# Governing Rebels in the Syrian Civil War: The Effect of Historic State-Society Relations on Rebel Governance

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# Governing Rebels in the Syrian Civil War:
# The Effect of Historic State-Society Relations on Rebel Governance

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the effect of highly institutionalized state-society relations before conflict on governance practices by insurgent groups during the Syrian civil war. Most cases of rebel governance have thus far been observed in areas with historically weak state reach. The case of Syria constitutes an exception as it is a case of rebel governance in a setting that had been highly institutionalized before the war. Through a qualitative comparative case study of three rebel groups' governance in Aleppo, Afrîn and Raqqa, the thesis analyzes the effects of highly institutionalized settings on rebels and civilians. The result of this research shows that historically strong state reach enables armed non-state actors to include pre-existing state institutions in their rebel governance, but that the historic dependency on the Syrian state and its institutions did not equip civilians with the ability to shape insurgents' governance to their interests.

# 1 Introduction

Areas of conflict are generally portrayed as anarchic and devoid of order. It might be true that the old, prewar order is destroyed during civil wars, but rather than having chaos prevail, it is often replaced with alternative ways to organize civilian life. This alternative order is what we call rebel governance. Rebel governance is established by armed non-state actors[1] to organize and administer civilian life under the actors' control.

Over the last decades, rebel governance has usually been observed in areas of conflict where the institutional presence of the state had been weak before the onset of war.[2] The mountainous, rural regions of Colombia constitute such an area where state reach had been weak before the outbreak of conflict in the 1960s and where the rebel group Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia engaged in rebel governance.[3] Similarly, the camps for Palestinian refugees in both Palestine and Lebanon were an area of little state presence where the Islamist insurgent group Hamas established governing institutions.[4]

While it might be true that most cases of rebel governance occur in areas of weak state reach, there are instances when rebels have governed territory that had previously been highly institutionalized. Due to the exceptionality of these cases, it is crucial to understand how the historic relationship between the state, its institutions and its civilians shapes the practice of rebel governance during conflict.

This thesis before you sets out to analyze one of these exceptional cases of rebel governance in a highly institutionalized area and aims to understand how that historic condition effects the way in which rebel groups establish order.

The Syrian civil war (2011- ongoing) has dominated global news coverage and research on civil wars over the last decade for its relevance to international relations as a proxy war, for the large number of competing rebel groups of varying ideological character, for the exceptional case of jihadi warfare of the so-called Islamic State, for the human rights abuses perpetrated, and also for the various ways in which insurgent groups established rebel governance in Syria. Rebel governance in the Syrian civil war constitutes a case of rebel rule in previously highly institutionalized areas, a factor that has thus far been largely ignored by those publishing about the conflict. This thesis is dedicated to shining a light on this specific aspect of governance in the Syrian conflict and beyond.

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[1] In the course of this thesis, these groups are called rebels, insurgents and armed non-state actors interchangeably.

[2] Arjona, 2017; Berman and Laitin, 2008; Breslawski, 2021; Weinstein, 2007; Wickham-Crowley, 1987.

[3] Weinstein, 2007.

[4] Berman, 2009.

This research valuably contributes to the study of rebel governance as it adds to the growing debate on the role prewar state institutions play on how rebels govern.[5] As I have laid out above, scholars have thus far argued that rebel governance usually occurs in areas of low state presence before civil war, but rebels have organized civilian life during conflict in areas where institutional state presence has historically been high, nonetheless. Looking at the exception to the rule adds value to our knowledge of rebel governance in these areas and how these exceptional cases might be distinct from the governance insurgents employ in areas where the incumbent state historically had little reach. Furthermore, to understand how the prewar character of the incumbent's state institutions shapes how and why rebels govern the way they do has implications for future policy on counterinsurgency.

We yet know little about how the prewar state of Syria as a highly institutionalized area shaped the ways insurgent groups governed during the Syrian civil war. Thus, this research aims to answer the following research puzzle:

*How did the highly institutionalized prewar relationship between the Syrian state and society effect insurgent's rebel governance practices in the context of the Syrian civil war (2011-ongoing)?*

Not only the armed non-state actors' actions are informed by the political realities its members experienced before conflict, but civilians are also shaped by how they experienced interactions with the state. Hence, to answer this question, I will examine the assumed influence on historically strong state-society relations on both rebel groups and civilians. I will investigate whether and how insurgent groups in Syria included state institutions in their practices of rebel governance in the areas under their control. Additionally, I will analyze the effect of these historic realities on the Syrian civilian's ability to shape insurgent rule to the individual or common civilian interest. Examining both rebel groups and civilians under rebel rule as active actors will enable me to answer the research question posed here in a meaningful way.

This thesis is structured in six parts. The current introduction offers an overview over the topic of the thesis. After the present introduction, a review of the current research of the field of rebel governance and the role state institutions play in governance by non-state actors will allow me to situate this study in the debate. I will then proceed to introduce two hypotheses covering the aspects of state-rebel cooperation and civilian agency based on existing research on the LTTE

[5] For more on this strand of research see Arjona, 2017; Berman and Laitin, 2008; Wickham-Crowley, 1987.

in Sri Lanka and how the historically strong institutional presence of the Sri Lankan state shaped rebel governance during its civil war. The design and methodology section in chapter 4 explains how this thesis analyzes three cases of rebel governance in Syria between 2012 and 2018 with the method of process tracing. The analysis part of this thesis constitutes of a chapter dedicated to the three case analyses and of a subsequent chapter that provides a comparison of the findings. In the final section, I draw concluding remarks on the findings of my research, the limitations of the work and potential future studies.

# 2 Literature Review

Students of war and conflict have long assumed that in the absence of a state and its organizational powers, anarchy and chaos would prevail. Still, when observing violent conflicts over time and space where the influence of the state is largely diminished, we often find that alternative forms of order are established by non-state actors. These non-state actors are oftentimes the forces that lead to the withdrawal of the state in the first place – rebel groups. When these rebels establish order during conflict, we can talk about rebel governance.

Recently, a new field of inquiry under the same name has emerged. Its aim is to further our understanding of how, when and under what conditions rebels take up governance functions such as the establishment of order in civilian-combatant relationships, the setting up of a judicial system, or the provision of public services and goods.[6]

Broadly, rebel governance can be understood as "a set of actions insurgents engage in to regulate the social, political, and economic life of non-combatants during war".[7] It is an attempt to shape the conduct of civilians in an area under rebel control by installing institutions through which authority is created in order to directly challenge the host state and its legitimacy.[8]

Most rebel governance literature concerns itself with elaborate systems of governance established by rebels,[9] but rebel governance can also be of little influence into civilian life such as the mere extraction of taxes and provision of minimal forms of security.[10] Furthermore, rebel influence over a territory does not have to be total, in fact studies have shown that in many cases rebels govern as an alternative or side by side with state administration.[11] Because rebel governance can involve many degrees of engagement with the civilian population, the reasons why rebels pursue rebel governance are numerous.

The literature on reasons for rebels to govern is broadly divided into those who concern themselves with the motivations behind establishing governance and those concentrating on the conditions for rebel governance.

[6] Arjona, 2017; Loyle et. al, 2021.
[7] Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly, 2015. page 3.
[8] Loyle et. al, 2021; Wickham-Crowley, 1987; Wood and Dupont, 2006.
[9] Magouirk, 2008; Stokke, 2006; Tilly, 1985.
[10] Ahmad et al, 2022; Arjona, 2017; Tull, 2003.
[11] Puleedevan, 2005; Stokke, 2006.

