] be most easily provided, not necessarily where it [was] most needed' (Gill 2016).[40] Thus we expect that communities located closer to the Turkish border received more aid, due to their proximity to the source, whereas those further from the border received less aid. We therefore use distance to the border as an instrument for aid flows. We measure distance in three ways. First, we used the shortest distance from a community to the Turkish border. Secondly, we used the distance through Lebanon for relevant areas. Thirdly, we used the distance to the closest crossing station. We include the same control variables as in our main specifications and robustness checks, along with survey period fixed effects. We find that we do not have a weak instruments problem, as the Donald-Cragg statistic exceeds the critical value.[41] Column 3 in Table 5 shows that our main results are robust to this specification.

For distance to be a valid instrument, the exclusion restriction must be satisfied; that is, distance to the border should only affect support for the LCs through its effect on aid flows. While we cannot prove that the exclusion restriction holds, we argue that this is a plausible assumption, though we acknowledge that violations of the exclusion restriction are possible. Of particular concern is that distance could affect LC support through its impact on migration, as those closest to the border may be more likely to migrate, which could in turn influence attitudes. We thus also present the results of an instrumental variable analysis that limits the period of study to the last two survey waves, given that these occurred after the border was closed to migrants in November 2015.[42] Our results hold under this specification, as shown in Appendix Table 3.

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[40]While a majority of aid came from Turkey, it also arrived in Syria from Jordan, and (to a lesser extent) Iraq. Most of the areas that OTI supported, as shown on the map in Figure 2, were in Aleppo and Idlib, and all aid to those provinces came from Turkey (along with aid to Homs and Hama). However, at least some of the aid that went to Rural Damascus and Daraya in the South came from Jordan, and some aid for Raqqa and Dereizzor came from Iraq (Howe 2016).

[41]The statistic's critical value tests whether the 5 per cent TSLS *t*-test for the hypothesis that potentially exceeds 15 per cent.

[42]See Human Rights Watch, 'Turkey: Syrians Pushed Back at the Border', 23 November 2015.

Alternative measure of Contestation

Another potential concern with our analysis might be that contestation is not randomly assigned. Yet rebel groups often target areas due to well-known historical, geographical and religious factors, many of which are absorbed by our fixed effects.[43] We also add control variables that capture several potential confounding variables, including how LC leaders were chosen and safety concerns.[44] This approach gives us confidence that our respondents' basic characteristics do not significantly differ in contested versus uncontested areas.[45]

As an additional robustness check, we also employ an alternative measure of contestation. While we have focused our analysis on contestation between rebel groups, our theory should also apply to contestation between the national government and rebels. In particular, contestation along the war's master cleavage – between the Syrian regime and rebel forces – should condition aid's effect on opinions of the national-level opposition body, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), as well as the LCs. USAID and other donors worked with the SIG, the opposition's executive representative that sat in exile in Turkey, to co-ordinate assistance for LCs and 'help the opposition leverage this cohesion at high-level political negotiations' (Brown 2018, 7). One American official described how aid was branded with the insignia of the opposition leadership in order to convey to those receiving goods and services that the national-level opposition was 'actually relevant inside Syria'.[46] In 2016, the then-interim deputy prime minister stated that the SIG's multi-pronged mission was 'to provide [citizens] with institutions that could normalize their lives, provide them with basic utilities…also to gather help and assistance for the Syrian people…It was also a way of really trying to defy the regime's legitimacy in the eyes of the international community by providing the alternative or the legitimate alternative'.[47] Our theory anticipates that aid could improve public opinion of the SIG and LCs, except in areas experiencing national-level contestation.

To test this proposition, we constructed a dichotomous measure of national-level contestation for each community during each data collection period, based on whether pro-government fighters attempted to retake the community from the opposition through ground attacks. If rebel sovereignty was not violently challenged by pro-government forces, we considered the area to be uncontested.[48] We also constructed a dependent variable similar to the one used in the main analysis, but based instead on survey questions asking about public support for the SIG. Our survey data contain six measures of support for this body, each of which is scaled from 1 (lowest level of support) to 5 (highest level of support). These include measures of the extent to which: (1) people support the SIG and believe that it (2) should play a role in governing Syria if Assad leaves power, (3) communicates its activities to the people, (4) supports the needs of the people, (5) is the best option and (6) is (not) corrupt. We again average these components to create a composite variable, in addition to examining each question individually, and rescale them from 0–1. Note that this variable has fewer components than the local-level measure because USAID/OTI asked fewer questions about the SIG. The results, shown in Column 4 of Table 5, corroborate our main results by demonstrating that aid only improved support for both LCs and the SIG in communities uncontested by pro-regime forces.

