

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

Allison Carnegie, Kimberly Howe, Adam Lichtenheld, and Dipali Mukhopadhyay\*

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\*Allison Carnegie is Associate Professor, Columbia University (Email: [allison.carnegie@columbia.edu](mailto:allison.carnegie@columbia.edu)). Kimberly Howe is Research Director and Assistant Professor, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University. Adam Lichtenheld is Post Doctoral Researcher, Yale University. Dipali Mukhopadhyay is Associate Professor, Columbia University (Email: [dm2917@columbia.edu](mailto:dm2917@columbia.edu)). We thank the participants of a seminar at Columbia University, New York University, Tufts University, and the ISA and IPES Conferences, as well as Page Fortna, Bob Jervis, Jack Snyder, Noah Zucker for helpful comments and conversations. We gratefully acknowledge funding and data from OTI. We received excellent research assistance from Max Marder and Jasper Yang. All remaining errors are our own.

## **Abstract**

A primary objective of foreign aid in conflict zones is to help political actors win citizens' "hearts and minds." Previous studies focus on assistance provided to state actors; however, this paper leverages unique data to examine aid's impact on rebel governance. We argue 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, we show that aid improves opinions of opposition councils in uncontested areas but not in communities experiencing intra-rebel conflict. We explore the underlying mechanisms using in-depth interviews with residents in Aleppo City and Saraqeb. Our study reveals a more nuanced relationship between aid, military competition, and governance than existing literature suggests, with implications for scholars and policymakers.

Word Count: 9,875

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 research on foreign aid in war zones has focused on assistance provided to states, often as part of counterinsurgency operations, and shows mixed results regarding the impact of aid on violence and governance outcomes.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we examine the impact of external assistance aimed at bolstering the authority of *rebel* governors, who have also been a target 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 civilian support for rebel governors critically depends on whether or not military control is contested between different armed actors. In uncontested areas, aid enables rebel governors to demonstrably provide much-needed services to the population, which can indicate international support for rebels in an environment in which the public is often sympathetic to rebels' cause. In contested areas, we argue that aid cannot bolster opinions of the opposition governing institutions in the face of insecurity, instability, and competition for three reasons. First, rebel governors lose credibility if they cannot offer the most valuable public good during war – protection. Second, it is difficult for them to deliver efficacious, sustainable services when they face competition from political and military rivals. Third, the anarchic conditions of active conflict present an extreme attribution challenge for institutions that seek credit for the provision of public goods.

To test our theory, we focus on the Syrian civil war. As a protracted, internationalized struggle between multiple warring parties, Syria exhibits key elements that are common in modern armed conflicts. Moreover, the Syrian context allows us to assess the role of local institutions that arose as part of a popular civilian uprising, evolved into agents of governance, and became targets of humanitarian and development assistance from Western donors. Since 2011, donors have lent non-military aid to members of the Syrian opposition in an effort to bolster "good" rebel governors,

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<sup>1</sup>For a review, see Findley (2018).

providing more than a billion dollars in "politically oriented assistance" to local governing councils in rebel-held communities.<sup>2</sup> 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 U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID/OTI) with civilian perceptions data collected from residents of 27 opposition-held communities. The data includes 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, and test our theory both quantitatively and qualitatively. We also rely on fieldwork that we conducted in Syria and along the Turkey-Syria border between 2013 and 2019.

We find that in communities unmarked by intra-opposition conflict, aid provided by USAID/OTI had a positive effect on popular opinions of local opposition governing councils. However, aid did not boost opinions in communities experiencing contestation – when the presence of one rebel group was challenged by at least one other rebel group.<sup>3</sup> 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 the rebels conditioned the impact of aid on public perceptions of 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 popular attitudes about institutions that aspire to govern during conflict.

This study makes several contributions. First, we examine the multiple dimensions of competition over violence that can mark the thorniest of civil wars and their implications for governance and intervention. In doing so, we advance the burgeoning literature on the relationship

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<sup>2</sup>Brown 2018, 2.

<sup>3</sup>On the concept of contestation, see Tao et al. 2016.

between foreign aid and governing authority. No consensus exists within this body of research over whether legitimacy – defined here as “social acceptance of the right to rule” (Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018) – can be derived from aid-funded service delivery.<sup>4</sup> We argue that the effect is conditional: for non-military aid to have a positive effect on legitimacy, we theorize that it must be provided in uncontested spaces. Moreover, we demonstrate precise mechanisms driving these effects. Second, this paper underscores the oft-observed distinction between civilian and military institutions in the work of insurgent rule, showing 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,<sup>5</sup> existing research is ambivalent on the ability of foreign efforts to win “hearts and minds.” While some studies have revealed a positive relationship between aid and perceived governing legitimacy, many find little evidence of sustained political 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 as to their capacity to provide for their constituents (Lake, 2010; Gubser, 2002).<sup>6</sup> Additionally, they may detect favoritism, inefficiency, or corruption

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<sup>4</sup>We review this literature subsequently.

<sup>5</sup>In 2016 alone, 65% of official development assistance (\$68.2 billion) went to fragile and conflict-affected countries (2018 OECD States of Fragility Report).

<sup>6</sup>Though see Mikulaschek, Pant and Tesfaye (2019) for the argument that expectations of future service provision can increase support.

in the distribution of aid (Ahmed, 2012; Jablonski, 2014; Brass, 2016; Fishstein and Wilder, 2012; Böhnke and Zürcher, 2013).<sup>7</sup> 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).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, many empirical studies have found a negative relationship between aid and legitimacy, particularly in conflict settings (King and Samii, 2014; Beath, Christia and Enikolopov, 2015; Humphreys, de la Sierra and Van der Windt, 2015; Nunn and Qian, 2014; Nixon and Mallett, 2017).<sup>9</sup>

We argue that there may be more room for optimism than this literature suggests when considering the effects of aid on public support for *rebel* governors, for several reasons. To start, 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 boost 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 governmental functions, and the public is unlikely to expect otherwise given the limited extractive capabilities and difficulty of taxing war-affected populations that most insurgencies face. Moreover, 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 (Wickham-Crowley, 1990). Furthermore, 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

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<sup>7</sup>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).