## 2.1 Rebel's interests in governance

Literature in the field of rebel governance has aimed to explain the motivations for rebels to engage in the governance of civilians. There are numerous insights we can evoke from this scholarship. Building on the works of insurgency-leaders such as Mao Tse Tung and Ernesto (Che) Guevara, scholars have described rebel's needs to build governance structures for the purpose of extracting funding, recruitment, and information from the local population under their control.[12]

The literature on organized crime has made similar arguments, linking rebel's needs for resources directly to the formation of nation-states in Western Europe by claiming that only through the establishment of institutions were rebels able to tax civilians.[13] Hence, the institutionalization of security by organized criminals lead to state building. These theories of organized criminals and their state-building efforts make valuable academic contributions to the origin of Western nation states. Nonetheless, this paper argues along the lines of Mampilly (2011) and Kasfir (2015) that rebel governance should be understood as a distinct category of analysis and not a step towards nation-state building, because it fundamentally differs from organized crime since rebel goals are inherently of political nature.[14]

Another insight we can derive from the literature of rebel governance is the implication of long- and short-term objectives of rebel groups on their interest to govern. It distinguishes rebel's interests mainly in two categories: those with secessionist interests and those concerned with overthrowing the central government of the state they operate in. The existing scholarship on rebel governance is in agreement that insurgents rule when their long-term interests in independence and secessionism are more relevant than short-term military or material gains. Consequently, if the long-term interest of insurgents is of secessionist nature, performing governance functions and civil services inclusively to those that live under rebel rule can increase rebels' legitimacy among the civilian population as well as the international community.[15]

Lastly, we can learn that the need for legitimacy is a decisive motivation for rebels to pursue governance. As established above, secessionist rebel groups require legitimacy of both the local civilians and the international community to reach their political goals. Rebels have relied on the performance of governance functions to establish themselves as a legitimate authority. The

[12] Arjona, 2017; Breslawski, 2021; Guevara, 1969; Mao, 1961.
[13] Olson, 1993; Tilly, 1985.
[14] Kasfir, 2015; Mampilly, 2011.
[15] Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly, 2015; Kasfir, 2015; Stewart, 2018; Tull, 2003; Weinstein, 2007.

combatant group can produce a social contract between itself and the civilian population over time through a combination of coercion and consent and thus gain legitimacy.[16]

The preceding paragraphs have introduced some, though hardly all, reasons why it would be in a rebel group's interest to engage in rebel governance ranging from its material needs and its long-term goals, to its aim for legitimacy. These are crucial insights the scholarship on rebel governance has won and they function as the basis for this research.

## 2.2 Conditions for rebel governance

While a lot has been written about the violence rebels impose on civilians, the recent emergence of rebel governance as a research field tries to find answers to which conditions are necessary for insurgents govern. Studies in the field of rebel governance have found various pre-conditions that determine whether a rebel group engages in governance, starting with territorial control.

Most scholars of rebel governance share the understanding that rebels' ability to govern is closely linked to their control over territory. Only when territory can be brought under rebels' control can they commence their governance activities.[17] Territorial control must be understood as fluid in a sense that neither does control of the incumbent state have to be completely diminished for rebels to engage in governance, nor do rebels need to be able to fully control every inch of territory in which they govern.[18] Recently, Loyle et. al (2021) have called for a separation of rebel governance from the question of territorial control, claiming that rebels can wield control over civilians without necessarily holding the territory these civilians live in.[19] While I would be interested to read future research on these instances of rebel governance, as long as these ideas remain argumentative rather than empirically supported, I will follow the mainstream argument that some territorial control is necessary for rebels to govern and make that a secondary scope condition.

A second precondition for insurgents to engage in governance is their organizational capacity to govern. The ability to believably uphold a social contract with the population depends largely on the rebel group's organizational capacity. Rebel groups whose organizational structure is centralized under an authoritarian leader are more likely to govern civilians, as order within the

[16] Kasfir, 2004; Tull, 2003.
[17] Arjona, 2017; Kasfir, 2004 & 2015; Stokke, 2006; Weinstein, 2007.
[18] Malthaner and Malešević, 2022.
[19] Loyle et. al, 2021.

rebel organization is a pre-requisite to establishing order with and among the civilian population.[20]

As demonstrated above, territorial control and coherence within the rebel group can account as decisive preconditions for the occurrence of rebel.

## 2.3 Governance and the role of local institutions

While the ability to organize as a rebel group plays an important role in establishing rebel governance, a variety of scholars have concerned themselves with the influence pre-war organization of civilian life has on rebel's ability to govern.[21] It is commonly understood that rebel governance mainly occurs in areas where historic state presence has been weak and insurgent groups function as an alternate provider of security and services to the state.

Timothy Wickham-Crowley (1987) argues that rebel governance occurs when the social contract between the incumbent state and the population under its rule had been violated during or before the conflict.[22] These violations of the social contract from the state party arise when the population is not protected from foreign armies or looting bandits, when exorbitantly high taxes are imposed or when the state's security forces are indiscriminately employed towards the population.[23]

Eli Berman and David Laitin (2008) further indicate that rebel groups become the legitimate authority in the area they control by pointing to the weaknesses in the state's performance and establishing themselves as a more efficient governing actor.[24] While Ana Arjona (2017) agrees that weak incumbent government reach and weak local institutions in general capacitate rebel governance, she approaches the argument from a different perspective. The author argues that existing local institutions in areas of rebel control enable the non-combatant population to organize and resist rebel rule.[25] Only when local institutions are weak does rebel governance that is more extensive than mere tax-collection and security occur.

While scholars have made convincing arguments that rebel governance primarily occurs when prewar institutional presence is weak, there are however cases of extensive rebel governance in highly institutionalized prewar settings. This thesis concerns itself with one such case, the case

[20] Arjona, 2017; Mampilly, 2011; Weinstein, 2007.
[21] Arjona, 2017; Barter, 2015; Berman and Laitin, 2008; Breslawski, 2021; Förster, 2015; Loyle et al, 2021.
[22] Wickham-Crowley, 1987.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Berman and Laitin, 2008.
[25] Arjona, 2016.

of rebel governance in the Syrian civil war. Thus, it is crucial to take a closer look at what this thesis understands as highly institutionalized prewar settings.

## 2.4 High institutionalization: A concept

The study of rebel governance in areas of strong prewar state institutions warrants a clear definition of what is understood by the state, its institutions and how their presence is determined. The understanding of the state that this thesis works with is based on Max Weber's (1968) work. Weber defines the state as a collection of institutions and their personnel that organizes its political power from the political center outwards to the state's periphery.[26]

Weber's understanding of the state describes what the state is by defining what it looks like – its institutions. Understanding the state as a set of institutions is only rational considering the questions this paper deals with. The aim of this paper is to explore variations in rebel governance in areas that were highly institutionalized in prewar times. Because institutions are the central aspect of the state that this paper concerns itself with, it is helpful to understand the state as institutional first and foremost.

The use of the Weberian understanding of the state as a collection of institutions demands reflections on the meaning of institutions that is adapted in this essay. While much has been written about institutions in general and state institutions specifically, a discussion on the scholarly debate on institutions would go beyond the limited scope of this paper. Therefore, one must make do with discussing the narrow definition of institutions this paper adopts. This definition is derived from Jose Alonso and Carlos Garcimartín (2013) that define an institution as "an intertemporary contract that shapes behaviors".[27]

An institution is thus a tool to shape societal conduct in a way that is aligned with the institutional goals. Supported by Migdal's (1994) historic comparison of ruling authorities in his work on "the state in society", one can assume that state authorities' goal is to dominate society within its territory.[28] Given Migdal's findings, one can conclude that the efficacy of a state is derived from the state's presence in society through its institutions. Whereas the efficacy of the state is not of concern for this work, the state´s institutional presence in areas of rebel governance is and some scholarly debate suggests that state power and high institutionalized areas can be understood as interchangeable.

[26] Weber, 1968.
[27] Alonso and Garcimartín, 2013. Page 8.
[28] Migdal, 1994.

Michael Mann (1984) has defined state power to be twofold. *Despotic power* relates to a state's immediate coercive capacities granting absolute power to a ruler over the subjects they can immediately reach.[29] *Infrastructural power* on the other hand represents the state's capability to permeate society thoroughly through institutions and thereby to be able to enforce political objectives.[30] *Infrastructural power* can implement political decisions more sustainably, reaching wide parts of society through institutions while being confined by moral as well as organizational limits.[31]

Mann's theory on *infrastructural power* is the logical extension of both Weber's and Migdal's ideas that the state is a set of institutions that function to direct civil behavior towards the state authority's interests and that the authority's ability to do so depends largely on their capacity to reach society through the state's institutions. *Infrastructural power* is directly relevant to the research question this paper concerns itself with as it equates the state's power with high institutionalized areas.

