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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Jihadism & Governance in North-Syria: Comparing Islamism and Governance in Aleppo and Raqqa ¹

Author 1: Teije Hidde Donker

Murray Edwards College; University of Cambridge

ABSTRACT:

Does ideology shape jihadist attempts at implementing rebel governance? In this article, I argue that the distinctness of jihadist governance initiatives emerges from the type of challenges that jihadists face when attempting to implement a distinct form of governance. To support this argument, I focus on the provision of public services in rebel-controlled Aleppo and Raqqa between 2012 and 2016. Two distinctly jihadist challenges emerge from this narrative: The first is how to position a jihadist identity in relation to local and national identities; the second is how to balance popular representation and religious authority as a source of legitimation for governance decisions. The strategic responses to these challenges vary across time and space. A focus on distinct challenges provides an avenue to investigate the distinctness of jihadist groups' attempts at rebel governance, while acknowledging their pluralist, multilayered and dynamic practices. The analysis builds on more than a hundred primary sources from Daesh, the Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham and relevant local jihadist actors, in addition to hundreds of sources from other governance related actors. It also draws on Arabic, English and French secondary sources and around thirty interviews with relevant actors and governance organizations.

KEYWORDS:

Civil War, Jihadism, Rebel Governance, Social Movements, Syria

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

td402@cam.ac.uk

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1. Introduction

Does ideology shape jihadist attempts at implementing rebel governance? In the fallout of the 2011 Arab Uprisings, multiple jihadist movements² secured territories and subsequently implemented forms of ‘jihadist’ governance. Some of the most infamous examples are the declaration of an emirate by the Nusra Front in 2013, Boko Haram’s control of territory in Nigeria from 2014 onward, and, last but not least, the caliphate declared by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in June 2014.³ Despite an increasing number of publications on the topic, research on jihadist governance tends to either focus on a single hegemonic group (Marsden 1998; Al-Tamimi 2015; Bunzel 2015; Drevon and Haenni 2021) or emphasize their ideological, extremist, specificities (Lia 2015; Aarseth 2018). Few scholars have comparatively assessed jihadist governance based on literature on rebel governance. It is a lost opportunity, because comparing these initiatives through the lens of this scholarship can teach us something about the distinct influence jihadism has on such initiatives, while acknowledging their pluralist, multilayered and dynamic practices.

Scholars of rebel governance analyze how rebel groups govern a territory that they partially and often temporarily control (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015). At a minimum, rebel governance means ‘the organization of civilians within rebel-held territory for a public purpose’, doing so ‘under armed threat and without the benefit of sovereignty’ (Kasfir 2015). Scholars analyze how rebel groups attempt to organize political input, service output, or the aggregation of material resources in such situations: for instance, the creation of political institutions that enable civilians to take part in governance, administrative organizations to provide public services, or ways to tax the local population (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015, 34–35). Zachariah Mampilly and Megan Stewart (2021), for instance, compare how the Rwandan Patriotic Front, Khmer Rouge and other rebel groups provided inclusive and/or transformative institutions for civilian participation (Mampilly and Stewart 2021, 29–37). Megan Stewart (2018) assesses how demand for domestic and international legitimacy shape inclusiveness of rebel service provision. Mara Revkin studies taxation of Daesh between 2013 and 2017 and shows that taxation by the group does not correlate with resource-richness of districts, but seems driven by ideology and pragmatic needs related to waging warfare (Revkin 2020, 760–763).

There are several insights that we can draw from this scholarship. A first insight is the immense diversity of rebel governance. Whether scholars focus on rebel political institutions, service provision or taxation: they observe variation between rebel groups (Mampilly and Stewart 2021), within one rebel group across time (Loyle 2021) or within one rebel group across space (Revkin 2020). Another insight is that rebel governance is not only shaped by a challenge to a particular state, but by a range of actors that emerge when state sovereignty collapses during a civil war. Besides states, armed actors, external political actors, and auxiliary forces created by multinational bodies shape rebel governance (Kasfir, Frerks, and Terpstra 2017). Related, third, is the notion of ‘layering’: the need to acknowledge the intersections among this diverse set of actors in order to understand the concrete practices of rebel governance (Kasfir, Frerks, and Terpstra 2017).

The above insights from studies on rebel governance overlap with observations from empirical case studies of jihadist governance. Mathilde Aarseth (2018), for example, highlights the dynamic interactions between

² Jihadism in this article is defined as groups that refer to themselves as participating in a jihad.

³ In this article I refer to ISIS, IS and its caliphate as ‘Daesh’.

Daesh and civilians around educational reforms in Mosul. Taking governance of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib as case, Jerome Drevon and Patrick Haenni (2021) analyze the strategic interactions between this group, other rebels, civilians, and international powers as HTS turned increasingly pragmatic in its governing strategies. They describe the multilayered and dynamic interactions that shaped HTS' rebel governance. Likewise, Morten Bøås and Francesco Strazzari (2020) use a political economy lens to provide a historical comparative analysis of how rebel governance deforms, transforms and reforms political orders. In sum, these case studies highlight how insights from studies on rebel governance can be applied to cases of jihadist governance.