<sup>8</sup>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.

<sup>9</sup>On the limits of the "hearts and minds" approach to counterinsurgency more generally, see Hazelton (2017).

achievement in the form of international recognition (Bob, 2005; Coggins, 2011).<sup>10</sup> Thus, in our context, we expect that aid can have a positive effect on public support.

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 aid is administered. In contested areas, rebel governors have a steep hill to climb in their efforts to use aid to win “hearts and minds,” for three key reasons. First, governing bodies in such areas lack credibility; aid may help governors provide better services but people are foremost concerned about 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. Indeed, 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. 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 state formation literature, too, has long conceived of government as requiring concentrated control over violence. Meanwhile, the counterinsurgent motto of “clear, hold, and build,” suggests the necessity of control, yet in practice, governments and donors tend to employ aid “to help establish control of contested areas” (Sexton, 2016).<sup>11</sup>

A second and related reason we do not expect aid to improve support in contested areas is because contestation undermines the efficacy of aid-enabled services. Since civilian institutions lack military capabilities, they have trouble protecting their services in contested areas; for exam-

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<sup>10</sup>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).

<sup>11</sup>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).

ple, an aid-funded electrical grid may be destroyed or a water tank blown up or contaminated. In contrast, armed groups tend to defend the services they provide, making aid provided by civilian governing bodies look especially unreliable by comparison.<sup>12</sup> In contested areas, aid may also be siphoned off by competing actors. In uncontested spaces, we expect armed actors to avoid disrupting services and even lend their support to those civilian opposition institutions engaged in public goods provision. Many rebel groups perceive a political pay-off in the governance project 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."

Third, attribution challenges that can arise with all forms of foreign aid grow more acute under circumstances of violent contestation, making the effort to establish claims as an authoritative governor especially difficult. The "correct attribution of governance success and failure" is crucial for governing effectiveness to translate into political legitimacy (Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018, 413). When multiple groups share space, people have difficulty accurately attributing 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 U.S.-funded local councils aligned with factions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), diverting reputational benefits away from these councils.<sup>13</sup> Given evidence that civilian 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.<sup>14</sup> In the absence of armed contestation, we expect

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<sup>12</sup>Armed actors often obtain resources for their services and arms from oil revenues, taxation, and foreign backers.

<sup>13</sup>USAID/OTI. 2016 (5 May) "Community Profile: Salquin, Idlib Province." Istanbul, Turkey: USAID/OTI, p. 23; Jaish al Fath Twitter Page, 6 October 2015, <https://twitter.com/JaishalFathEn>

<sup>14</sup>As we discuss subsequently, aid provided by OTI was branded with the insignia of Syrian institutions, rather than the U.S.

dominant armed groups to coalesce around, invest in, and even promote the work of their civilian counterparts in aid-enabled service delivery, precisely because of the presumed political dividends that accrue to effective rebel governors. A coherent approach on the part of military and civilian actors is likely to be read more easily and accurately by civilian observers.

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 not only involves a significant foreign campaign to support the establishment of "good" rebel governance, but also 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; Wood and Kathman, 2015; Pischedda, 2018). Multiple factions therefore wielded violence and, in many cases, fought, lived, and governed in close proximity. This provides an ideal setting in which to test our theory, though we note that Syria is far from unique in this regard. Similar multifaceted, 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, 2018).

## **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. 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 by number since we offered our interviewees confidentiality as a condition for the interviews.

The Syrian war began in 2011 after a violent insurgency erupted in the wake of a popu-

lar 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.<sup>15</sup> These 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, often collaborating with, but operating separately from, local armed groups (Ali, 2015). They chose their leadership through public elections or elite appointments of rebel fighters, tribal leaders, opposition activists, and prominent families. But as the conflict went on, the Syrian opposition fractured and 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).

By 2014, the primary rebel organization, the FSA, had splintered and, as insurgent factions proliferated, radical Islamist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra became more powerful than the ideologically-moderate FSA (Pedersen and Walther, 2018, 16). During the period in which most of the data for this study was collected (2014-2016), rebel groups clashed violently in many communities, wrestling for dominance over the areas in question. In some cases, they established service delivery bodies that worked as alternatives to, or competed with, local civilian governing bodies.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>According to territorial control data collected by the Carter Center, during the time period we analyze, roughly 40% of territory in Syria was held by the regime, around 20% by Syrian rebel groups, around 20% by ISIS, and about 20% by Kurdish forces.

<sup>16</sup>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-Shamayah, 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

Despite the fracturing of the military opposition, western donors – along with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the U.A.E., and Turkey – saw LCs as representative of the moderate opposition and moved to support them through pledges of millions of dollars of humanitarian aid. USAID’s Office of Transitional Initiatives (OTI) was at the forefront of international efforts to generate support for the Syrian opposition through foreign non-military aid. USAID/OTI’s mission is to stabilize conflict-ridden 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."<sup>17</sup> OTI began work in Syria in March 2013, providing \$17.58 million worth of equipment, supplies, and training to Syrian opposition institutions by July 2016. OTI’s efforts facilitated a wide range of services, including education, road repair, rubble removal, emergency response (e.g. the White Helmets), public outreach, humanitarian assistance, civil society/media, water, and council administration (e.g. civil records, land titling, etc).<sup>18</sup> This assistance was meant to boost perceptions of rebel institutions through service provision. One Syrian interlocutor indicated that Western donors understood local councils and their work in service delivery as "legitimizing the political opposition."<sup>19</sup> According to Frances Z. Brown, "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" (Brown, 2018, 6).

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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).