Highly institutionalized areas in times before the outbreak of conflict are hence areas in which the *infrastructural power* of the state, displayed through the state's institutions, is high. These theoretical underpinnings on institutions and the *infrastructural power* of the state function as the basis of how this essay understands the concept of highly institutionalized settings.

## 2.5 Situating this thesis in the debate

Rebel governance as a research field has made important contributions to our understanding of civil wars that range from rebel's interests in rebel governance, the pre-requisites for governance to occur, to variations within rebel governance. Variations in rebel governance regarding the influence of prewar state institutions, though, is yet severely under researched.

The case of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka is one prominent example often cited as a case of rebel governance in a highly institutionalized prewar setting. Still, findings concerning the LTTE have not yet been applied to other cases of rebel governance in highly institutionalized settings. This thesis aims to contribute to the existing research on rebel governance by addressing this existent research gap, drawing closely on what has been observed in the case of the LTTE.

The case study of this thesis focusses on rebel governance in the case of the Syrian civil war. The Syrian civil war has evoked much scholarly attention recently and rebel governance in the

[29] Lucas, 1998; Mann, 1984.
[30] Mann, 1984; Mann, 1986.
[31] Leftwich and Sen, 2010.

case of the Kurdish PYD and the so-called Islamic State have been studied extensively. But scholars have thus far ignored the possible effects of Syria as a highly institutionalized state on the practices of rebel governance. Hence, this thesis tries to further or understanding of rebel governance by reflecting on an aspect of the Syrian civil war not yet extensively studied and on the variations that occurr in highly institutionalized prewar settings on rebel governance. This thesis focusses on two factors in particular, state-rebel cooperation and civilian agency in highly institutionalized areas.

# 3 Hypotheses

This thesis works with the assumption that rebel activity, including rebel governance, is never an ahistorical occurrence. How rebels relate to the incumbent state, to civilians within their territory and how these rebels govern is always informed by the prewar realities all parties experienced. Therefore, this thesis argues that if the incumbent state's institutional presence was high in areas of rebel control before the war, this relates to how rebel groups interact with these state institutions and the civilian population. In the following paragraphs I will introduce the observable implications derived from this argument.

## 3.1 State-Insurgent cooperation

In the previous chapter of this paper, I have tried to emphasize the dynamic nature of rebel governance. Neither is complete territorial control over a demarcated area necessary for rebel governance to occur, nor need rebel governance express itself identically across the whole area that a rebel group controls.[32] Because, as is common in conflict situations, rebel governance is rarely static, it is important to move away from a dichotomous perception of control in which either rebel groups or the incumbent state are the sole producer of order in the perspective areas under their control.[33] While it is true that rebel governance can be theoretically understood as a direct challenge to state authority and control, state and non-state actors are frequently both in conflict and cooperation with each other.

There have been multiple examples of rebel governance in which rebels share governance responsibilities with state institutions or co-opt these institutions rather than establish their own. Rebel groups have included state institutions to varying degrees in their provision of public services. These variations range from co-optation to collusion. Co-optation is understood here as an appropriation of existing state institutions for the rebel's purposes, whereas cooperation has a less hierarchical dynamic, and decisions are shared by both state and insurgent groups although possibly with different degrees of leverage.[34] Collusion is the willing cooperation towards a shared goal that benefits both groups equally. "State-insurgent cooperation" is the umbrella term deployed in this paper to cover the entire range of possible inclusions of state institutions into rebel governance.

[32] Arjona, 2017; Mampilly and Stewart, 2021; van Baalen and Tepstra, 2022.
[33] Donker, 2022; Staniland, 2012.
[34] Dueñes, 2014

The so-called Islamic State[35] is a jihadist insurgent group known for its extensive governance practices. While Daesh went on to dominate most aspects of civilian affairs in the territories it controlled, it did co-opt state institutions as well. Teachers in Mosul for example continued their work on the state's paycheck in the first year of IS control of the city.[36] Furthermore, Daesh uses administrative institutions and their personnel for its taxation efforts by simply replacing the senior management and they do so to preserve the capabilities existent in these institutions.[37] The so-called Islamic State represents an example where state-insurgent cooperation is limited to a mere useful co-optation of existing state structures and services to fulfil the insurgent's interests.

Cooperation between states and non-state groups is not limited to co-optation of certain state institutions or services on part of rebel groups though. The academic literature provides examples of cooperation of states and non-state actors. Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili (2016) describes instances of active cooperation between the Afghan state and local informal authorities to provide order and services in areas in which the state has very limited presence.[38] Malthaner and Malešević's (2022) findings lead to a similar conclusion, albeit with regards to active cooperation between states and armed non-state actors. The authors argue that insurgent groups and the incumbent state, while in combat with each other in regular intervals, often cooperate and even collude in locations neglected by formal authorities.[39]

The examples of cooperation between rebel groups and state institutions laid out above have shown that varying forms of cooperation in rebel governance have taken place at different times and for various rebel groups in the past. For co-optation of and cooperation with state institutions by insurgent groups to take place requires state institutions to be present and to some degree functional in the areas under rebel control. Therefore, the author of this paper argues that a strong prewar presence of the state facilitates cooperation between state and non-state actors in that area. Literature on rebel governance in the case of the LTTE in Sri Lanka supports this argument.

Before the outbreak of conflict in Sri Lanka in 1983, the Sri Lankan state was a highly institutionalized welfare state throughout its territory, especially invested in providing healthcare and education everywhere in the country.[40] With the beginning of war, the insurgent

[35] In this paper, IS and Daesh, the abbreviation of IS' Arabic name, are used interchangeably.
[36] Revkin, 2021.
[37] Revkin, 2018.
[38] Brick Murtazashvili, 2016.
[39] Malthaner and Malešević, 2022.
[40] Björkman, 1985.

group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), known for their extensive rebel governance endeavors, have co-opted numerous state institutions in their attempt to establish rebel governance.[41] The case of the LTTE in Sri Lanka constitutes not only a rare example of rebel governance in an area where state presence has historically been high, the large extend of co-optation of state institutions by the LTTE supports the argument made above that state-insurgent cooperation occurs especially in highly institutionalized settings.

Syria is another case of a highly institutionalized state before the outbreak of civil war in which not only attempts at rebel governance have occurred but also state-insurgent cooperation by numerous rebel groups in various regions of Syria over the course of the civil war since 2011.[42] Even though the interventionist policy of the Ba'ath regime had namely declined over the first decade of the 21st century, the government of al-Assad and his predecessors have focused on establishing a strong state presence not only through security institutions but also through the nationwide provision of healthcare and education services. Hence, this paper examines the impact the high level of institutionalization of Syria has on rebel's tendency to cooperate with state institutions.

Thus, the observable implication regarding cooperation between insurgent groups and state institutions reads as follows:

Hypothesis A: *Highly institutionalized prewar settings enable rebel groups to include existing state institutions in the group's rebel governance.*

## 3.2 Civilian agency in rebel governance

This paper rests on the assumption that civil wars, is influenced by the prewar realities in the areas under rebel control. The degree to which state institutions were present in civil life before the outbreak of conflict affects the way in which insurgents build rebel governance, whether they invent new institutions with which to organize civilian affairs or whether they co-opt existing ones to their ends.[43] The civilians living in an area under rebel rule act equally informed by their historic engagement with the state in the way they approach rebel groups who govern. Civilian expectations on the insurgent's rule can therefore not be understood without analyzing the historical context of state-society relations in prewar times.

[41] Klem and Maunaguru, 2018; Terpstra and Frerks, 2018; von Baalen and Tersptra, 2022.
[42] Donker, 2022; Martínez and Eng, 2018.
[43] Klem and Maunaguru, 2018.