Despite this relevance, few scholars have assessed the distinctness of jihadist rule based on existing literature on rebel governance. Brynjar Lia (2015), for instance, draws on a macro-level comparison between jihadist proto-states to assess their shared characteristics. He argues they are all intensely ideological and internationalist projects that share an aggressive behavior to neighboring states and commitment to good governance (Lia 2015, 35–36). He does not draw on scholarship on rebel governance and implies a coherence, unity and stability to jihadist governance that is at odds with the case studies mentioned above. A contrasting study is *Reviewing Jihadist Governance in the Sahel* by Natasja Rupesinghe, Mikael Naghizadeh and Corentin Cohen (2021): they do explicitly assess the distinctness of jihadist governance in the scope of literature on rebel governance. Based on existing case studies, they observe that the global aspirations of jihadist movements often veil sub-national or national goals; that the distinct application of sharia comes in many shapes and forms and that international jihadist networks often intersect with local rebel ones (Rupesinghe, Naghizadeh and Cohen 2021, 10–11). Jihadists' governance initiatives have the same diversity, interactions and layering as other rebels' attempts. The question is, rather, how to 'understand the distinctiveness of jihadi groups without lapsing into an all-too-often racialized exceptionalism' (Lia 2015, 16; Rupesinghe, Naghizadeh, and Cohen 2021, 10).

In this article, I analyze the distinctness of jihadist governance, while going beyond tendencies that imply a religious exceptionalism to jihadists' social and political behavior. I argue that the distinctness of jihadist governance initiatives emerges from the type of challenges that jihadists face when implementing rebel governance: for instance, how to position a global jihadist identity in relation to local and national ones; and how to balance popular representation and religious authority as a source of legitimation for governance decisions. The actual strategic responses to these challenges are limitless and vary across time and space.

To support this argument, I use the provision of public services in rebel-controlled Aleppo and Raqqa between 2012 and 2016 as case study. Specifically, I focus on the attempts to provide justice, security, water, electricity and education to civilians in areas controlled by rebel groups. Sharia courts and related police forces are an example where jihadists used religion to redefine their relation to a local population (The Associated Press, 2014). They reflected the diversity of such attempts: some courts used an adapted version of Syrian law, some Unified Arab Law, and some an interpretation of Sharia. Though less well known, the same holds for the provision of electricity and water. Rebel groups' ability to provide these services, control their price and distribution reflected their level of control over a territory, but also reflected their approach to using religion to mobilize labor and financial resources (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesney 2013; Khalaf, Ramadan, and Stolleis 2014; Baczko *et al.* 2016). Finally, education remained dependent on salaries paid by the Syrian regime between 2012 and 2014, with original curricula mostly retained. It forced jihadist movements to create an Islamic educational system either within or parallel to these pre-existing educational institutions. These are all examples of concrete strategies in response to practical challenges around identity and legitimacy that jihadists faced when implementing governance initiatives. I will return to all these examples in more detail below.

1.1 Data and Methods

The Syrian conflict is a perfect case to assess the distinctness of jihadist governance: trajectories of rebel governance differed immensely between regions. In north-Syria alone, rebel governance in Aleppo, Raqqa, Idlib, areas secured by Kurdish forces, and those governed by autonomous local councils under Turkish tutelage developed along particular paths. Despite this variety, they often involved similar jihadist movements (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesney 2013; Khalaf, Ramadan, and Stolleis 2014). As a result, the Syrian conflict provides a perfect setup for a comparative analysis.

The analysis builds on more than a hundred primary sources from Daesh, the Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham and relevant local jihadist actors, in addition to hundreds of sources from other governance related actors. I collected these sources via justpaste.it, youtube.com, telegram and facebook pages and websites from these organizations.⁴ In addition, the article builds on 28 interviews with relevant actors and governance organizations.⁵ Interviews took place during four research stays in Istanbul and Gaziantep, Turkey, between July 2012 and October 2016. I selected interviewees because of their work in opposition movements, rebel groups or governance organization in Raqqa and Aleppo, and through a process of snowball sampling. The combination of these two sampling methods resulted in a sample that included individuals that were part of, or interacted with all relevant organizations in the two localities. The age of interviewees ranged from early 20s to early 60s. I used the NVivo software package to do a content analysis of these interviews and primary sources, and used Arabic, English and French secondary sources as additional resources to assess and revise this qualitative analysis.

In the following article, I first provide a brief background of the Syrian conflict, including a description of relevant (jihadist) groups and governance institutions. Second, I give an in-depth narrative of attempts at public service delivery in Aleppo and Raqqa. In the concluding section, I draw some preliminary insights regarding the role of jihadism in shaping rebel governance.

2. Background to the Syrian conflict

As narrated many times before, in March 2011, following the examples of Tunisia and Egypt, a popular uprising erupted in Syria. Initially mostly peaceful and demanding political liberalization and accountability, faced with brutal repression, the uprising turned more violent within months (Porta *et al.*, 2017, chap. 3). Gradually, the regime lost control over various parts of the country. In these areas, novel forms of governance emerged. The most developed initiatives were the Kurdish Rojave project (International Crisis Group 2014; Khalaf 2016) and, infamously, the Islamic State that was declared in June 2014 (al-Adnani 2014) with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its leader (al-Baghdadi 2014; Bunzel, 2015). These were not the only two governance initiatives: many others emerged. In each region, governance initiatives developed in their own specific ways

⁴ When specific pages were no longer available, I used the internet archives wayback machine to trace previous versions of web pages.