<sup>17</sup>USAID/OTI. <https://www.usaid.gov/political-transition-initiatives/where-we-work>.

<sup>18</sup>On the evolving logic of the U.S. aid effort in Syria, see Brown (2018). While OTI has provided democracy assistance in other contexts, this was not the case in Syria due to the particularly acute humanitarian needs.

<sup>19</sup>Interview 6 with authors, 2016.

However, our fieldwork in Syria suggests that intra-rebel contestation made this support much more difficult. For example, multiple local council members in Northwest Syria cited contestation between armed groups as one of the most significant factors interfering with their work. Clashes between rebel factions and attacks from regime forces 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, cutting civilians off from local authorities.<sup>20</sup> As explained by a council leader in Aleppo Province, "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."<sup>21</sup>

## Quantitative Analysis

To test the effects of aid to local councils 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 OTI. The data was gathered in five collection periods between 2014 and 2016, with 13,657 total surveys from 50-250 individuals in 27 Syrian communities. 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 researchers have previously found inaccessible.<sup>22</sup> This sample covers opposition-controlled areas; OTI did not provide aid to communities in which the national 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 opinions of

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<sup>20</sup>Interviews with LC members in Idlib and Aleppo provinces, February 3-4, 2019.

<sup>21</sup>Interview with LC leader, February 4, 2019.

<sup>22</sup>We have both the original interview transcripts, translated into English from Arabic, and the raw survey data, allowing us to cross-check responses and providing several forms of insights.

local governing bodies. Our survey data contain eight measures of support for LCs, each of which is measured on a scale of one to five, with one signaling the lowest level of support. These measure how much: (1) people support the LC 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; (6) is (not) corrupt; (7) listens to people who visit its offices or contact it; and (8) prioritizes peoples' needs.<sup>23</sup> We average these components to create a composite variable and rescale it from zero to one for ease of interpretation. As a robustness check, we use an additive specification and separately analyze each of the dependent variable's individual components (Table 4).

Our analysis features two key independent variables. The first, *Contestation*, is a dichotomous measure indicating whether there was contestation between different rebel opposition groups 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 Free Syrian Army and affiliates, the Kurdish YPG, and several smaller or more localized factions. We define contestation as areas in which no armed group has unchallenged control. We make our assessment based on reports of clashes between different opposition groups, which indicate violent challenges to a group's claim over an area. 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, whereby if two disagreed, additional research was conducted to verify a given coding decision. We focus on intra-rebel contestation in our baseline specification because the regime is not competing with the local councils for service delivery. However, we also employ an alternative specification in which we use national-level contestation in the robustness checks, described subsequently.

Our second main independent variable is the value of the cumulative foreign aid from OTI, in U.S. dollars, that a community received from the beginning of the sample until the current period.<sup>24</sup> We use the cumulative value because aid has compound effects and thus influences

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<sup>23</sup>Details on the questions asked are provided in the appendix.

<sup>24</sup>Note that the correlation between aid and contestation is only 0.127.

opinions in subsequent periods; for example, a piece of equipment that is provided in one period can still be used in the next period.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, we use cumulative rather than per capita aid in part due to the lack of reliable population data. However, we also run a robustness check using population data from 2016 according to USAID, and find similar results. 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 1, which suggests considerable variation in the location and dollar value of the aid given during this period. Cumulative aid to a particular community ranges from \$0 to \$5,382,857, which is summarized in Table 1.<sup>26</sup> Many Syrian opposition councils lacked 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."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>OTI did not provide cash since it could be looted, so equipment was the primary form of aid. Equipment was given to support service provision, providing either the materials that local councils needed to deliver a service (e.g., a water tank, part of an electricity grid, dump truck for waste management), food baskets or other non-food emergency items, or salaries to support local council employees in providing this assistance.

<sup>26</sup>We also log the cumulative value of aid as well as drop outliers and find similar results.

<sup>27</sup>Interview with LC member, Atareb, Aleppo Province, Feb. 5, 2019.