In his monograph *Rebel Rulers,* Zachariah Mampilly (2011) invokes the importance of understanding the historical relationship of the state with its citizens. The author writes that states should be thought of in two categories – rentier states and merchant states. Rentier states, he argues, are dependent on outside funding rather than the cooperation of its' citizens and therefore produce an apolitical citizenry that does not know how to make demands from those that govern them, reasoning that rebels controlling citizens of rentier states would not establish rebel governance as they do not have to.[44] Merchant states on the other hand follow the logic of Charles Tilly's (1985) state-making theory and therefore are dependent on tax collection in return for services to the population, producing a politically aware citizenry. If insurgents were to encounter such a population, it is likely that these citizens would demand the provision of public services from the rebel group in return for compliance to their rule.[45] The author's argument is, therefore, that highly institutionalized prewar state presence creates a demanding, politically aware population and thereby necessitates governance from insurgents. Mampilly implies that the pre-existing political realities shape civilian's capacity for agency and, by extension, how rebels govern.[46]

Similarly, Ana Arjona (2017) argues in her monograph *Rebelocracy. Social Order in the Colombian Civil War* that the quality of local institutions directly influences civilians' willingness to be governed by an alternative actor, the rebel group, and their ability to resist this actor.[47] Local institutions serve as a focal point for collective resistance to rebel rule. The stronger the local institutions, the better can they serve to organize the civilian population on a common issue. Hence, Ana Arjona argues that wide penetration of the state into civilian life before the outbreak of conflict leads to an active civil society able to formulate demands on rebel's rule. Both Mampilly and Arjona contend that a strong institutional presence of the state creates a society capable to exert its civilian agency, whether as individuals or as a group, thus is able to influence how rebels govern.

The depth of institutional state presence ante-bellum in a rebel-controlled area shapes how order is produced during civil war because of the civilians that inhabit that area.[48] Civilian's historical relationship with the state impacts their expectations on how to be governed. This paper argues, supported by Mampilly and Marta Furlan (2020), that highly institutionalized prewar settings

[44] Mampilly, 2011.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Here, agency is understood as the "ability and will" of a person or persons to act effectively and have an impact on the world. For more see Clarke, 2003; Smith, 1999; van Baalen, 2020
[47] Arjona, 2017.
[48] Mampilly and Stewart, 2021.

create a citizenry that asks to be included in governance as active participants and that is expectant to be provided similar services as it had been before the conflict.[49]

Once again, the Sri Lankan LTTE functions as an example supporting this observable implication. As I have laid out above, due to the highly institutionalized Sri Lankan welfare state before the war, the non-combatant population was used to extensive provisions of services by the state. This produced "high expectations of governance provisions" if the LTTE wanted to appease the local population.[50] To gain popular support, the LTTE not only attempted to provide extensive services themselves but cooperated with state institutions to provide education and welfare services all the while using symbolism to perform state-building abilities for internal and international audiences.[51]

Syria is a similar case where state presence had been historically high, and the Ba'ath regime had provided extensive public goods in place of political compliance.[52] Following the reflections on civilian agency in highly institutionalized areas above, the assumption manifests that high state presence in Syria creates a demanding populace that has the capacity to shape rebel governance efforts by rebel groups during civil war.

Hence, the observable implication regarding civilian action capacities in rebel governance reads as follows:

Hypothesis B: *Highly institutionalized prewar settings create a demanding non-combatant population that can directly influence how rebels govern.*

[49] Furlan, 2020; Mampilly, 2011.
[50] Van Baalen and Terpstra, 2022. Page 2.
[51] Terpstra and Frerks, 2018.
[52] Martínez and Eng, 2018.

# 4 Method and research design

This paper examines variation in rebel governance in highly institutionalized areas. It aims at understanding how highly institutionalized prewar settings influence rebel's governance practices especially regarding civilian agency and state-rebel cooperation. To find valuable inferences to my research question I have conducted a qualitative comparative analysis of cases of rebel governance in highly institutionalized settings in Syria following a multi-method approach that comprises of process-tracing and a comparative case study.

In this chapter, I first introduce the selected case study of the Syrian cities of Aleppo, Afrîn and Raqqa and why they make adequate cases. Then, I present the methods used for data collection and analysis. The final part of this chapter discusses the challenges and limitations of this research approach.

The independent variable of this research is a highly institutionalized area before civil war in which rebel governance has occurred during conflict. The case of the civil war in Syria (2011 – ongoing), and Syrian cities specifically can be understood as one such example of a highly institutionalized setting. The Assad family's firm grip on power in Syria over many decades produced a strong security presence throughout the country.[53] Furthermore, before the outbreak of conflict, welfare provision had largely been understood as an expression of state presence and strength. Not only education, but the allocation of subsidized bread and free primary healthcare was regarded a high priority by Syrian rulers.[54] Subsequently, a strong state presence was established through the institutions necessary to distribute the above-mentioned services throughout the country.[55] Syria can therefore be exemplary for a state that enjoyed high levels of institutionalization throughout its territory, making it a suitable case to explore for the aim of this paper.

The factionalized Syrian civil war has become notorious for the large number of armed non-state actors vying for access to resources and territorial control. After considerate research into numerous rebel groups involved in governance in the Syrian civil war, I have selected to analyze three rebel groups in three Syrian cities in detail, the jihadist Ahrar al-Sham, the Kurdish PYD and the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra.[56]

The first case to analyze is the rebel governance endeavor of Ahrar al-Sham in the Syrian city of Raqqa. Ahrar al-Sham, together with the Nusra Front, captured Raqqa in March 2013. Raqqa

[53] Droz-Vincent, 2019.
[54] Martínez and Eng, 2018.
[55] Sen, Al-Faisal and AlSaleh, 2012.
[56] The PYD is the Partiya Yakîtiya Demokrat; Jabhat al Nusra is abbreviated as JN; Ahrar al-Sham is abbreviated as AaS; all names are used interchangeably.

as a municipality makes a case worth studying as it was the first major regional capital that rebel groups were able to take full control over in the Syrian civil war. The capture of Raqqa does not only hold importance in terms of progress of battle, but also since it marks the first time a city with extensive functioning state institutions was taken over.[57] As the regional capital of one of 14 Syrian governorates with largely intact state infrastructure at the time of its capture, Raqqa constitutes an example of a highly institutionalized area at the onset of war as well as at the time of seizure.

The second case is the PYD's establishment of Democratic Federalism in Afrîn. Afrîn in Northern Syria was formally liberated by Kurdish forces in September of 2012. The Syrian regime, confronted with violent uprisings throughout the country, gradually withdrew its army from the dominantly Kurdish areas of Northeastern Syria to limit the fronts it was forced to militarily engage with and left the Kurdish forces as easily defeatable placeholders.[58] In September of 2012, the PYD and its armed wing the YPG[59] cleared the city of Afrîn of all remaining state presence.

The city of Afrîn was, unlike Raqqa, not a regional capital under the Syrian state, but part of the Aleppo governorate. Nonetheless, it held importance for the Assad regime in two distinct aspects: Since Syria's economy is highly state-controlled and private economic freedom limited, Afrîn constituted a crucial city to the Syrian state economy since it was a major producer of olive products and wheat.[60] Furthermore, because of its vicinity to the Turkish border, Afrîn held further importance for the Syrian state and enjoyed high levels of institutional state presence before the war.[61] Therefore, even though the city is not a regional capital, the PYD's control over Afrîn represents a case of rebel governance in a highly institutionalized prewar setting, making it an adequate second case for comparison.

The third case analyzed here is the Nusra Front in Aleppo. The Nusra Front, in an alliance with several other rebel groups, sieged large parts of Aleppo city in July 2012.[62] Aleppo is the regional capital of the eponymous governorate and the center of industry and commerce in Syria.[63] Due to Aleppo's prominence as the economic center of Syria and its institutional importance as a regional capital, Aleppo as a case fulfills the scope condition of a highly institutionalized prewar setting effortlessly.

[57] Donker, 2022.
[58] Cemgil and Hoffmann, 2016.
[59] And its female only YPJ.
[60] Al-Hilu, 2019; globalEDGE.msu.edu, 2022.
[61] Jongerden, 2019.
[62] Berti, 2020.
[63] Awad, 2022.

I have chosen these three cases for several reasons. First, I follow King, Keohane and Verba (1994) who have pleaded to select cases on the scope condition rather than the dependent variable to avoid selection bias and faulty inferences.[64] Since the scope condition for this paper constitutes a high prewar state presence through state institutions, it is important to select the first non-state actors to hold territory after the state retreats. As mentioned above, the Syrian civil war is known for its abundance of actors, state and non-state, and large parts of Syrian territory have been controlled by multiple rebel groups over the course of the war. With the continuation of conflict, more of the Assad state´s infrastructure, including its institutions, is damaged and the scope condition of prewar highly institutionalized settings becomes less clear to define. The PYD, Aas and JN were the first armed non-state actors to hold and govern the respective cities in this case study and were selected on that criterion.