⁵ Where possible, the references to the primary sources in the bibliography include original URLs. Many of these URLs are no longer accessible. The author has a copy of all the sources that are cited in this article. They are available upon request.

because of variations in urbanization, different moments at which rebel groups conquered areas, the extent that civil servants continued to be paid by the regime after rebel takeovers, and the political ideology of (jihadist) rebel groups. This fragmentation severely frustrated the creation of a common governance structure in these rebel-held areas. Having said this, it provides a context where jihadist movements were active in a large variety of situations. It gives an opportunity for a comparative analysis of jihadist rebel governance within a single civil war.

2.1 Jihadist Groups

The Syrian conflict gave birth to countless rebel groups: often initially not more than a few friends or relatives taking up their (often antique) rifles.⁶ As time went by these groups coalesced into more organized rebel organizations; creating alliances and unions with other groups or falling out with each other into violent conflict. It resulted in a dense and ever shifting network of rebel groups that broadly split along a more civil section, under the banner of a Free Syrian Army (FSA) and a jihadist one. The major rebel groups that will appear in the article are:

- Ahrar al-Sham [*Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya*, The Islamic Movement of Free Men of the Levant, or AaS]. Created as a union from multiple smaller rebel groups in November 2011, it was one of the first effective Salafi-jihadist group in the Syrian conflict. In their own words, AaS is a ‘comprehensive reformist Islamic movement that works to build an Islamic civilizational society in Syria, under the rule of Islamic Law, as favored by its people’, the movement comprises an armed movement ‘that aims to bring down the regime and provide security’, and a civilian one ‘from which its proselytization, education, humanitarian activism, media, politics and services emerge’ (Ahrar al-Sham 2016, 4).⁷
- Jabhat al-Nusra [*Jabhat al-Nusra*, the Support Front, or JaN]. Founded in January 2012 as a Syrian representation of the global Islamic jihad (al-Joulani 2012). After the founding of Daesh in April 2013 Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, the leader of the Nusra Front, declared its allegiance and traced its ancestry to al-Qaeda's Zawahiri (al-Joulani 2013).⁸ It was a declaration of allegiance that took al-Qaeda's leader by surprise. Joulani recanted this allegiance to al-Qaeda in July 2016 (al-Joulani 2016). In their own words, they aim to ‘work toward establishing the religion of Allah, having his Sharia as legislation and establish justice among all people’ (al-Joulani 2016). Joulani explicitly framed the organization as an outgrowth of the global jihadist movement that came to the aid of the Syrian people.
- Daesh [*Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham*, The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or Daesh following its Arabic acronym]. Originally a branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq (or ISI) became increasingly powerful and self-assured under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It led to the declaration in April 2013 that they extended their organization to Syria and aimed to create an Islamic State. It also led to the fallout with the Nusra Front (al-Baghdadi 2013). Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's declaration of the founding of a caliphate, in June 2014, sent shock waves through the global jihadist movement (al-Baghdadi 2014).

⁶ Interview with secular activist from Saraqeb. August 24, 2012, Antakya, Turkey.

⁷ For in-depth studies on Ahrar al-Sham and the (Syrian) Islamic Front see: (Lund 2013; Abazeed 2015).

⁸ In July 2016, in an apparent attempt to seem more moderate, they rebranded themselves as Jaysh Fateh al-Sham (The Army of Conquest of Sham, or JFS) although their previous name is still widely used both inside and outside Syria. They subsequently created a new coalition under the name of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. (see also Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesney 2013).

- The Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement [*Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki*] is a contrasting nonjihadist case. Initially founded in Aleppo in 2011, it transformed into one of the major rebel movements in North-Syria. Although they refer to Islam in their statements, they do not have the explicit aim to structure public life according to religion.

2.2 Public Service Organizations

As rebels took control over various regions in Syria invariably problems regarding the delivery of public services emerged, although at different times and around different issues. As a reaction, people began to organize, distribute and maintain public resources. These initiatives emerged in a limited set of institutional forms:

- Informal networks of emergency service delivery. Where service delivery collapsed, improvised initiatives emerged to sustain a modicum of normal life. There were many initiatives to provide emergency relief, but also to organize trash collection or neighborhood security. Other examples of such informal initiatives are the organization of local internet services and transportation of food and fuel. The level of organization and commercialization of these initiatives differed, although none had any formal credentials.
- Civil society organizations. Some of the above initiatives developed into more formalized civil society organizations. Hundreds of these organizations exist,⁹ but two examples that appear below are the Muslim Youth Council and the Ahali Halab Initiative — both from Aleppo. These organizations are the institutional embodiment of informal networks of activism, but also themselves made up nodes of a extensive network of an emergent free Syrian civil society (Khalaf, Ramadan and Stolleis 2014).
- Local Councils [*Majalis Mahaliya* or LCs]. These are organizations explicitly aimed to manage governance related issues in rebel-controlled areas in Syria. Some of these LCs were the successors of local coordination committees that emerged at the very start of the uprising to coordinate protests and emergency relief. Many LCs emerged together with the creation of the Syrian Interim Government in March 2013, but their integration into a coherent governance structure fell short of expectations. This was despite multiple attempts to strengthen them over time (Enab Baladi 2016).¹⁰
- Islamic Board [*Haya 'a Shara 'iya*]. These organizations aimed to provide public services within an Islamic framework. They emerged at the beginning of 2013 and were often supported by (one or more) jihadist rebel groups. They resemble Islamic courts but provide a wider range of services. The most (in)famous example was the Islamic Board of Aleppo, but many other Islamic Boards emerged throughout the uprising with varying levels of institutionalization, range of services, regional control and approaches to Islamic law.
- General Management for Services [*Al-Idara al-'Ama lil-Khidamat*]. Finally, there were service organizations that were formally independent from any rebel group but were widely recognized to be part and parcel of a jihadist project to govern civilians in rebel-held territories. The General Management of Services in Aleppo, linked to the Nusra Front, is one example.