Figure 1: USAID OTI Assistance by Community, 2013-2016

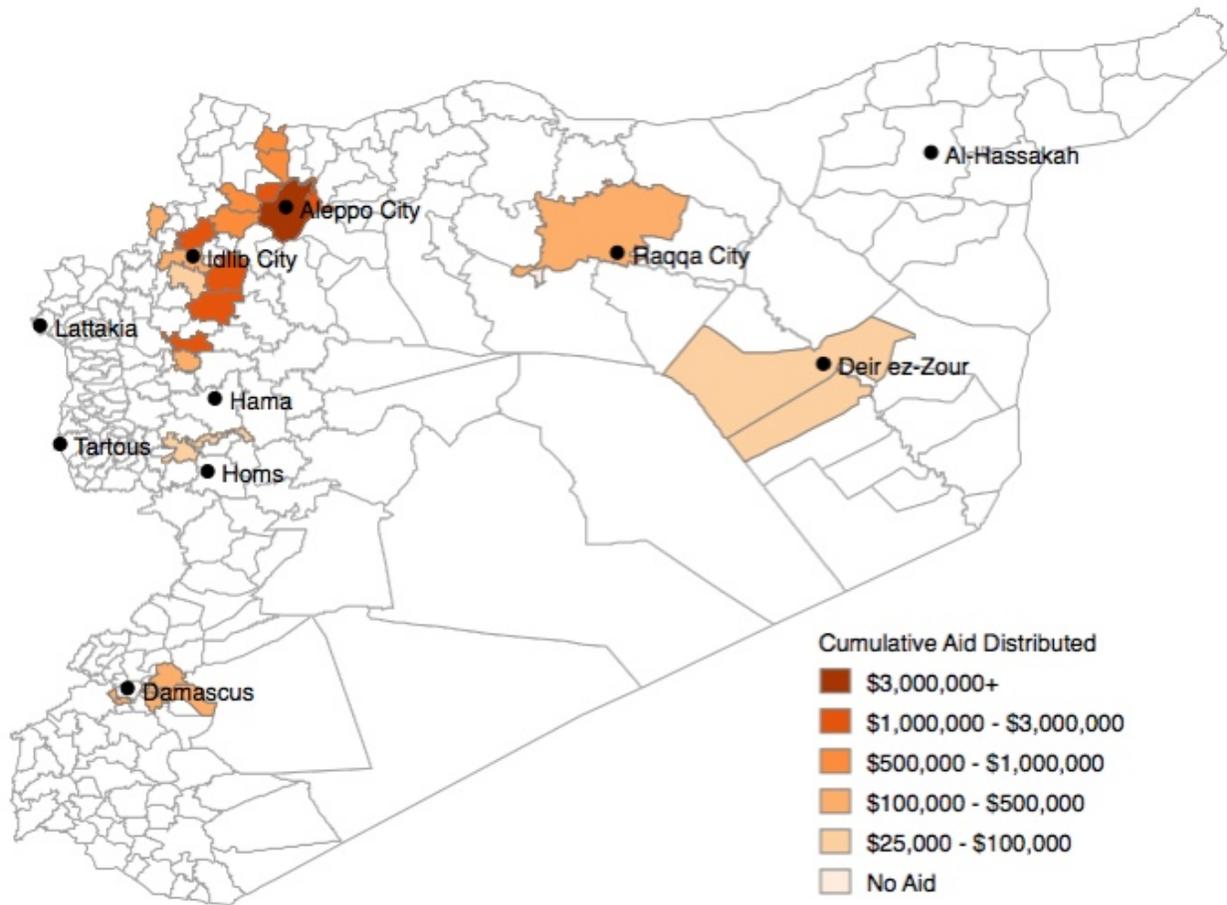


Table 1: USAID OTI Assistance by Community, 2013-2016

Province	Sub-District	Community	Cumulative Aid
Aleppo	Aleppo City	Jebel Saman	\$5,382,857.00
Aleppo	A'zaz	A'zaz	\$561,315.94
Aleppo	Atarib	Atarib	\$789,876.38
Aleppo	Daret Azza	Daret Azza	\$709,229.31
Aleppo	Haritan	Anadan	\$793,568.75
Aleppo	Haritan	Haritan	\$652,330.25
Aleppo	Tall Refaat	Tall Refaat	\$713,426.38
Deir-ez-Zor	Deir-ez-Zor	Deir-ez-Zor City	\$66,306.00
Deir-ez-Zor	Muhasan	Muhasan	\$41,773.58
Homs	Ar-Rastan/Taldu	Al-Houla	\$44,877.00
Hama	Kafr Zeita	Kafr Zeita	\$716,015.56
Hama	Kafr Zeita	Latmana	\$205,639.45
Idlib	Ariha	Ariha	\$88,909.98
Idlib	Idlib	Idlib City	\$215,427.63
Idlib	Maaret Tamsrin	Kafr Nabl	\$1,092,731.00
Idlib	Khan Shaykun	Khan Shaykun	\$1,234,552.50
Idlib	Ma'arrat An Nu'man	Ma'arrat An Nu'man	\$1,007,315.44
Idlib	Salqin	Salqin	\$245,207.83
Idlib	Saraqab	Saraqab	\$1,608,787.63
Ar-Raqqa	Ar-Raqqa	Raqqa City	\$249,268.45
Ar-Raqqa	Taqba	Taqba	None
Rural Damascus	Arbin	Arbin	\$93,888.80
Rural Damascus	Markaz Darayya	Darayya	\$138,424.00
Rural Damascus	Duma	Duma	\$410,378.94
Rural Damascus	Maliha	Deir Elasafir	\$106,883.08
Rural Damascus	Nashabiyeh	Al-Marj	\$305,322.38
Rural Damascus	Kafr Batna	Saqba	\$105,603.46
<b>Total</b>			\$17,579,916.72

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 *Male*, *Employed*, and a *Muslim Sunni Kurd*.<sup>28</sup> We then added the respondent's *Age*, *Income*, and level of

<sup>28</sup>The vast majority of respondents were Muslim Sunni Arab, with Muslim Sunni Kurd representing only about 1% of the sample, and a negligible number of respondents who were Muslim

*Education.* 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 local council’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*.<sup>29</sup>

Table 2: Summary Statistics

	Obs	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
LC Support	11838	3.03	1.18	1.00	5.00
SIG Support	11661	2.65	1.12	1.00	5.00
Male	13605	0.43	0.49	0.00	1.00
Age	13605	35.64	14.63	16.00	98.00
Income (pre-war)	12405	1.40	0.61	1.00	3.00
Sunni Kurd	13605	0.01	0.08	0.00	1.00
Employed	13605	0.12	0.33	0.00	1.00
Education	13605	2.44	0.81	1.00	5.00
Aid	13605	5.02	8.94	0.00	53.83
Local Contestation	13657	0.30	0.46	0.00	1.00
National Contestation	13657	0.38	0.48	0.00	1.00
ISIS Control	13657	0.21	0.40	0.00	1.00
JAN/AAS Control	13657	0.17	0.38	0.00	1.00

Horizontal line separates individual-level variables from community-level variables.

In our baseline model specification, we use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression with community and data collection period fixed effects, as fixed effects are robust to many kinds of endogeneity and misspecification. 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. We display summary statistics in Table 2, and show our results in Table 3.

The addition of aid has a modest but positive effect on this support for local councils

Alawite, Muslim Druze, Christian, or Other.

<sup>29</sup>We are unable to account for the effects of displacement, though we note that previous work has shown higher levels of 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 a different mechanism, we note that we find evidence consistent with our preferred mechanism in our qualitative results.

in uncontested areas, as the coefficient in our baseline specification is 0.015 and is statistically significant. Substantively, going from no aid to 500,000 USD – the mean amount of aid in our sample – boosts support for rebel governance by .075 on a scale from 0 – 1. Thus, we find that aid can produce limited but real change in perceptions of governance. However, in contested areas, the effect of aid becomes insignificant, as shown in Figure 2, in line with our predictions. We also note that baseline levels of support for local councils is large, positive, and significant, indicating that, as we have argued, civilians tend to identify with and support these bodies.