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[43]For example, see Rikar Hussein, 'Why Islamic State Chose Raqqa as its Syrian Capital', *Extremism Watch*, 14 June 2017.

[44]These variables, shown in the Appendix, include whether key officials were *elected*, *appointed*, selected due to their *clan ties*, or chosen through an *indirect election*, as well as whether justice was administered via a *Sharia Court*, the presence of *coalition bombing* and whether respondents *feel safe*.

[45]The sample in contested areas is 43 per cent female, 98.6 per cent Sunni, with 12 per cent full-time employment, an average age of 36, and an average of a primary-level education. Uncontested areas were 42 per cent female, 99.6 per cent Sunni, with 11.4 per cent full-time employment, an average age of 35.3, and also an average of a primary-level education.

[46]Interview 14 with authors, 2017.

[47]Interview 12 with authors, 2016.

[48]This variable was coded using OTI's community profile reports, news sources and interviews. We do not include airstrikes because the regime often launched strikes against areas over which it had no control and did not dispatch troops in an effort to retake territory.

While our alternative measure of contestation is also not randomly assigned, it is reassuring that we find similar results using both measures.[49]

Qualitative Analysis

Our quantitative findings suggest that foreign aid amplifies a civilian opposition institution's governing reputation in uncontested spaces. We explore the mechanisms underlying our theory qualitatively at the local level by conducting comparative case studies in two opposition-controlled communities: Aleppo City in Aleppo Province and Saraqeb in Idlib Province. While both LCs were major recipients of US aid, and arose in the wake of the popular uprising against the Assad regime, they differed based on the coercive context in which they operated. Aleppo City featured high levels of contestation, while Saraqeb remained militarily uncontested during our period of study, enabling its council to translate aid into popular support, whereas its counterpart in Aleppo City could not.[50]

Moreover, we show through detailed interview responses that all three of our mechanisms contributed to this outcome. First, in Aleppo, people frequently noted the need for more military protection and equipment, expressing the view that the LC suffered from an inability to protect itself and those it governed. Secondly, interviewees noted that armed Islamist groups had an advantage over the LC when it came to service provision on account of their capacity to protect the goods they had on offer and to out-compete the LC in servicing some neighborhoods and sectors. Finally, due to the variety of service providers in the city, it was often difficult for residents to ascertain who had delivered particular services. In contrast, in Saraqeb, despite episodic disgruntlement with the LC's politics, people recognized the council for the clear and consistent aid it provided and noted that it was protected by the Saraqeb brigades.

Aleppo City

We elected to study the Aleppo City Council (ACC) for several reasons. First, during our study period, USAID/OTI channeled more than $5.6 million into Aleppo City in the form of equipment, stipends and trainings across twelve sectors, making it the largest US aid beneficiary in Syria at the time. One US official stated that the ACC was 'a high capacity, high performing council that could take money and translate it into tangible activities on the ground'.[51] The ACC thus represented an ideal test case for the translation of aid-enabled service delivery into support for the institution. Moreover, the council emerged as a popular grassroots institution, an unmistakable product of the city's revolutionary politics. Our interviewees, native to neighborhoods that aligned their politics with those of the rebellion, recognized in the ACC an organization embedded in local social networks and attuned to the community's revolutionary aspirations. This recognition furthered its potential to become an authoritative governing body. Aleppo City thus represents a hard case for our theory, since people were arguably predisposed to consider this LC favorably.

However, the ACC sought to govern in a highly contested space, in which no armed group could claim a monopoly over the Aleppine effort to remake Syrian politics through revolution. At the height of the Syrian civil war, Aleppo's cityscape served as a microcosm for the larger

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[49]Our results are robust to limiting the sample to communities in which contestation did not vary during the study period.

[50]As we describe below, in Aleppo City, the LC worked alongside the local FSA affiliate; Al Nusra (the Al Qaeda affiliate) also maintained a military and civilian presence in the city that competed with its moderate counterparts, which exacerbated the intra-rebel contestation. In Saraqeb, the FSA affiliate operated in conjunction with an Islamist faction, Ahrar al-Sham, which joined the Revolutionary Command Council in 2014 (Lund 2014). We note that this kind of opportunistic partnership is quite common in civil wars, as Christia (2012) documents in the context of the civil wars in Afghanistan and Bosnia. In Saraqeb, relations between the FSA and Ahrar al-Sham meant the absence of intra-rebel contestation.