⁹ See for a list of Syrian NGOs <http://ngosyria.org/Pages/InstitutesSearch.aspx>. The list was compiled by the Syrian Islamic Zaid movement.

¹⁰ Interview president Syrian Interim Government. October 31, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

3. Aleppo

In July 2012, rebel groups staged an attack on Aleppo, a city of over four million in the north-west of Syria and famous for its industry and trade.¹¹ Within days of the attack, rebels took control over several neighborhoods, for instance Haydariya and Sheikh Najjar in the north; Sakhour and Hanano in the west and Salahuddin and Sukkari in the south. Crucially, rebels did not conquer governance buildings; these were all in neighborhoods that remained under regime control. The only public installation that was controlled by rebel forces was the Bab al-Nairab water installation. Being part of the integral water system of the city, a logic of mutually assured destruction made the political use of (discontinuing) the provision of water by either regime or rebel forces impossible. Teachers at schools in rebel-controlled neighborhoods received their government salaries for at least a year following the takeover. The division between rebel and regime-controlled territory remained a relative one throughout much of the period under consideration.

Directly after the attack, several pressing practical issues emerged in rebel-controlled neighborhoods. An acute lack of fuel and flour for bakeries (due to supply routes being cut off) is one example, and the sudden collapse of trash removal (al-Halabi 2014) another. The second issue led to the creation of countless neighborhood and street level initiatives to clean roads and manage garbage collection.¹² The first resulted in many informal, often family based, networks to buy flour and propellants in Turkey (or other accessible Syrian cities) and redistribute, or sell, them in Aleppo.¹³ Many associations emerged as a result, among which Islamic ones. One of the more effective Islamic social organizations at the time was the Muslim Youth Council (their slogan: ‘Religion for God... and the Nation to god’).¹⁴ The organization would be one of the first that set up a trading route for flour to Turkey. One former activist boasted that at the beginning of 2013, they sold at prices lower than those in regime neighborhoods of Aleppo.¹⁵ Rebel groups also took part in providing services. While discussing governance and service provision in these neighborhoods, a high-level representative of the Zenki movement admitted to the author that:

At the start, we didn't have a strategy. We created organizations when they were needed because of a specific practical issue. This was true of courts, police. We needed service organizations because they were lacking [...] but in these days they always emerged in a pragmatic and dynamic way. One day we sat together and decided on something, next day we tried to implement it — of course related to resources we had at the time.¹⁶

The level of organization and commercialization differed between these initiatives, but together they constituted a vast informal network that emerged to remedy the acute problems that arose due to imploding service provision in rebel-controlled neighborhoods of Aleppo. The lack of clear governance strategy meant

¹¹ The attack on Aleppo, in August 2012, was led by the al-Tawhid Brigade: a group that emerged from a unification of various rebel movements from the rural surroundings of Aleppo.

¹² Interview with a media activist related to the Fastaqim Union. October 21, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey; and Interview with activist from Aleppo. October 16, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

¹³ Interview with a media activist related to the Fastaqim Union. October 21, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

¹⁴ As one their facebook page: www.facebook.com/MuslimYouthCommittee/.

¹⁵ Interview with a media activist related to the Fastaqim Union. October 21, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey. The remark should be seen in the context of many complaints of price gouging in rebel controlled areas at the time.

¹⁶ Interview with a representative of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki rebel group. October 24, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

that many of the initiatives that were implemented were small, incomplete and lacked funding. A lack of accountability led to widespread accusations of predatory practices. Most initiatives were dead on arrival.

3.1 Attempts to Unify Governance in Aleppo

Following the fall of the city, a first attempt to unify these service provisions was through the Revolutionary Transitional Council in Aleppo [*Majlis al-Intiqali al-Thawri lil-Muhafaza Halab*]. It acted as a local council for Aleppo, and as an umbrella organization for integrating education, police and public services in Aleppo province (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesney 2013, pp. 7–8). Another initiative was the Unified Judiciary Council [*Majlas al-Qadaa al-Muwahad bi-Halab* or UJC], established in September 2012, as an attempt to unify the judiciary in the city. Most rebel groups initially supported these initiatives. The exceptions were Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front. The UJC was meant to be a type of supreme court in the city. It used Unified Arab Law that builds on a combination of sharia and Arab Law. Courts affiliated with the UJC comprised both civil lawyers and religious shaikhs (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesney 2013). Finally, there was the Local Council of Aleppo City [*al-Majlas al-Mahali li-Madinat Halab*]. It grew out of the Revolutionary Transitional Council, which dissolved itself into the council in March 2013. The council had its headquarters in the northern neighborhood of Sheikh Najjar (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesney 2013). In their own words, their aim was to strengthen the unity of the Syrian nation and alleviate lacking services and administration of the city (Local Council of Aleppo City 2015).