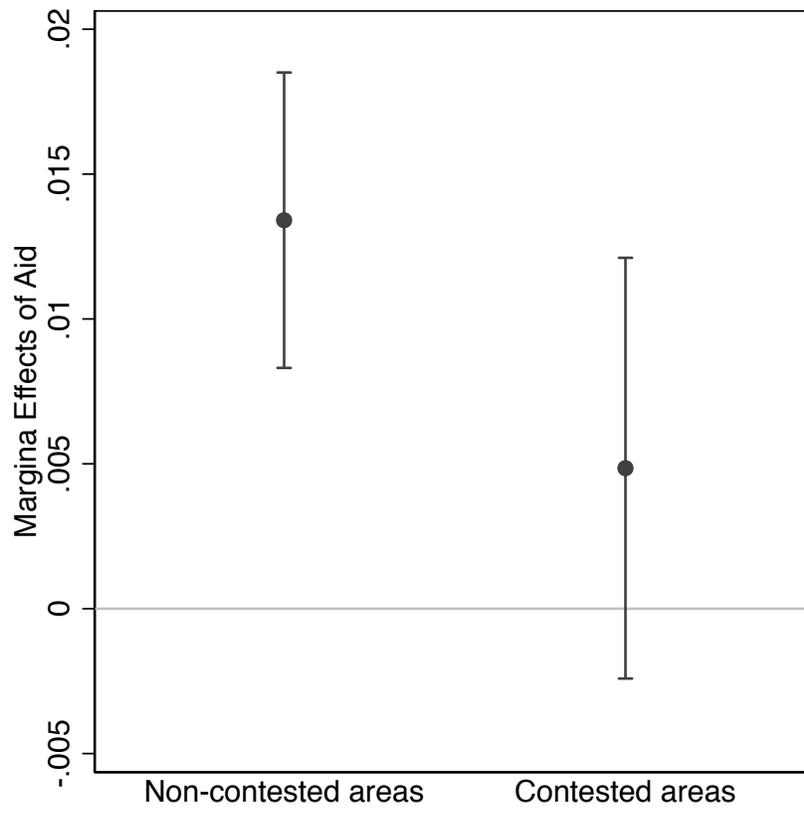
Table 3: OLS Regression Results

	Model 1 (LC Composite)	Model 2 (LC Composite)	Model 3 (LC Composite)	Model 4 (SIG Composite)
Aid	0.013 *** (0.003)	0.013 *** (0.003)	0.129 *** (0.040)	0.046 ** (0.019)
Aid X Contestation	-0.009 ** (0.004)	-0.009 ** (0.004)	-0.112 ** (0.047)	-0.034* (0.017)
Contestation	-0.057 (0.066)	-0.007 (0.082)	-0.049 (0.091)	-0.073 ** (0.030)
ISIS		-0.216* (0.123)	-0.177 *** (0.036)	0.120 (0.100)
JAN/AAS		-0.047 (0.087)	-0.075 (0.054)	0.059 (0.111)
FSA		0.075 (0.095)	0.013 (0.052)	0.172 ** (0.067)
Age		0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)
Education		0.157 *** (0.012)	0.158 *** (0.012)	0.258 *** (0.013)
Male		0.002 (0.019)	0.007 (0.021)	-0.016 (0.020)
Sunni Arab		-0.206 ** (0.086)	-0.216 ** (0.109)	-0.104 (0.073)
Sunni Kurd		-0.012 (0.133)	-0.074 (0.149)	0.293 (0.177)
Constant	2.363 *** (0.054)	2.250 *** (0.137)		1.469 *** (0.095)
Observations	12981	12981	12284	11691

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.010

Figure 2: **Marginal Effects**



## Selection Effects

One potential methodological concern is that aid was not distributed randomly, which could bias our results if, for example, OTI gave aid to the best performing councils. However, our conversations with OTI officials indicated that aid was often allocated to LCs with precarious reputations or in contested regions to try to bolster them and stabilize the region, suggesting that any bias might work against our theory. More generally, accounts of U.S. assistance in Syria suggest the absence of a larger, consistent logic behind OTI's distribution of aid (Brown, 2018, 2-3). Moreover, since civilian bodies emerged, evolved, and were engaged by interveners separately from armed groups, aid was allocated to LCs for reasons distinct from, if not independent of, local military dynamics.<sup>30</sup>

Empirically, while we note that our community fixed effects should help to address concerns that certain kinds of locations obtained more aid than others, we also address these concerns using an instrumental variables approach. In particular, 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). Thus, we expect that communities located closer to the Turkish border received more aid, on account of their proximity to the source, whereas communities further from the border received less aid. We therefore use distance to the border as an instrument for aid flows.

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, especially with respect to local governing institutions given the small geographies under their writ. For this analysis, 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

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<sup>30</sup>The fact that for 17 of the 27 communities contestation does not change during our study period – and that most communities were contested at the beginning of the period, and became uncontested later on – also alleviates concerns that aid was a driver of contestation. See appendix.

problem, as the Donald-Cragg statistic exceeds the critical value.<sup>31</sup> Column 3 in Table 3 shows that our main results are robust to this specification.

## **Alternative Measure of Contestation**

A potential concern with our analysis might be that contestation is not randomly assigned. However, rebel groups often target areas due to well-known historical, geographical, and religious factors, many of which are absorbed by our fixed effects.<sup>32</sup> We also add control variables that capture several potential confounding variables including the way in which leadership within the local councils are chosen and safety concerns.