Second, because the temporal sensitivity regarding the scope condition of highly institutionalized prewar settings, a cross-sectional rather than longitudinal analysis was conducted. The insurgent groups came to control territory during roughly the same period, their sieges of the cities being only nine months apart. Furthermore, all groups have lost control over the cities since. Ahrar al-Sham has conceded its control of Raqqa to the Islamic State in early 2014.[65] The PYD lost control over Afrîn in the Battle of Afrîn to Turkey and allied forces united under "Operation Olive Branch" in March of 2018.[66] Jabhat al-Nusra was defeated in Aleppo in December 2016 by Syrian regime forces after a prolonged battle.[67]

Third, the groups selected vary fundamentally in their ideology. My research question does not focus on the ideology of rebel groups but on their practices of governance, so choosing rebel groups that vary in their ideology helps me avoid the pitfall of coming to inferences that relate to the ideology of a group rather than the group's governance of an area were institutional state presence has formerly been high.[68] All group's ideologies warrant them to govern, though while Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra strive to establish an Islamic state, the PYD works to implement a form of democratic self-administration called Democratic Confederalism.

The research on the effect of highly institutionalized prewar settings on rebel governance in Syria is divided into a two-part analysis. First, the selected cases were individually analyzed

[64] King, Keohane and Verba, 1994.
[65] Donker, 2022.
[66] Al-Hilu, 2019.
[67] Sim, 2016.
[68] The importance of ideology for rebel groups is contested. See Collier and Hoeffler (2004) for example for their thoughts on greed versus grievances. Nonetheless, scholars have observed that ideology impacts how rebels govern, see e.g. Kalyvas (2006).

using the qualitative method of process-tracing and subsequently a comparison of both cases was conducted.

Process-tracing, as understood in this paper, is the systematic analysis of "diagnostic evidence" that is closely related to the research question at hand.[69] The method aims at tracing causal mechanisms that produce a certain outcome through the "interaction of a number of parts".[70] Process-tracing is used when the goal of a research is investigating the causal relationship between structural causes and implied effects.[71] The puzzle motivating this research follows the goal of disclosing a potential causal relationship between highly institutionalized prewar settings to practices of rebel governance. Hence, process tracing can find answers to the posed research question as it is useful for revealing and evaluating causal claims through the tracing of causal mechanisms in a single case design.[72] The research draws on a variety of sources ranging from secondary literature, news articles, policy papers and official statements provided by the rebel groups and relevant other actors.

In a second step of analysis, the findings are organized using a comparative case study. The systematic comparison of the three cases allows for finding implications regarding the validity of the hypothesis introduced.[73] The comparison of cases of rebel governance within Syria, a place which enjoyed a strong institutional state presence before the outbreak of war, helps classify the inferences derived from the three case studies in a meaningful way and can thereby help validify or negate the hypothesis of chapter 3.

Due to the currency of the conflict in Syria and the lack of freedom of speech within the country, this research was forced to largely rely on secondary sources of other scholars and news outlets based in the diaspora rather than attaining primary data of people on the ground in Syria. This has the potential to limit the forthcoming findings since the weak security situation in Syria made it impossible for me to conduct interviews with representatives of rebel groups or the Assad regime as they are unable to openly discuss their conduct in Syria due to security concerns. First-hand accounts given by representatives of the Assad regime and members of the rebel groups would have enriched the value of this research considerably. Nonetheless, scholars concerned with rebel governance of the respective insurgent groups with access to more time and resources have managed to access the accounts of a wide array of actors within Syria and in their places of refuge abroad. Through these accounts, it was made possible for me

[69] Collier, 2011. Page 823.
[70] Beach and Pedersen, 2019. Page 1.
[71] George and Bennett, 2005.
[72] Collier, 2011.
[73] Kaarbo, 1999.

to draw conclusions about the effect of highly institutionalized prewar settings on rebel governance. The use of process-tracing to analyze all kinds of literature is an advantageous method given the nature of the underlying research puzzle that concerns itself with the effects of historic state-society relations on current practices of governance. Thus, analyzing this data through process-tracing made this a fruitful addition to the literature, even given the limitations this approach entails.

The single case studies of these three cases with the method of process-racing, combined with a comparative analysis of the cases, allowed me to reach valid inferences on the influence of highly institutionalized prewar settings on the practice of rebel governance in Syria.

# 5 Case Studies

## 5.1 PYD in Afrîn

### 5.1.1 General outline

The PYD[74], affiliate of the PKK in Turkey, was founded in 2003 and has operated underground before the Syrian uprisings in 2011. It established People's Local Committees to organize civilian affairs in Afrîn even before it established a military wing, the YPG.[75] Afrîn was liberated from the withdrawing Syrian state forces in July 2012 and declared a canton of the autonomous region of Rojava in January 2014 by the PYD, although their governance project commenced immediately after the withdrawal of state forces.[76]

When the PYD took control over Afrîn and the northern Syrian regions of Kobanî and Cizîre, it established complex structures of local governance built on the theory of Democratic Confederalism that focusses on self-governance and values feminism, environmentalism, multiculturalism, and self-determination.[77]

PYD's rebel governance comprised of local councils ranging from the commune to canton level that are tasked with providing justice, basic public services including healthcare, education, electricity, water, and subsidized wheat.[78] Additionally, all-female parallel institutions and a male-female co-presidency are established on all levels of decision-making to ensure women's participation in governance.[79] Security is provided inside Afrîn by the internal security force, the *Asayish*, and against external threats by the YPG/YPJ.

As demonstrated above, the rebel governance ideals of the PYD are elaborate in theory. In practice however, the provision of services to the civilian population only suffices civilians in the aspect of security in an otherwise volatile security situation.[80] Furthermore, though the concept underlying PYD governance relies on self-determination, participation in decision-making is limited and discriminatory against non-Kurdish civilians.[81]

[74] I will refer to the rebel group as the PYD because even though the PYD does not hold military power, it is the party in control of governance and military decision-making.
[75] And later the all-female military wing the YPJ. For more see Crisis Group, 2013.
[76] Phillips, 2016.
[77] Corradi, 2022.
[78] Boyraz, 2021; Cemgli and Hoffmann, 2016.
[79] Gilbert, 2021.
[80] Netjes and van Veen, 2021.
[81] Özçelik, 2020.

### 5.1.2 Hypothesis A: Cooperation

The PYD's leadership was familiar with the ideas of Democratic Confederalism and had started to clandestinely organize committees devoted to the organization of civilian affairs in Afrîn even before the war. Therefore, it had both the ideological underpinnings as well as an organizational structure for governance at its disposal at the beginning of its rule.[82] These structures were converted into an elaborate system of governance through communes throughout the city as well as higher administrative institutions.[83] Thus, the preparations before the PYD took control of Afrîn facilitated the establishment of independent rebel institutions.

This thesis asks the question whether highly institutionalized prewar settings translate to cooperation with state institutions during civil war. Even though the PYD was not able to maintain all newly established institutions alone and relied on non-PYD professionals to run the administration, it functioned largely independent from the incumbent state's institutions.[84]

The numerous councils and committees created in Afrîn support the argument that co-optation of state institutions has been absent during PYD rule. The PYD has not taken over prominent state institutions. There are, however, aspects of governance in which the Syrian state offered services the PYD was unable to provide. The state provided official documents to civilians living in PYD-controlled Afrîn, that the PYD could not provide due to a lack of formal recognition from the international community. By doing so the state could demonstrate civilian's dependency on its services and could maintain administrational relevance to those under PYD rule.[85]

Hypothesis A has argued that given a highly institutionalized area, rebels would be enabled to use state institutions for their rebel governance. In the case of Afrîn, the PYD does allow the Syrian state to provide some essential services to civilians, but Kheder Khaddour (2015) has argued that this limited provision of services by the state serves the Syrian regime more than it does the PYD. Hence, the PYD in Afrîn constitutes a case were only limited co-existence between state and rebel group as providers of the administration exists since the ideology of Democratic Confederalism does not allow for the co-option of existing institutions.