All these initiatives had their problems. Alligations of corruption marred the Revolutionary Transitional Council; and its control over councils and initiatives in the city was tenuous at best (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesney 2013). Soon after the creation of the UJC, the al-Tawhid Brigade withdrew its support and another rebel group, the Fastaqim Union, attacked its principal court (Schwab 2018). As the UJC lost support from rebel groups, its influence declined rapidly and it disbanded in November 2013. The local council received sustained criticism for ineffective governance, but lacked the financial and military backing to assert its control. It meant that the extent that the revolutionary transition council, the Unified Judiciary Council or local council controlled the provision of services varied between regions and neighborhoods, and reflected changes in rebel support over time (Schwab 2018).

3.2 The Islamic Board of Aleppo

A fourth attempt to unify governance was through the Islamic Board in Aleppo [*al-Haya'a al-Shara'iya*]. Four of the most powerful jihadist rebel groups at the time — the Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham and the al-Tawhid Brigade (Odaba sham 2015) — created the board in late 2012. These groups emphasized they created the board following popular demand, to provide security for the inhabitants of Aleppo (Hadath Media Center 2013). The statement could not disguise that the Islamic Board — and the al-Tawhid Brigade switching its support from the UJC to the Islamic Board — constituted a direct challenge to the authority of the UJC and local councils. Service delivery took place with an explicit aim to Islamize Syrian society (Islamic Board of Aleppo 2014; see also Enab Baladi 2015). Courts linked to the Sharia Board built on Sharia, although most judges were drawn from local neighborhoods and often lacked detailed legal knowledge (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesney 2013).

The Islamic Board also received extensive criticism: mostly for following an ‘un-Syrian’ (Salafist) approach in its attempts to institutionalize Islamic governance.¹⁷ There were also allegations that the Nusra Front took control over the Sharia Board soon after its creation (Schwab 2018). But their relation to rebel groups meant that the Islamic Board had financial and armed support, whereas the local council lacked funding and experience.¹⁸ An Aleppo based activist stated everyone realized the Nusra Front controlled the Islamic Board, but that he had supported it at the time because it built on expertise in governance (gained from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) and their vision of building proper governing structures in the city:

*[The Islamic Board] was the institutional representation of the jihad. A large majority of fighters in Syria call themselves jihadist. The uprising itself was not Islamic, but an Islamic identity was clearly present within it. The Islamic Board in Aleppo appropriated this identity.*¹⁹

Appropriating this jihadist identity also meant that the council could appropriate existing Islamic social initiatives in the city — claiming they belonged to a shared jihadist effort. The previously mentioned Muslim Youth Council, for instance, was asked to hand over its network of food distribution to the Islamic Board. They complied with little resistance, fully supporting the Islamic Board’s claim to Islamic legitimacy and jihadist representation.²⁰ Either positively or negatively, many living in Aleppo during these days corroborate the image of a powerful Islamic Board that appropriated a wide range of initiatives in the city (al-Halabi 2014).²¹ This was only possible with the support of rebel groups and its appropriation of a jihadist identity. The above mentioned activist continued:

*If you wanted to get married, you went to the board; if there was a conflict between people they had a judge. They had something for everything. The local council tried, but didn't have the ability. [...] It is true that the board tried to control everything. But the thing was that the Board had a project. They had an ideology and structure, when nobody else had.*²²

3.3 The local Council Triumphs?

In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq to Syria, creating Daesh. Where the Nusra Front had been the dominant group appropriating the identity of an Islamic jihad, for instance through the above mentioned Islamic Board, Daesh now explicitly superseded this project with their state building effort. It was a message that found immense resonance among Nusra supporters and the Front could not prevent that it lost large amounts of fighters, arms and resources to Daesh. Representatives from the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham lashed out through a series of publications, but found that being jihadist

¹⁷ Interview with two junior representatives of Islamic Councils in the Aleppo governorate. November 4, 2015, Gaziantep, Turkey. (See also the reply to criticisms from the Islamic Board in the shape of a detailed documentary Hadath Media Center 2013)

¹⁸ Interview with activist from Aleppo. October 17, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

¹⁹ Interview with a media activist related to the Fastaqim Union. October 21, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Interview with activist from Aleppo. October 17, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey and Interview with a former junior representative of an Islamic Councils in the Aleppo governorate. October 19, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

²² Interview with a media activist related to the Fastaqim Union. October 21, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey. Emphasis by the interviewee.

organizations restricted their ability to directly attack an organization that had a popular claim to be an Islamic State (Enab Baladi 2014). However, by claiming a monopoly over the representation of a Muslim community, Daesh inevitably came into conflict with an ever wider array of Syrian jihadist rebel groups. Many of these rebel groups would unify under the banner of the Army of Mujahideen [*Jaish al-Mujahedeen*] and, starting from the Idlib countryside, proved successful in clearing Aleppo from Daesh in mid-2014 (Army of Mujahideen 2014).²³