[51]Interview by authors, August 2018.

conflict.[52] An inventory of the armed groups that occupied space within the opposition-held eastern part of Aleppo City between 2014 and 2016 includes every major faction of significance across the country, while the Assad regime's forces controlled the remainder of the provincial capital.[53] Several Syrian interlocutors described their surroundings as being highly contested. In 2014, one resident explained the interaction between the city's multiple, competing armed groups: 'If they are confronted in the street, they will fight. This is the law of the fittest, and the fittest one is the armed one' (2014_2_ALE 001). Another concluded, 'we now live under the rule of weapons, which makes accountability impossible' (2015_1_ALE 002). A third described the insecurity and unpredictability that came from this dispersed coercion: 'There are a lot of militia in the area. People don't feel secure. If someone has a problem with you, he might get the help of any armed group to kidnap or kill you' (2015_1_ALE 007).

This unrelenting armed competition created an environment in which the ACC, despite the aid-enabled services it provided, proved unable to deliver the most critical public good of all: security. Residents frequently noted the importance of military protection and security, and unfavorably compared the non-military aid the ACC received to 'harder' forms of assistance it often required. For example, one interviewee stated, 'We asked…for equipment to pull people from the rubble, but [the donors] said 'no' because it is military equipment. What are we supposed to give those working in rescue…Roses?'[54] Indeed, interviews in both 2014 and 2015 indicated that the ACC was in a precarious position amid the various armed groups operating in the area. While the aid the ACC distributed was helpful, respondents indicated that what it really needed to govern was 'a protection force' (2014_3_ALE 003) because 'arms always have the strongest voice' (2015_1_ALE 007). The ACC proved incapable of reliably leveraging coercive power on its own behalf, let alone on behalf of ordinary civilians, which undermined its ability to portray itself as an authoritative governing body. Respondents commented on the resulting impotence: 'the opposition brigades are the ones who hold the local council's members accountable and might threaten them if they are not satisfied' (2014_2_ALE 005).

Moreover, many interviewees noted that the ACC was cut out of service provision in various areas due to the stiff competition posed by other rebel organizations, some of which jointly maintained armed and civilian administration bodies. For example, one interviewee noted:

> The LC cannot provide bread properly in the neighborhood because it is controlled by the General Services Administration (affiliate of Jabhat Al-Nusra), and [it is] not active in the health sector either. These are the reasons that made me come to the conclusion that people are not satisfied with the LC. Furthermore, the LC cannot interfere in water services because these services are also controlled and provided by the GSA, and the electricity has been cut for three months from the neighborhood (2016_3 ALE).

The interviewee further noted that both the lack of security provided by the ACC and the services delivered by other groups together shaped the perceptions of the council in the community: 'what I'm seeing is that the GSA is trying to control the service sector completely and is marginalizing the ACC from doing its job with the excuse that it is being supported by external sources – "infidels"'. The interviewee elaborated:

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[52]Samar Abboud described Aleppo City as emblematic of the splintered conflict-scape Syria represented more generally: 'The fragmentation of the militarized opposition and its effects can best be seen in the city of Aleppo, where all the major coalitions exist' (Abboud 2016, 95).

[53]In 2012, FSA affiliates had seized control from regime forces, alongside Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, and then Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic State in the coming year. ISIS was forced into retreat by 2014, but the others remained, as did the Kurdish YPG. As Abboud declared, 'relations between these groups [were] rarely cooperative and they [were] mostly engaged in conflict with one another as they attempt[ed] to expand their geographic and military control' (Abboud 2016, 95).

[54]Provincial Council member, interview by authors, 2014.

What controls our neighborhoods are coordination and administrative bodies which are Jabhat Al-Nusra affiliates, or follow JAN's ideology…and they are taking the role of the service authorities…Anything that does not abide to their way of management is banned and must not exist, like when the ACC opened the schools, they forced the schools to segregate the students into male and female beginning of the 2014 academic year. Therefore, you find many simple citizens afraid to communicate with the ACC to avoid any reaction from those Islamists. The ACC cannot work individually in our area, and it doesn't communicate with people at all, because the Islamists are controlling the neighborhood and the military power the LC lacks the Islamists have (2016_3 ALE).