### 5.1.3 Hypothesis B: Civilian Agency

The social contract of the autonomous administrations, that constitute the PYD's rebel governance, specifically claims to involve the civilian population in governance. Should the

[82] Crisis Group, 2013; Özçelik, 2020..
[83] Aldarwish, 2016.
[84] Boyraz, 2021; Kajjo, 2020.
[85] Khaddour, 2015.

governance project of the PYD therefore automatically be understood as confirmatory of hypothesis B? Scholars have demonstrated that PYD dominance in bodies of decision-making does not reflect these values of self-governance. Thus, I argue that the social contract alone does not confirm Hypothesis B. Did the civilian population of Northern Syria develop tools to effectively influence rebel governance given its historical experience of living in a highly institutionalized area ante-bellum?

Scholars have noted several instances of protests and civilian resistance to aspects of PYD rule. First, parents have protested the education provided by the PYD and accused it of teaching PYD propaganda. These protests were subsequently broken up and protesters were arrested by security forces.[86] Second, forced conscriptions into the YPG/YPJ have occurred throughout PYD-controlled areas including Afrîn prompting protests at YPG-offices and large numbers of civilians to leave the city for Turkey or Iraq.[87] Forces conscriptions in Afrîn, including of minors, has continued until its fall to Turkey in 2018 although the PYD-YPG has repeatedly professed willingness to end these practices.[88]

Refugees flocking to Afrîn in search for security have changed the city's demography from majority Kurdish to being home to many ethnicities.[89] The social contract of the administration aims to include all ethnicities in the decision-making process but evidently the inclusion of non-Kurdish civilians has been limited on all levels of the administration.[90] Still, the change in demography in the area prompted the PYD to repeatedly change the name of its governance project from the Kurdish *Rojava* to the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES) and non-Kurdish militias are consequently included in its security forces.[91]

The PYD has reacted to criticisms regarding forced conscriptions and has nominally taken steps to include non-Kurdish populations into its rule. But rather than civilians being able to make demands on governance, evidence suggests that these changes were primarily made to appease international pressure. Thus, the case of Afrîn cannot confirm that civilian's capabilities to influence rebel governance link to highly institutionalized prewar settings.

[86] Palik and Tank, 2022.
[87] Al-Jabassini, 2017.
[88] Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 2020.
[89] Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, 2016.
[90] Özçelik, 2020.
[91] Netjes and van Veen, 2021; Van Wilgenburg and Fumerton, 2022.

## 5.2 Raqqa

### 5.2.1 General outline

The formation of Ahrar al-Sham can be traced back to April 2011 when the Assad regime's decided to release incarcerated Islamists for the purpose of dividing the opposition.[92] These formed the originally Salafi-Jihadist rebel group that gradually dissociated from jihadism over the course of the Syrian civil war and has since become beknown for its pragmatism and alliance-making.[93] Nonetheless, Ahrar al-Sham described itself as a "comprehensive Islamic reform movement" who's aim it is to militarily, politically and socially transform Syrian society and to overthrow the Assad regime.[94] The declared goal of AaS therefore entails the transformation towards jihadi-Salafi interpretations of an Islamic state through rebel governance.

After its siege on Raqqa in March 2013, AaS was around 10 000 to 20 000 fighters strong, the majority of which were local Islamists rather than global jihadists.[95] These local jihadists have never controlled the regional capital of Raqqa entirely. The rebel group has ruled in an uneasy alliance with Jabhat al-Nusra and later in co-existence with IS until it was finally forced out of the city in January 2014.[96]

In Raqqa, Ahrar al-Sham governed through the aspects of security and enforcement, the provision of services, and through education. To demonstrate the comprehensiveness of Ahrar al-Sham's Islamic movement, the group established Dawah centers for Islamic education, a court practicing Sharia law and used schools to teach its preferred curriculum.[97]

The rebel governance practices of Ahrar al-Sham in Raqqa are noteworthy in the sense that the group undertakes attempts to provide services to civilians such as security, social services, and infrastructural maintenance without extracting taxes from the population.[98]

### 5.2.2 Hypothesis A: Cooperation

Raqqa was the first municipal capital fully under insurgent control in the Syrian civil war and thus constitutes a case of rebel governance where infrastructure and state institutions were

[92] Drevon, 2020; Steinberg, 2016.
[93] Almustafa, 2021; Drevon, 2020.
[94] Ahrar al-Sham, 2015.
[95] Drevon, 2021.
[96] Donker, 2022.
[97] Soliman, 2017.
[98] Plapinger, 2014.

hardly damaged and public servants were still performing their services at the time of siege. Hypothesis A argues that these pre-conditions of highly institutionalized settings to rebel governance would enable co-optation of or cooperation with state institutions through the insurgents.

In Raqqa, Ahrar al-Sham has in fact co-opted institutions for their governance project in two principal ways. First, AaS has physically conveyed its dominance by taking over public buildings, critical infrastructure, and the central bank of Raqqa which it used as a headquarter after expropriating its funds.[99] Second, AaS has co-opted state services such as the provision of healthcare and education to win civilian's hearts and minds by seemingly providing these services.[100] Thus, during the span of Ahrar al-Sham's governance of Raqqa the group adopted co-optation of state institutions as a way to impart control and effectiveness of its rule.

AaS has not only used state institutions to organize civilian affairs in the city of Raqqa between March 2013 and January 2014, but it has also created entirely new institutions in order to convey that the group is in fact a "comprehensive Islamic reform movement" devoted to strict interpretations of Islam. It has established Dawah centers to educate citizens on the individual and communal duties of Islam to influence civilian's behavior.[101] Ahrar al-Sham has further attempted to establish a Sharia court that provided justice based on its interpretation of Islamic Law, a cornerstone of Ahrar al-Sham's declared goals for all of Syria.[102]

AaS has created independent institutions to propagate their ideology of Salafism in Raqqa. But it has additionally co-opted pre-existing state institutions to facilitate its governance endeavor and to bolster its authority vis-a-vie the civilian population.

### 5.2.3 Hypothesis B: Civilian Agency

In addition to the effect of highly institutionalized prewar settings on state-rebel relations, this thesis investigates the influence of pre-existing highly institutionalized settings on civilian's ability to shape rebel governance according to its demands. Were the inhabitants of Raqqa able to effectively affect Ahrar al-Sham's governance?

The 'liberation' of Raqqa by Ahrar al-Sham and others saw the formation of numerous formal civil society organizations out of previously informal networks.[103] These civil society organizations formed local administration councils (LACs) that were tasked with ensuring the

[99] Donker, 2019.
[100] Donker, 2022.
[101] Donker, 2022; Khatijun, 1986.
[102] Almustafa, 2021.
[103] Khalaf, 2015.

continuation of service provision to a population dependent on it.[104] This emergence of LACs is not specific to the city of Raqqa. The first local council emerged in Zabadani in early 2011 some 50 km north of Damascus and it has since served as an example for other LACs.[105] Nonetheless, Rana Khalaf et. al (2014) note that Raqqa´s LACs were more progressive in their values and better equipped than LACs elsewhere.[106] The LACs aimed at being the new governing body of Raqqa, but their lack of funding forced them to approach AaS for assistance.[107] Consequently, AaS created the Services Administration Commission (SAC) to coordinate its indirect governance through the LACs under the protection of its armed forces and was thereby able to sell the governance successes of the LACs as their own.[108]

As far as Ahrar al-Sham's governance is concerned, my sources suggest that the LACs in Raqqa were numerous, active and engaged and they were employed for the governance project of AaS. Still, literature on Ahrar al-Sham's governance is inconclusive on the question whether the LACs functioned solely as an executive organ of AaS interests or whether the civil society organizations that emerged due to the inter-dependent state-society relations before the war shaped governance in the civilian's interest.