The conflict with Daesh would prove of fundamental importance in reshaping governance in the city. First, Daesh institutionalized a more explicit state like structure at the beginning of 2014, with specialized offices [sing: *Diwan*] dedicated to issues such as food and education. This weakened the original Islamic Board. After Daesh was routed from the city and with the Nusra Front weakened, the Islamic Board merged with remnants of the UJC to form the Sharia Court in Aleppo and Countryside [*al-Mahkama al-Shara'iyat fi Halab wa Rifha*]. As the name suggests, this was principally a court, with all other public services placed under the control of the local council of Aleppo city. This court was subsequently reformed, in the summer of 2015, into the Supreme Court for Aleppo City [*Majlas al-Qadaa al-A'laa fi Madinat Halab*] (Schwab 2018). Both these courts drew on Unified Arab Law. Over time, the more integrative jihadist approach of the Islamic Board seemed to lose out for a more specialized approach in which Islamic judiciary was detached from other services such as education, and the provision of water and electricity.

But the local council, the sharia and supreme courts, still did not have the explicit backing of one or more rebel groups. Trying to save what it could, Nusra created its own General Management for Services (Aljazeera 2014).²⁴ Despite being weakened, it began a steady campaign of taking over buildings and equipment that were crucial to service provision and placing them under its general management organization. The water station in the Bab al-Nairab neighborhood, for example, was controlled by the General Management of Services in Aleppo (2016). Also, the only vehicle for repairing electricity cables in the city would for a long time be in the hands of the organization — not the civil local council.²⁵

A simmering proxy war over service provision emerged that would endure until the end of rebel control in Aleppo. The council accused the General Management for Services of selectively providing services, refusing cooperation with the council and leaving entire neighborhoods — literally — in the dark (Local Council of Aleppo City 2016b). The General Management for Services (2016) answered that it was trying, but that it was severely constrained by circumstances in the city. The conflict reflected in broader civil society: The Local council would meet and discuss with civil society organizations, discussing their demands and how to address them (Local Council of Aleppo City 2016a). The General Management of Services, instead, continued to draw on an implicit jihadist reference. Interviewees stated that if someone couldn't fight in the jihad, you could still be able to work for the General Management of Services or related organizations, as many perceived it as activism within the same overall jihadist project.²⁶ With increasing Russian bombardments, and as the rebel lines collapsed around Aleppo in November 2016, this enduring conflict stopped in its tracks. Any form of normality — which was already heavily degraded through the constant use of barrel bombs on the city — collapsed during the final regime assault on rebel-held neighborhoods in the city.

²³ Note that this attack started around January 2014, nine months *prior* to the US led anti-Daesh intervention in Syria and Iraq.

²⁴ See their Facebook page at: www.facebook.com/edara3amah.

²⁵ Interview with a media activist related to the Fastaqim Union. October 21, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

4. Raqqa

From the beginning of rebel control in the city, the context and development of governance in Raqqa differed from that in Aleppo. First, with 220.000 inhabitants, Raqqa is far smaller than Aleppo. Its significance as industrial and trading center is also more limited. Second, how rebels secured the city differed from what happened in Aleppo. With attention focused on battles in the west of the country, rebel groups could slowly but steadily complete a surrounding of Raqqa in February 2013. One month after, they attacked the city and took it within days. In contrast to other cities, rebel groups secured Raqqa swiftly, completely, and with minimal damage to its infrastructure.

It meant that rebel groups took control, for the first time, over a functioning regional capital. All state institutions — the regional governorates' office, central bank, courts, public hospitals — were still present and functioning. In addition, already from September 2012 onward, inhabitants of the city discussed the creation of local councils and created small networks to take control over service delivery in case of an imminent fall of the city.²⁷ Finally, although public servants in the water and health sectors were relatively quickly cut off from their regime paid salaries, those working in communication, education and electricity sectors continued to receive their paychecks for over a year (al-Attar 2013). Raqqa presented an opportunity to show how rebel groups would develop in a context where all these institutions still functioned and where activists had time to prepare for an imminent collapse of regime control.

Immediately following the rebel takeover, many organized initiatives emerged. Within a month, there were 41 civil organizations in the city itself and at least eighteen local councils in the countryside of the Raqqa province (al-Attar 2013).²⁸ A local council emerged that attempted to build some type of governance structure in the city. It meant that informal grassroot networks institutionalized into formal organizations much faster than was often the case in other Syrian cities. But they were relatively weak compared to rebel groups. Rebel groups had found a city with plenty of resources, meaning that local initiatives were not an outright threat and could relatively easily be bought or pressured into submission. It would shape the dynamic of emerging rebel governance in the city.