Another respondent, discussing the ACC's limitations, also contrasted it with Jabhat al-Nusra and described the degree to which the latter's coercive capacity enabled it to capture the management of public goods like water and electricity, some of which had been previously supported by foreign aid: 'In the early days, there were lots of thieves and chaos and even the infrastructure was robbed. As the local council lacks military force, it failed to maintain security. So Jabhat al-Nusra took control of the water institution and expelled the thieves there…The same applies for electricity' (2015_1_ALE 007). Another interviewee similarly pointed to differences between the ACC and Nusra's GSA, which operated services in an adjacent neighborhood:

[T]he services provided there are great, the electricity situation is always better than ours, so is the water, and when there are water cuts, they send tanks to fill water for the residents. Additionally, the GSA dug up wells in the streets of that neighborhood, to provide for the residents, and it provides electricity to the water pumps that are connected to those wells. I think it is very positive to see that a military power also has executive powers, it does what it wants and is not afraid of anyone and does not wait for anyone's approval from abroad, which is not the case with the ACC (2016_5 ALE).

The Aleppo City Council's reliance on external assistance may have undercut its reputation vis-a-vis competing service providers, whose independence and autonomy sharply contrasted with a civilian institution that was dependent on foreign support.[55]

Even when the ACC did provide quality services, the violently contested environment in which it operated created opportunities for other groups to take credit for its aid-funded work. According to a USAID/OTI report, the ACC's competitors, such as Jabhat al-Nusra's services administration, 'undermine, and even take credit for, ACC projects'.[56] One interviewee confirmed, 'often the GSA [Nusra's services administration body], through the mosque clerics, takes credit for the ACC's work, twist[s] facts, and say[s] that the GSA…did the work done by the ACC' (OTI 2016, 28).

Ultimately, the ACC could not complement its political programs and service delivery with credible coercive capacity. Instead, it remained only one of several contenders for governing power within the city, unable to protect itself, its assets or its constituents. As one of the respondents quoted above described, 'the ACC in our neighborhood is a weak LC and cannot stand up to the General Services Administration, so how can I believe in the security of my area and country when the ACC that is supposed to take care of us, is afraid of the military [groups] or those that are supported by them?' (2016_3 ALE). Thus the ACC's well-supported capacity to deliver services could not compensate for its precarious position amid acute inter-rebel contestation; as a result, it failed to translate aid-funded service provision into a reputation for authoritative governance.

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[55]This is consistent with other work on the pathological effects of foreign aid (Bates and Donald Lien 1985; Gubser 2002; Lake 2010).

[56]USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). 2016 (24 April). 'Aleppo City Community Profile'. Istanbul, Turkey: USAID/OTI, 32.

Saraqeb

A different story unfolded between 2014 and 2016 in Saraqeb, a revolutionary bastion in Idlib Province. Like the ACC in Aleppo City, the Saraqeb LC was one of the key targets of American support, receiving nearly $2.5 million during the study period from USAID/OTI for emergency response, humanitarian aid and waste management. Like in Aleppo, the council grew organically out of the social solidarities underpinning the town's grassroots struggle against the Assad regime. This case, however, featured non-contestation between armed actors. Thus the influx of American aid amplified the council's capacity to serve its constituents.

The town's dominant armed groups – the Islamist group Ahrar al Sham and local FSA affiliates – did not violently contest one another. Instead, they exercised substantial influence over the membership and decision making of the civilian institution in their midst. These growing interactions between armed groups and council members could be read as the very kind of symbiosis that lends itself to generate order out of anarchy. It is, as North et al. (2009) explains, precisely the exclusionary aspect of resource sharing that incentivizes powerful actors to co-operate rather than compete. Even Saraqeb residents who were critical of military involvement in politics betrayed a clear recognition that the armed groups on the ground translated their peaceful coexistence with one another into the kind of protection that is critical during wartime, which was facilitated by aid (SAR_2014_2_002).

The Saraqeb LC, in the shadow of its armed patrons, moved considerable capital in the service of much-needed public goods, which often came from USAID and other donors. Interviewees described the Saraqeb brigades as focused on the fight against Assad and securing their town, which included protecting the LC's service provision:

> These fighters are the sons of our area. [They] will work to protect people from murders that have spread in the town and the surrounding region recently. In general, there is coordination and cooperation between the Front of Saraqeb Revolutionaries and other brigades with the Local Council (SAR 2015 2 009).