Nonetheless, Ahrar al-Sham did adopt to civilian demands in one aspect of governance. During its rule, AaS gradually dissociated from jihadi Salafism in both rhetoric and administration. Thus, the active civil society in Raqqa prevented AaS to practically implement its ideological project through governance.[109]

## 5.3 Aleppo

### 5.3.1 General outline

Jabhat al-Nusra[110] was founded in January 2012 as the Syrian representation of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).[111] The expansion of ISI into Syria starting in early 2013 and resulted in al-Nusra's official split from the group and its pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda, an affiliation JN had long been suspected of since its leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani had previously fought for al-Qaeda in Iraq.[112] JN has professed the goal of establishing an Islamic state in Syria and beyond,

[104] Donker, 2019; Khaddour, 2015.
[105] Khalaf, 2015.
[106] Khalaf et. al, 2014.
[107] Hassan, 2017.
[108] Bamber and Svensson, 2022.
[109] Almustafa, 2021; Drevon, 2020.
[110] Officially Jabhat an-Nusra li-Ahl ash-Sham.
[111] Steinberg, 2014.
[112] Donker, 2019.

although Jerome Drevon (2017) has noted that national priorities of the group have always trumped al-Qaeda's transnational agenda.[113]

The group is known for its stringent internal organization stemming from experiences of its cadres in Jihadist warfare elsewhere. The knowledge of the well-organized ranks of JN elicited Syrian combatants of other groups to join its ranks and this increase in local combatants lead to a nationalization of the formerly international body of fighters. [114]

In allegiance with several other Islamist rebel groups, JN sieged parts of Aleppo in late 2012 and has ruled these areas first as the dominant party in an alliance of rebel groups through the Sharia Committee, which was dedicated to providing justice and social services to the civilians under its rule, and later through its independent General Directorate of Services.[115] Jabhat al-Nusra has been involved in governance in Aleppo since its siege of the city in late 2012, but has noticeably intensified the services provided to the civilian population after Daesh's brief rule in Aleppo.[116]

### 5.3.2 Hypothesis A: Cooperation

Jabhat al-Nusra has engaged in governance in parts of Aleppo from 2012 to 2016. Before the Syrian civil war, the city was the economic and administrative center of Northern Syria.[117] Did JN co-opt the pre-existing state institutions for its rebel governance project? The answer is ambivalent.

On the one hand, Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies created the main governance body of their rule, the Sharia Committee, in November 2012. This committee organized civilian affairs by providing justice and its execution, the maintenance of services and the distribution of relief.[118] Jabhat al-Nusra used the committee for the purpose of enforcing Islamic order.[119] In summer 2014, Jabhat al-Nusra withdrew from the Sharia Committee and created a rival institution, the General Directorate of Services, to avoid having to compromise its Salafi jihadi understanding of governance that had been necessary to maintain its allegiance with more moderate Islamic groups.[120] The main bodies of governance, both in JN's allegiance with other groups and in its

[113] Cafarella, 2014; Drevon, 2017.
[114] Pierret, 2017.
[115] Tønnessen, 2018; Tveit, 2019.
[116] Tveit, 2019.
[117] Donker, 2022.
[118] Khaddour, 2015; Lippincott, 2016.
[119] Lippincott, 2016.
[120] Cafarella, 2014.

endeavor to govern independently, have been established separately of the existing state institutions.

On the other hand, JN took over buildings that formerly hosted state institutions to create Dawah centers that conveyed JN's interpretation of Islam to the wider public.[121] But rather than co-opting existing state institutions, the establishment of Dawah centers constitute a physical presence in places where the Syrian state had been present before rather than a co-opting its institutions.

The organization of critical infrastructure, however, has been an aspect of governance that occurred in a cooperation between Jabhat al-Nusra and the incumbent Syrian state. The delivery and maintenance of water infrastructure to the population in rebel-held and state-controlled areas of Aleppo was maintained through both state and rebel efforts.[122]

Jabhat al-Nusra's governance of parts of Aleppo relied mainly on the institutions the group created independently. Nonetheless, cooperation on the distribution of water and the physical presence of JN's governance offices in state buildings has occurred, making this a case of limited co-optation of pre-existing highly institutionalized settings.

### 5.3.3 Hypothesis B: Agency

Hypothesis B argues that prewar highly institutionalized settings create civilian abilities to influence rebel governance in their interest. This is to be tested on the population of Aleppo's response to Jabhat al-Nusra's rule. The literature on civilian capabilities to shape JN's governance does not suggest that highly institutionalized Aleppo created an effectively demanding population for several reasons.

First, Teije Donker (2019) writes that civilian demands for services such as the distribution of flour to bakeries and trash removal first prompted JN to engage in governance.[123] While JN first started its governance project in response to civilian demands, that is not to suggest that the group did not plan to govern regardless of civilian demands. Rebel governance would be cohesive with their objective to establish an Islamic state.

Second, the collapse of state presence in the 'liberated' areas of Aleppo caused civilians to organize in street initiatives and establish the Local Council of Aleppo, a civilian-led body to govern the city in absence of the state.[124] The Local Council stood in competition with the Sharia Committee, but it was deemed comparatively ineffective by the population as it could

[121] Tveit, 2019.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Donker, 2022.
[124] Adraoui, 2019; Donker, 2019; Khaddour, 2015.

neither reliably provide social services nor security to civilians.[125] Thus, the non-combatant population of JN-controlled Aleppo organized with the potential to either self-govern or effectively ask the governing rebel groups for services in return for their loyalty, but the severe lack of resources of the Local Council and other initiatives suggest an inability to effectively influence rebel governance.

Third, even though scholars have shown that civilians from Aleppo had preferred the governance provided by Jabhat al-Nusra to that of the Local council for its ability to provide services on an ongoing basis, Rana Khalaf (2015) notes that civilians tried to oppose JN-rule in form of protests and civil resistance.[126] Still, those that attempted resistance were not able to formulate alternative demands that could challenge or change Jabhat al-Nusra's rebel governance.[127]

Civilians in JN-controlled Aleppo attempted to shape the group's rebel governance by establishing rival organizations and by protesting Jabhat al-Nusra's rule, but hypothesis B can still not be confirmed in the case of Jabhat al-Nusra in Aleppo for the displayed reasons.

[125] Khalaf, 2015; Tveit, 2019.
[126] Adraoui, 2019; Cafarella, 2014; Khalaf, 2015.
[127] Tveit, 2019.

# 6 Analysis

| Hypotheses | PYD in Afrîn | Ahrar al-Sham in Raqqa | Jabhat al-Nusra in Aleppo |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Hypothesis A** | • **Limited co-existence** -> state continues to provide some administrative services to civilians | • **Co-optation** of healthcare and educational institutions<br>• Physical presence through tanking over public buildings and critical infrastructure for newly established institutions | • Physical presence through taking over public buildings for newly established institutions<br>• **Cooperation** with the Syrian state on the maintenance and distribution of water |
| **Hypothesis B** | • **No evidence** of civilian ability to influence JN's rebel governance<br>• Attempts of shaping rebel governance through protests | • **Effective resistance** against Salafi ideology in governance -> AaS politicized into a more secular movement<br>• LACs function as a tool through which AaS governs -> no evidence for the LACs' ability to influence governance | • **No evidence** of civilian ability to influence JN's rebel governance<br>• Attempts of shaping rebel governance through LACs and protests |

Table: Overview over the findings.

## 6.1 Hypothesis A: Cooperation

The analysis of the case studies reveals that Hypothesis A can be confirmed because as demonstrated in chapter 5, Ahrar al-Sham, the Nusra Front and the PYD all engaged in some form of relation with pre-existing state institutions in their rebel governance. Ahrar al-Sham employed the most extensive use of existing state institutions in its governance of Raqqa from March 2013 to January 2014. The intact state institutions facilitated AaS' governance as the group co-opted hospitals and schools and thus gained legitimacy by taking credit for the services these institutions provided.

Jabhat al-Nusra's relationship with existing state institutions in Aleppo does not present as extensive as that of AaS in Raqqa. The group primarily made use of the annexed state buildings to set up Dawah centers, an activity observed with AaS as well. The mutual dependence on water by all actors vying for control in Aleppo, lead the group to cooperate with the Syrian state in the maintenance of Bab al-Nayrab water station and the distribution of water to the citizens of Aleppo.