The first thing jihadist groups did after gaining control was to take over specific state buildings.²⁹ Ahrar al-Sham, for instance, took over a public hospital and the central bank — taking all the money inside to 'secure it for the people' and setting up its headquarters in the building. The Nusra Front took over the governorate building, which would later be used by Daesh. The Ahfad Rusul Brigade, a smaller local jihadist group, set up their headquarters at the old train station (al-Attar 2013). All this was in addition to the schools and mosques that were incorporated as rebel controlled buildings and bases. It took place rather haphazardly and had the distinct feel of a scramble for the spoils of victory. On top of this, many families, according to a member of the former local council of Raqqa, flocked to the various rebel groups in search of security — which meant that their size and power increased rapidly.³⁰

Soon, struggles between rebel groups started. Jihadist groups — specifically Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front — overpowered nonjihadist ones. The Nusra Front moved to the nearby town of Tabqa as Daesh depleted its ranks. The Ahfad Rusul brigade was wiped out around the same time. It meant that in mid-2013, Ahrar al-

²⁷ Interview with a member of the former Local Council of Raqqa. November 14, 2014, Gaziantep, Turkey.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Interview with a member of the former Local Council of Raqqa. October 12, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

³⁰ Interview with a Syrian aid worker from Raqqa. October 31, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

Sham and Daesh remained, with the Nusra Front nearby. At the beginning of 2014, Daesh would outgun the other two and take full control of the city and its surroundings.

4.1 Sponsoring Informal Initiatives... and the Local Council

During the period that they controlled Raqqa, the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham were not overtly hostile to existing civil initiatives in the city. Even though both worked to strengthen their positions among these projects. Despite the similarity in aim the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham took a rather different approach to their interactions with civil initiatives. Two events help illustrate the difference.

First, following rebel control over the city, the Local Council of Raqqa faced an acute lack of experience and was severely under-funded.³¹ Soon the realization dawned that they fully depended on rebel, and especially jihadist, groups in the city. A member of the local council recalls:

We needed cars to function as a local council. We didn't have any and neither the money to buy them. But we knew who had: Ahrar al-Sham. So we went with a small delegation to the leader of Ahrar al-Sham in Raqqa and asked if they somehow would support the local council. What else was there to do? The thing was, he said yes — but as long as we would put Ahrar al-Sham as signs on our cars.³²

Ahrar al-Sham bought its way into service delivery in the city. Other respondents from Raqqa complained about the extent that the group enforced moral norms in public life. An effort that was facilitated by the many dawah centers the group had across the country (Ahrar al-Sham 2013a, 2013b)³³ and in the Raqqa province itself.³⁴ It seems that Ahrar al-Sham truly attempted, through any means necessary, to give an image that they were active not only as rebel group but as ‘a comprehensive Islamic reform movement’ (Abazeed 2015). A movement that also provided services, security and education. Other groups during this period, especially the Nusra Front, did the same but used different practical tactics. As another member of the former council recalled:

We received an invitation from the leader of the Nusra Front: to come and pay a visit. There was no way that we could refuse this ‘invitation’. So we decided to go. All of us. We went fearing for our lives. The strange thing was: he said he supported us, thought that we did great work and that — if needed — we could always call on the Nusra Front for protection. No one of us had expected this. Not from them.³⁵

During these early months of rebel control in 2013, there were many types of organizations active in the city: from media, education and trash collection related organizations, to the local council and coordination committees. But, in contrast to Aleppo, jihadist groups — and especially the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham — had direct access to an immense amount of resources. Although they acted from an unchallenged position in

³¹ Interview with a Syrian aid worker and former member of the Local Council from Raqqa. October 31, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

³² Interview with a former member of the local council in Raqqa. October 12, 2016, Gaziantep.

³³ Interview with Ahrar al-Sham activist. March 2, 2015, Istanbul, Turkey.

³⁴ Interview with a member of the former Local Council of Raqqa. March 20, 2015, Gaziantep, Turkey.

³⁵ Interview with a Syrian aid worker and former member of the Local Council from Raqqa. October 31, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey. The episode was also independently recalled by other former members of the Local Council of Raqqa.

the city and shared an aim to create distinctly jihadist governance, the two groups had different strategies. Ahrar al-Sham was actively co-opting existing NGOs, local councils and activist networks, while the Nusra Front took a hands off approach.

The development of the local Islamic Board further exemplifies the particular situation in Raqqa. As a formally independent religious organization, although informally related to Ahrar al-Sham, the Islamic Board in Raqqa provided fatwas and statements regarding governance issues in the city. It apparently also controlled the local land registry³⁶ and had a specialized police force (Islamic Board of Raqqa 2013b). But, in clear contrast to the Islamic Board in Aleppo, it did not have support from a union of jihadist rebel groups, had relatively few resources of its own and did not provide the wide set of public services as its Aleppine counterpart. It is probable that because of the abundance of resources in Raqqa, jihadist groups did not see the necessity of cooperation.

It meant that the Islamic Board would have an opinion on, for instance, education and health care in the city (Islamic Board of Raqqa 2013a, 2013c) but that it was unclear to what extent anyone was listening. It also meant that when it came to security issues the Islamic Board could do little else than send around a list of phone numbers, including that of the Islamic State, that could be called whenever a security issue arose (Islamic Board of Raqqa 2013b). And, finally, as they lost the protection of Ahrar al-Sham — following the Daesh takeover and Ahrar al-Sham's annihilation in the city — there was a final public statement from a related Islamic organization denouncing the kidnapping of one of their members (Ulama Association of Raqqa, undated) followed by a deafening silence. The Islamic Board ceased to exist. That the Islamic Board was an institutional representation of a jihadist movement did not provide any protection when caught in inter-jihadist fights.