However, as an additional robustness check, we also employ an alternative measure of contestation. While we have focused our analysis on local contestation (rebel-rebel), our theory should also apply at the national level (government-opposition). 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). USAID and other donors worked with the SIG, the opposition's executive representative that sat in exile in Turkey, to coordinate assistance for local councils 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.”<sup>33</sup> 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 alter-

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<sup>31</sup>The statistic's critical values tests whether the 5% TSLS t-test for the hypothesis that  $\beta = 0$  potentially exceeds 15%.

<sup>32</sup>For example, see Hussein, Rikar. “Why Islamic State Chose Raqqa as its Syrian Capital.” *Extremism Watch* June 14, 2017.

<sup>33</sup>Interview 14 with authors, 2017

native or the legitimate alternative."<sup>34</sup> Our theory therefore expects aid to improve public opinion of the SIG, 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.<sup>35</sup> 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 one to five, with one signaling the lowest level of support. These include measures of how much: (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 zero to one. Note that this variable has fewer components than the local level measure because fewer questions were asked by USAID/OTI about the SIG. The results, shown in Column 4 of Table 3, corroborate our main results by demonstrating that aid only improves support for the SIG in communities uncontested by pro-regime forces. While our alternative measure of contestation is also not randomly assigned, it is reassuring that we find similar results using both measures.

## 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

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<sup>34</sup>Interview 12 with authors, 2016.

<sup>35</sup>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.

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 local councils were major recipients of U.S. 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 uncontested during our period of study, enabling its council to translate aid into popular support – whereas its counterpart in Aleppo City could not.

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 non-military aid and the institutions that delivered it suffered from an inability to protect themselves and those they governed. Second, interviewees noted that armed Islamist groups possessed an advantage over the civilian bodies funded by OTI 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, people recognized the LC for the clear and consistent aid that it provided, and noted that it was protected by the Saraqeb brigades.

## **Aleppo City**

We elect 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 U.S. aid beneficiary in Syria at the time. One U.S. 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."<sup>36</sup> 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 unmis-

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<sup>36</sup>Interview by authors. August 2018.

able product of the city's revolutionary politics. Our interviewees, native to neighborhoods aligned with the rebellion, recognized in the ACC an organization embedded in local social networks and aligned with the community's political ideals, furthering its potential to become an authoritative governing body. Aleppo City thus represents a hard case for our theory, since people were 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 conflict.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> Several Syrian interlocutors described their surroundings as a kind of semi-choreographed anarchy. 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

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<sup>37</sup>Samar Abboud highlighted Aleppo City as emblematic for 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).

<sup>38</sup>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. In Abboud's words, "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).

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 compared the non-military aid the ACC received unfavorably 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?"<sup>39</sup> Indeed, interviews in both 2014 and 2015 indicated that the ACC existed 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, undermining its ability to portray itself as an authoritative governing body. Respondents commented on this 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 armed groups, some of which erected their own 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."<sup>40</sup>

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

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<sup>39</sup>Provincial Council member, interview by authors, 2014.

<sup>40</sup>2016\_3 ALE.

marginalizing the ACC from doing its job with the excuse that it is being supported by external sources – ‘infidels.’” The interviewee elaborated:

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, 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 contrasted the ACC with Nusra’s GSA, which operated services in an adjacent neighborhood: "the 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."<sup>41</sup> Thus the ACC’s reliance on external assis-

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<sup>41</sup>2016\_5 ALE

tance helped diminish support for the council vis-a-vis competing service providers, who were unencumbered by donor regulations and other constraints.<sup>42</sup>

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 the council's aid-funded work. According to a USAID/OTI report, competitors to the ACC, such as Jabhat al-Nusra's services administration, "undermine, and even take credit for, ACC projects."<sup>43</sup> As confirmed by one interviewee, "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."<sup>44</sup>

Ultimately, the ACC could not compliment 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. In the words of one of the above respondents, "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?"<sup>45</sup> Thus, the ACC's well-supported capacity to deliver services could not compensate for the council's precarious position amidst acute inter-rebel contestation; as a result, it failed to translate aid-funded service provision into political support.

## **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 Local Council was one of the key tar-

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<sup>42</sup>This is consistent with other work on the pathological effects of foreign aid (Bates and Donald Lien, 1985; Lake, 2010; Gubser, 2002).

<sup>43</sup>USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). 2016 (24 April). "Aleppo City Community Profile." Istanbul, Turkey: USAID/OTI. p. 32.

<sup>44</sup>OTI 2016, p. 28.

<sup>45</sup>2016\_3 ALE

gets of American support, receiving nearly \$2.5 million during our 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. In this case, however, the influx of American aid not only amplified the council's capacity to serve its constituents; it also facilitated the consolidation of relationships between coercive actors and political elites as they grew increasingly invested in this young revolutionary institution. While this proved a disappointing turn for some of the council's constituents, such consolidation has long been understood as the basis for credible state formation and, in this case, enabled the emergence of an authoritative local council.

The town's dominant armed groups – the Islamist group Ahrar al Sham and local FSA affiliates – did not violently contest one another and, instead, 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 the production of order out of anarchy. It is, as North et al. (2009) explains, precisely the exclusionary aspect of resource-sharing that incentivizes those most powerful to cooperate 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.

The Saraqeb Local Council, 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 the securing of 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, there was no ambiguity over 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."<sup>46</sup> 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."<sup>47</sup> 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."<sup>48</sup> Some interviewees specifically stated that they believed that this was the proper role of the LC, rather than armed groups. In the words of one: "Accessing services for civilians through the LC is much better than accessing them through military groups."<sup>49</sup>

It should be noted that the LC's very success in disbursing aid enticed armed actors to seek influence over its membership and work. As a result, popular protests erupted during our period of study, 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

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<sup>46</sup>SAR\_2016\_5

<sup>47</sup>SAR\_2016\_4

<sup>48</sup>SAR\_2016\_3

<sup>49</sup>SAR\_2016\_2

bombardment but, at least on the ground, the absence of violent contestation and the inclination of militant actors to empower their civilian counterparts created a space wherein 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.