The PYD's governance project leans on the transformative and state-critical ideas of Democratic Confederalism. Thus, co-optation of state institutions does not align with the ideology behind the PYD's governance endeavor in Afrîn. Still, scholars have observed a limited form of continuation of state institutions to function inside PYD-controlled Afrîn to

provide non-combatants with important administrative services that the PYD is not able to perform. Therefore, a co-existence between state and PYD-run institutions existed in Afrîn.
Chapter 3 has described the variation that can and does exist in rebel's use of pre-existing state institutions for their governance purposes. The case studies of Raqqa, Aleppo and Afrîn reflect that variety. All groups have included state institutions in their governance to differing extends ranging from co-existence to cooperation. Nevertheless, a common feature within these varieties is the fact that the pre-existing state institutions either possessed the necessary expertise, were more effective or simply more overtly present than any governance project that the insurgent groups could establish in the respective areas under their control. This leads me to conclude that highly institutionalized prewar settings indeed enable armed non-state actors to include pre-existing state institutions in their rebel governance.

## 6.2 Hypothesis B: Civilian agency

The case studies of rebel governance by Jabhat al-Nusra, the PYD and Ahrar al-Sham have discovered that in the Syrian context the civilian ability to shape governance to the civilian interest has not clearly materialized. The sources available to me have shown that only in the case of Ahrar al-Sham's rule in Raqqa have non-combatants been able to shape governance when they prevented the implementation of Sharia law. How this effective resistance manifested exactly remains unknown, since the literature on the subject does not reveal that. Therefore, the causal mechanism between the highly institutionalized setting of Raqqa in prewar times and citizens' ability to resist Ahrar al-Sham's implementation of Salafi ideals in its governance cannot definitively be established. The implication that highly institutionalized settings foster a demanding population that can effectively influence the rule of rebels cannot be confirmed for the three case studies analyzed here.
Still, my research on civilian-rebel relations in Raqqa, Afrîn and Aleppo has shown that attempts to influence the governance of these rebel groups are informed by the prewar historic relation civilians had with the Syrian state. The dominant feature of civilian organizations in the Syrian civil war, the local administrative councils, were established in Aleppo and Raqqa to compensate for the sudden loss of welfare provisions that Syrians had largely been dependent on and therefore can be understood as a civilian organization created due to the highly institutionalized prewar setting before the conflict.[128]

[128] Khaddour, 2015.

The Local Council of Aleppo represented the main, but ultimately inferior, competition to JN's rule in the rebel-controlled parts of Aleppo and yet neither managed to outperform or effectively raise demands on the governance of the rebel group. Similarly, the LACs active in Raqqa were subjugated by the Ahrar al-Sham to merely execute their vision of governance, not to shape it. Highly institutionalized prewar settings did provoke the formation of civilian networks. These attest to the fact that highly institutionalized state-society relations do shape how civilians interact with insurgent groups during times of conflict but in the case of Raqqa, Aleppo and Afrîn they failed to shape the rebel governance endeavors of Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra and the PYD to their interests. This leads me to propose that highly institutionalized prewar settings do not sufficiently provide civilians with the ability to influence rebel governance during conflict.

The comparison of the three case studies reveals that while the rebel groups all operated at the same time within the state of Syria, they included Syrian state institutions in varying ways that depend on the local reality they encountered. Still, all rebel groups included state institutions in their governance to some extent, thus confirming Hypothesis A. The comparison also shows that Hypothesis B cannot be confirmed in any of the three cases and that civilians' ability to influence rebel rule does not necessarily correlate with prewar state presence.

# 7 Conclusion

Our knowledge of armed non-state actors in civil wars and how they engage in governance is far from complete. The emerging research field of rebel governance tries to enhance our understanding of how rebels govern under varying conditions. This thesis has attempted to enrichen the debate on rebel governance by analyzing the effect of prewar state-society relations on quasi state-building efforts by insurgent groups. To that end, I have analyzed the rebel governance endeavors of Ahrar al-Sham in Raqqa, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Afrîn and Jabhat al-Nusra in Aleppo from 2012 to 2018 in a qualitative comparative case study analysis regarding two observable implications.

I have examined the effect that highly institutionalized prewar settings in an area under rebel control have on the likelihood and ability of rebels to include former state institutions in their governance. My analysis has shown that, given the three cases I examined, highly institutionalized prewar settings enable rebel groups to co-exist, co-opt, and even cooperate with state institutions. Ahrar al-Sham has co-opted numerous institutions of the Syrian state to govern the city of Raqqa and bolster its image of a service-providing ruler by co-opting healthcare and education. In Afrîn, the PYD has allowed co-governance with the Syrian state on certain administrative aspects of governance which the group is not able to perform themselves due to a lack of international recognition. Jabhat al-Nusra has cooperated with and used the expertise of the Syrian state to maintain and distribute water from the al-Nayrab water station in Aleppo. Consequently, this thesis has shown that observations of rebel governance of the LTTE in the highly institutionalized setting of Sri Lanka can in fact be transferred to the Syrian context.

In addition to the analysis of the effect of the historic state-society relations on rebel governance in civil wars, I have investigated whether highly institutionalized prewar relations between the state and civilians lead the non-combatant population of an area under rebel control to develop the abilities to effectively address demands towards the governing rebel group. My analysis has not been able to confirm such a causal relationship in the cases examined. I have, however, been able to show that the appearances of civilian-led local administrative councils in Raqqa and Aleppo constitute a direct result of the Syrian civilians' dependency on the Syrian state and its many institutions in the decades before the conflict erupted in 2011. Still, my literature-based assumption that highly institutionalized prewar settings would foster a civilian population capable of demanding service provision or resisting aspects of governance could not be confirmed by the sources available to me. Given these findings, I must argue that strong historic state-society relations do not directly inform the civilian capacity to shape rebel governance in

the case of Syria and thus findings related to the LTTE in Sri Lanka do not seem to be transferable to other contexts.

For the cases examined, my analysis has been able to confirm hypothesis A introduced in chapter 3.1 but has not been able to find the causal link between civilian agency and prewar highly institutionalized settings as proposed in hypothesis B of chapter 3.2. To understand these results, the limitations of this paper need to be highlighted.

First, due to the resounding research gap concerning the effects of highly institutionalized settings on rebel governance, the limited resources on the issue and my inability to conduct fieldwork because of the ongoing security threat in the region posed a major challenge. Because of this challenge, I have not been able to decisively confirm hypothesis B, but neither do the sources available to me enable me to resolutely discredit it. Further examination of the subject with more available resources can facilitate a more definitive answer.

Second, concerning the question of resources, due to the limited scope of such a paper only a comprehensive analysis of three cases was possible without reverting to superficial examinations and possibly faulty inferences. To strengthen the arguments made here, an extended study of a larger number of cases with the same scope condition of rebel governance in highly institutionalized areas on both aspects of this study would make for interesting future research that could generate a new theory on rebel governance in cases of highly institutionalized prewar settings. Additionally, quantitative larger-n studies could better answer questions of probability of the hypotheses I introduced here and thus make for a more comprehensive analysis.

Having reflected on the challenges of this research, the results gathered here shed a light on a crucial, but previously overlooked, aspect of rebel governance – the possible effects of historically high presence of state institutions in an area under rebel control. This thesis has gathered new evidence that was able to link state-rebel interactions in rebel group's practices of governance to the prewar relationship of state institutions to society and thereby contributed to a better understanding of civil wars. Understanding the conditions under which rebel groups in Syria included state institutions in their governance during the Syrian civil war, can inform future counterinsurgency considerations by states and the international community. Additionally, further conclusive research into the effect of highly institutionalized prewar settings on civilian ability to voice demands on ruling rebels can expand our currently limited understanding of civilians as active actors in civil wars.

This thesis has concerned itself with how historic institutional state presence influences both insurgents and civilians in their approach to the matter of rebel governance for Kurdish as well

as jihadist insurgent groups in the Syrian civil war between 2012 and 2018. Research on the organization of civilian affairs in the Syrian cities of Raqqa, Aleppo and Afrin is far from concluded. Many unanswered questions remain on why, how and under what circumstances insurgent groups govern, but this thesis has sought to shed light on the uncommon and understudied phenomenon of rebel governance in areas where the institutional presence of a state had been high and far-reaching before the inception of civil war.

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