In the absence of contestation, it was clear who was providing goods and services. 'We see their [the LC's] activities here', said one interview respondent (SAR_2014_2_002), while another reported: 'Yes, there's responsiveness, and a lot of it – they support the entire community' (SAR_2014_2_003). A third respondent concurred, pointing to the council's efforts to improve residents' access to electricity after the need was brought to its attention (SAR_2014_2_004). A fourth respondent echoed this point: 'They say, we will offer this project to so-and-so supporting organization, and if they approve it, we will work on it. So they do respond to people and try their best within their capabilities' (SAR_2014_2_006).

Moreover, by 2016, due to the lack of competition with other armed service providers, the LC reaped the reputational benefits of the aid-funded services it provided. One interviewee stated that his positive view was because, 'The LC is currently in charge of providing services and taking care of families of martyrs and other services' (SAR_2016_5). Another stated, 'A good percentage of the people in the city support the LC because of the services it provides, including communications, water, sanitation. Civilians in general support the LC, which contributes to the improvement of the city through the services and projects it implements. When the LC is active and provides more services, the number of its supporters increases' (SAR_2016_4). A third respondent explained, 'What makes for a good local council is the ability to manage the city's services in all sectors, including basic services, education, and regulating prices' (SAR_2016_3). Some interviewees specifically stated that they believed that this was the proper role of the LC, rather than armed groups. One exclaimed: 'Accessing services for civilians through the LC is much better than accessing them through military groups' SAR_2016_2).

The LC's success in disbursing aid enticed armed actors to seek influence over its membership and work. As a result, popular protests erupted during the study period, but by mid-2015,

residents described modes of coexistence, even cooperation, between military and civilian actors in Saraqeb. The regime continued to batter the town with aerial bombardment but, at least on the ground, the absence of violent contestation and militant actors' inclination to support their civilian counterparts created a space in which the work of civilian governance – including much-needed service delivery – could unfold under ordered conditions. In this sense, foreign aid proved catalytic in consolidating a council whose existence, membership and activities served the militant project and thus had the space and capacity to establish itself as an authoritative provider of public goods.

Alternative Explanation

A potential alternative explanation is that perhaps relative weakness rather than contestation can explain our results. Perhaps the LC in Aleppo needed support in hard power rather than economic aid given that it was facing the powerful al Nusra. However, we argue that the LC's relative weakness cannot explain our findings because contestation creates a number of problems that cannot be solved via institutional strength. Our first mechanism involves the importance of hard power in the midst of contestation. Even if an LC is materially strong, hard power is still likely to be in greater demand than non-lethal aid in contested areas as entities vie for control and create insecurity for those living in their midst. In an uncontested area, even a weak council can offer protection because the threats to its constituents are limited. Our second mechanism involves the vulnerability of aid in the face of contestation. Absent contestation, aid would be less vulnerable to sabotage, theft and assault. This remains true regardless of the LC's strength. Our third mechanism involves attribution problems. If there was no contestation, attribution of aid would be relatively clear regardless of the LC's strength, since only one group would be in the business of governing.

In Aleppo, Nusra could not claim the ability to create a secure environment or to address all attribution errors. Any military superiority it possessed may have enabled it to guard its work from destruction more effectively but, in a highly contested environment, it remained vulnerable to asymmetric attacks. Indeed, accounts indicate that Nusra had trouble providing services effectively in this environment: 'A simmering proxy war over service provision emerged that would endure until the end of rebel control in Aleppo….[Nusra] would answer that it was at least trying [to provide services], but was severely constrained by circumstances in the city' (Donker 2020).

We also attempt to account for this variable empirically. We now proxy for an LC's strength using the number of months it was operational, based on the assumption that LCs that existed for a longer period of time did so both due to their initial capacity and the opportunity that time afforded them to gain additional capacity. Our results hold while controlling for this variable, as shown in Table 6.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated that foreign aid is more effective at 'winning hearts and minds' during civil war in uncontested communities. Aid does not generate support for governing institutions in contested communities because insecurity and competition from other actors undermine the ability of these institutions to offer protection to those under their writ, to maintain efficacious and sustainable services, and to receive credit for their work. Using novel data on public perceptions, aid flows and armed contestation during the Syrian civil war, we find qualitative and quantitative evidence to support our claims. Aid distributed by USAID/OTI improved support for local governing councils only in areas lacking intra-opposition contestation.

The importance of control over the use of force – which is well established in the literatures on civil war and state formation – has significant implications for foreign efforts to promote domestic governance. Our findings suggest that aid may improve the credibility of rebel governing

institutions in the absence of contestation, but it may also facilitate the consolidation of politics at odds with the democratic ideals that many Western donors hold dear. Civil institutions supported by their armed counterparts may become more credible governors. At the same time, they may also adopt the kinds of predatory, exclusionary practices associated with limited access orders, thereby undermining other aspects of 'good' governance. These forms of institutional capture have been identified in other contexts and suggest the need for further inquiry into the relationships between aid, civil–military relations and governance outcomes (De Waal 2009; Mukhopadhyay 2014; Reno 1997).