## **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 for our claims. Aid distributed by USAID/OTI improved perceptions of local governing councils only in areas lacking intra-opposition contestation.

We tested our theory with respect to rebel governance in the Syrian case, but we expect our findings to travel to other cases. 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 in boosting the popular reputation of governing institutions regardless of whether it is delivered to state governments or to insurgents, as the mechanisms we have outlined are neither unique to 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 directed in support of 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, though states may face additional hurdles when delivering aid in uncontested areas, as described previously. Our findings also raise promising directions for future research, as effects could vary depending on the type of aid and the identity and goals of the donor.

The import of control over the use of force – well-established in the literatures on civil war and state formation – has significant implications for foreign efforts at domestic governance promotion. 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 held dear by many Western donors. 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).

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.<sup>50</sup> Yet the micro-politics of rebellion involve a number of cleavages that can complicate and undermine even the most locally-driven intervention. We illuminate the need for careful consideration of the various forms of local

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<sup>50</sup>See, for example, Boege et al. (2008); Chandler (2015); Chandler and Richmond (2015).

contestation and cooperation at play, both between rebel groups and between military and civilian elements within a given opposition movement.

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# Aid Contestation and Rebel Rule

## *Supplemental Appendix*

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## **A Robustness Checks**

Table 4: OLS Regression Results

	Model 1 (LCsupport)	Model 2 (LCpostAssad)	Model 3 (LCcommunicates)	Model 4 (LCsupportneeds)	Model 5 (LCbestopnot)	Model 6 (LCnotcorrupt)	Model 7 (LClistens)	Model 8 (LCprioritizes)
Aid	0.008*** (0.003)	0.035** (0.012)	0.018*** (0.003)	0.016*** (0.002)	0.035** (0.012)	0.006 (0.005)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.018 (0.022)
Aid X Contest	-0.009** (0.004)	0.019 (0.020)	-0.010** (0.004)	-0.013*** (0.004)	0.020 (0.020)	-0.006 (0.008)	-0.011*** (0.003)	-0.010 (0.032)
Contested	-0.039 (0.087)	-0.148 (0.115)	-0.011 (0.089)	-0.031 (0.082)	-0.133 (0.123)	-0.021 (0.046)	0.027 (0.076)	-0.093 (0.148)
ISIS Control	-0.156 (0.145)	-0.088 (0.164)	-0.189 (0.171)	-0.085 (0.172)	-0.126 (0.148)	0.003 (0.087)	-0.021 (0.110)	-0.199 (0.154)
JAN Control	-0.096 (0.115)	-0.280** (0.120)	-0.134 (0.146)	0.006 (0.086)	-0.079 (0.134)	-0.071 (0.064)	-0.035 (0.115)	-0.197*** (0.067)
FSA	-0.045 (0.120)	-0.212 (0.129)	0.047 (0.124)	0.100 (0.099)	-0.069 (0.163)	-0.052 (0.076)	0.068 (0.111)	0.000 (.)
Age	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Education	0.185*** (0.017)	0.227*** (0.016)	0.166*** (0.019)	0.188*** (0.017)	0.186*** (0.015)	0.068*** (0.010)	0.177*** (0.016)	0.237*** (0.023)
Male	0.006 (0.026)	-0.004 (0.026)	0.011 (0.026)	0.013 (0.029)	0.027 (0.031)	-0.010 (0.019)	0.012 (0.023)	0.016 (0.032)
Sunni Arab	-0.259* (0.131)	-0.272** (0.097)	-0.088 (0.094)	-0.172 (0.134)	-0.311*** (0.075)	-0.173* (0.087)	-0.252* (0.139)	-0.184 (0.163)
Sunni Kurd	0.013 (0.155)	0.035 (0.152)	0.075 (0.176)	-0.029 (0.166)	-0.006 (0.174)	-0.016 (0.132)	0.039 (0.171)	0.182 (0.144)
Constant	1.863*** (0.220)	2.562*** (0.148)	2.328*** (0.159)	1.835*** (0.191)	2.613*** (0.135)	4.014*** (0.094)	2.459*** (0.162)	2.396*** (0.293)
Observations	11308	10122	11353	11335	10181	8112	11369	7795

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.010

Table 5: OLS and 2SLS Regression Results

	LCcomposite	LCcomposite	LCcomposite	LCcomposite
Aid	0.011 ** (0.004)	0.013 *** (0.003)	0.169 *** (0.057)	0.141 *** (0.053)
Aid X Contestation	-0.009 ** (0.004)	-0.006 (0.004)	-0.108 ** (0.054)	-0.116 ** (0.058)
Contestation	0.044 (0.066)	-0.069 (0.087)	-0.089 (0.136)	-0.062 (0.108)
ISIS	-0.109 (0.102)	0.000 (.)	-0.113 (0.105)	
JAN/AAS	-0.168* (0.091)	-0.113 (0.076)	-0.024 (0.075)	-0.097* (0.059)
FSA	-0.052 (0.084)	-0.011 (0.090)	-0.026 (0.083)	-0.025 (0.068)
Age	0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Education	0.161 *** (0.014)	0.162 *** (0.014)	0.160 *** (0.014)	0.163 *** (0.013)
Male	0.015 (0.021)	0.004 (0.026)	0.025 (0.022)	0.011 (0.027)
Sunni Arab	-0.319 *** (0.072)	-0.250 *** (0.057)	-0.195 (0.138)	-0.261 ** (0.107)
Sunni Kurd	-0.028 (0.136)	-0.125 (0.195)	-0.093 (0.169)	-0.155 (0.177)
Election	-0.362 ** (0.164)		-0.484 ** (0.213)	
Appointed	0.001 (0.147)		0.014 (0.161)	
Clan Ties	-0.395 *** (0.094)		-0.402 *** (0.127)	
Indirect Election	-0.538 *** (0.065)		-0.516 *** (0.187)	
Sharia Court	-0.205 ** (0.089)		-0.167 ** (0.075)	
Coalition Bombing		0.240 ** (0.103)		0.307 ** (0.137)
Feel Safe		0.033* (0.018)		0.010 (0.019)
Constant	2.429 *** (0.127)	2.172 *** (0.166)		
Observations	11251	9389	10704	9339

Standard errors in parentheses. Columns 1 and 2 use OLS estimation while Columns 3 and 4 use 2SLS.

\* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.010

## **B Sampling**

To understand the sampling process, we carefully reviewed documents that detailed US-AID/OTI's methodology and also interviewed OTI officials as well as representatives of the research firm contracted to conduct the study. We were told that enumerators acted as representatives of the research firm and presented the study as an initiative of this firm. Thus, the role of OTI and the USG were not disclosed to study participants. Enumerators came from the communities in which they interviewed. The research team was not involved in the instrument design or the field work, as the study took place well in advance of our access to the data and preceded our relationship to the implementers. A given researcher typically approached every  $n$ th person in central areas, and applied snowball sampling in particularly insecure areas. Random sampling was infeasible due to both security issues and attrition resulting from death and displacement; thus, our data is not likely representative of each community. However, we note that snowball sampling is often recommended in conflict areas, and can approximate a random sample in some cases (Cohen and Arieli, 2011; Heckathorn, 1997).

Enumerators used the following prompt when administering the survey: "Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey, which will take about 30 minutes to complete. My name is [X] and this survey is part of a research effort to help determine what people in Syria believe and want with regard to local government. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the survey at any time, without penalty. Your responses are anonymous and no information that you provide will enable your identification. We appreciate your time."

## **C DV Constituent Parts**

Our dependent variables are based on responses to the following survey prompts. For the SIG, the following question was asked:

*I am going to ask you about your views on the National Coalition. The National Coalition is one of the political opposition representatives, based in Istanbul. To what extent do you agree with the*

*following statements about the National Coalition? (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)*

- *Has the support of people in your area*
- *Should play a role in governing Syria if Assad leaves power*
- *Communicates its activities with people in your area*
- *Supports the needs of people in your area*
- *Is the best option despite its shortcomings*
- *Is corrupt*

For LCs, the following question was asked:

*I am now going to ask you about your Local Council or whatever local municipal body currently administers your area. By Local Council, I am referring to the most recognized and largest local council covering your town/city/area. If your town/city/area is currently administered by some municipal body other than a local council, please respond about that body. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your Local Council or other local municipal body? (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)*

- *Has the support of people in your area*
- *Should play a role in governing Syria if Assad leaves power*
- *Listens to people who visit its offices or contact it*
- *Communicates its activities with people in your area*
- *Supports the needs of people in your area*
- *Is the best option despite its shortcomings*
- *Is corrupt*
- *Prioritizes the needs of my community*

## D Contestation Coding

Table 6: Contestation, by Data Collection Period

Community	Coding	Period
Aleppo City	Contested	1-5
Atarib	Contested	1-5
A'zaz	Contested	1, 5
A'zaz	Uncontested	2-4
Anadan	Contested	1, 4, 5
Anadan	Uncontested	2-3
Daret Azza	Contested	1-5
Haritan	Contested	1, 3-5
Haritan	Uncontested	2
Tall Refaat	Contested	1-2, 5
Tall Refaat	Uncontested	3-4
Deir-ez-Zor City	Contested	1-2
Deir-ez-Zor City	Uncontested	3-5
Muhasan	Contested	1-5
Al-Houla	Contested	1-5
Kafr Zeita	Contested	1-5
Latmana	Contested	1-5
Ariha	Contested	1-5
Idlib City	Contested	1-5
Kafr Nabl	Contested	1-2, 4
Kafr Nabl	Uncontested	3, 5
Khan Shaykun	Contested	1-5
Ma'arrat An Nu'man	Contested	1-3, 5
Ma'arrat An Nu'man	Uncontested	4
Salqin	Contested	1, 5
Salqin	Uncontested	2-4
Saraqab	Contested	1
Saraqab	Uncontested	2-5
Raqqa City	Contested	1
Raqqa City	Uncontested	2-5
Taqba	Uncontested	1-5
Arbin	Contested	1-5
Darayya	Contested	1-5
Duma	Contested	1-5
Deir Elasafir	Contested	1-5
Al-Marj	Contested	1-5
Saqba	Contested	1-5

Note: Contestation was coded based on reports of sustained, active fighting/violent clashes between different groups for control of territory or resources in each community for each data collection period. One-off skirmishes and segmented/fragmented control that was not contested or violently challenged were not counted as contestation.

## **E Interviews and Field Research**

In addition to the survey and interview data collected from the 27 opposition-held communities, this paper draws on original in-depth, semi-structured interviews that the authors conducted in Turkey and in Syria in 2013, 2014, 2016, and 2019. Our sample included American and European officials, Syrian activists, Syrian local council and provincial council members, members of the Syrian Interim Government, journalists, members of Syrian and Western firms and NGOs, and international organization officials. Several of the study participants were interviewed on multiple occasions.

Fieldwork in Syria in 2019 was facilitated by the NGO Mercy Corps. We used snowball sampling to identify key informants (including aid workers, Syrian activists, local council officials, and members of local communities) in Northeast and Northwest Syria. Interviews were conducted in person or through Whatsapp in English and Arabic, with the assistance of several Syrian translators. Interviews were arranged through Mercy Corps and other humanitarian organizations active in Syria. No interviews were arranged through USAID/OTI. Given the risks involved, we conducted all interviews on the condition of anonymity. Ensuring confidentiality was essential as some respondents are wanted by the Syrian government or other armed groups.