While we tested our theory in the context of rebel governance in Syria, we expect our findings to travel to other cases as well. Foreign governments and international donors have funneled substantial non-lethal assistance to both state and non-state actors in conflict-affected countries. We anticipate that foreign aid injected into highly contested settings will prove ineffective at boosting the popular reputation of governing institutions regardless of whether it is delivered to state governments or insurgents, as the mechanisms we have outlined are unique to neither Syria nor to rebel groups. Weak states – at the national and local levels – face similar difficulties in areas marked by banditry, insurgency and terrorism, all of which undermine their capacity to manage violence. Aid designed to support these states as part of campaigns to subdue rebellion and violent extremism are likely to fail for the same reasons we have laid out with respect to insurgent rule in Syria. States and counter-states face comparable challenges in winning popular allegiance through aid when politics are riven by violence; in fact, states may face additional hurdles when delivering aid in uncontested areas, as described above.

However, our findings also highlight promising directions for future research, as our results are not likely to hold in all settings even as they may be more robust in others. For example, the type and degree of contestation may condition our findings. The Syrian context features especially fragmented territorial control with a large number of competing armed challengers, which likely makes the Syrian case a hard one for our hypothesis. Aid-enabled services may be easier to attribute to a given actor with fewer actors in the space, in which case aid would be more likely to positively affect political attitudes.

The Syrian civil war is also exceptionally violent, which may make our mechanisms especially salient. In less violent spaces, people may be less concerned about their security relative to other public goods and services, and aid-enabled goods and services are less vulnerable to sabotage or destruction. It is also possible that the effects could vary depending on the type of aid and the identity and goals of the donor. For example, aid given as cash rather than equipment could be stolen or diverted more easily, even as it might be welcomed for its fungibility.

Further, US aid was managed remotely, from over the border in Turkey, on account of the high levels of violence that made the security situation impermissive to a sustained Western donor presence on the ground. The remote management of aid made this intervention less coherent than it might otherwise have been (Howe 2016). So, too, did the ever-shifting concerns of the US government with respect to the Syria conflict and its intervention therein, which evolved from a focus on removing the Assad government to a subsequent concern with countering violent extremism. The absence of a more concerted strategy, while not exceptional to US interventions abroad, was particularly striking in the Syrian case,[57] making it, again, a hard case for our hypothesis. If donors were to adopt a more concerted approach to delivering aid, we would expect the positive results of aid to be stronger in uncontested areas. However, a more coherent and consistent donor approach would be unlikely to overcome the problems that stem from contestation that we have highlighted.

Another interesting avenue for future work would be to explore additional efforts to 'win the hearts and minds' of the surrounding population. Both military and civilian entities have roles to play in this endeavor: military forces provide security, and are more likely to win support if they

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[57]On the perils of US 'managed militarization' in Syria, see Lynch (2016).

do not abuse the population, while civilian actors provide other goods and services. While we focus on the civilian side, further research might explore the efficacy of civilian vs. military wings of a rebel movement and gauge the relative importance of each in winning hearts and minds. A related fascinating question would be to explore the degree to which success in winning hearts and minds on the civilian side of a rebel group advances its military cause.

This study also has important policy implications. Foreign interveners continue to channel non-military aid into violently contested settings hoping that it will 'win hearts and minds'. Our results suggest that territorial control should be considered a prerequisite of international aid in civil war. The introduction of non-military assistance into contested areas may actually prolong conflict by keeping individuals, institutions and hope afloat without injecting the kind of hard power required to create credible rule (Kuperman 2008; Lynch 2016). Finally, this research speaks to the tendency of Western donors to put their faith in the power of 'the local' – communities, institutions, and organizations – to transform conflict and build peace.[58] Yet the micro-politics of rebellion involve a number of cleavages that can complicate and undermine even the most locally driven intervention (Kalyvas 2003). We illuminate the need for careful consideration of the various forms of local contestation and cooperation at play, both between rebel groups and between military and civilian elements within a given opposition movement as part of any meaningful analysis about the impact of foreign aid in conflict settings.

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[58]See, for example, Boege et al. (2008); Chandler (2015); Chandler and Richmond (2015).

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