4.2 Daesh and Institutional Change

After having pushed the Nusra Front out of the center of Raqqa in mid-2013, and growing increasingly powerful in the months after, Daesh took over Raqqa in mid-January 2014. Multiple inhabitants from Raqqa remarked the lack of immediate change following the takeover. In an effort not to alienate the local population, Daesh went to great lengths to make the transition as smooth as possible. Education, for instance, was initially allowed to continue to function as before. This included allowing teachers to receive their salary from regime-controlled areas.³⁷ But it all proved temporary. Slowly but steadily, Daesh enforced its specific approach to governance and identity onto Raqqa society.

First, mosques and religious dawah schools all came under control of Daesh or were closed. The organization took over all existing emergency relief organizations. For the first month, Daesh left the local council alone, but in February 2014 it was forced to close. When former members started a new council, they were called in and forced to go on the record that they did not work for any type of local council any longer — otherwise they would be shot.³⁸ The same took place for any other type of civil initiative. Daesh then created a dedicated office, or diwan, to manage service delivery. In all this, it showed a keen ability for bureaucratization and control. Temporary foreign aid projects were allowed to be active within its territory, but first had to go through an extensive, and fully formalized, vetting procedure. After an organization received

³⁶ Interview with a member of the former Local Council of Raqqa. March 20, 2015, Gaziantep, Turkey.

³⁷ Interview with a former physician from Raqqa. November 3, 2015, Gaziantep, Turkey.

³⁸ Interview with a member of the former Local Council of Raqqa. November 14, 2014, Gaziantep, Turkey.

a positive reply, Daesh bureaucracy supported them for the duration of their projects.³⁹ Education is another example of how Daesh bureaucratization developed over time (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria 2014; Abu Mohammed 2017). As an inhabitant from Raqqa, who had left only weeks before, recalled:

How this developed in practice? First classes continued as if nothing happened. [...] The same curriculum just without Baathist topics. Then they offered an Islamic course to teachers. After that, they came into classes to check the 'proper Islamic character' of education. And only ten days ago [end of October 2015] they started to provide a complete Daesh curriculum. [...] Even so, you don't have to send your children to school, as they are not enforcing attendance. Not yet at least...⁴⁰

The crucial difference with other jihadist groups is that Daesh implemented a fully-fledged state structure, and did not allow for any other — either jihadist or nonjihadist — independent schools, mosques or other organization to be active in areas it controlled. Its increasing bureaucratic reach meant that any form of local aid networks had to go further and further underground. Apart from the well-known Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently organization,⁴¹ there were many initiatives to support families in the city, but all were secretive, small and explicitly informal.⁴² Although these changes took more than a year to come into effect, in practice it meant that it became increasingly challenging to be active outside Daesh defined organizations.

5. Conclusion

What insights can we draw from the comparison between jihadist rebel governance in Aleppo and Raqqa? First, the two case studies show the intersections between the organization of civilian representation, the provision of public services and extraction of material resources. In this article, I focused on the provision of services: educating youth, providing water and electricity, and the creation of a police force and courts. Doing so, we observed that all rebel groups were actively extracting resources from local populations. Armed force was used to take over banks; and to secure sites and vehicles that were crucial to control the delivery of services. Control of trade routes — as well as oil fields (Adraoui 2019) — was indispensable as source of income. The proxy war over service provision in Aleppo, in which the Nusra Front slowly chipped away public services from the local council, is another excellent example of the close intersection between armed control, resources extraction and increasing strength as service provider. The same goes for interactions between civilian initiatives and rebel governance: the incorporation of civilian initiatives into rebel governance was a constant source of tension between rebels and civilians.

Second, we observed that in both cases, jihadist governance practices emerged from dynamic interactions between jihadist groups, rebel movements, and civil organizations. As a result, jihadist governance varied across time and space. While Daesh institutionalized its bureaucratized Islamic State, Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front seemed to have understood that, in their case, pragmatism dictated another approach. In Aleppo, Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front initially supported a joined jihadist Islamic Board, while in Raqqa they went at it alone from the start. As result, both shifted to semi-independent 'general management' organizations

³⁹ Interview with a Syrian aid worker and former member of the Local Council from Raqqa. October 31, 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

⁴⁰ Interview with a physician from Raqqa. November 3, 2015, Gaziantep, Turkey.

⁴¹ See their website at: <http://www.raqqa-sl.com/>

⁴² Interview with a member of the former Local Council of Raqqa. November 14, 2014, Gaziantep, Turkey.

and attempted to either coordinate with, or gain control over, existing local councils. But both did so in their own particular ways. Instead of providing a distinct approach to governing a population, there were multiple jihadist groups that each had their own ways of organizing civilian representation, providing public services and extracting material resources in territories they secured.

As an answer to the question at the start of the article, the two cases show that a jihadist distinctness emerges from the type of issues that jihadists face when attempting to implement a distinct form of governance. The first challenge is how to position a jihadist identity in relation to local and national ones. The Islamic Court of Aleppo placed Sharia, through its application of Unified Arab Law, within an institutional structure for service provision that represented a nationalist Syrian uprising. The Islamic Board, instead, constituted service provision in name of a jihadist identity of the Syrian uprising. Daesh, as a third approach, represented the bureaucratization of a pure jihadist identity that was detached from Syrian national identity. These are different answers to a single issue: how to position a Sunni Islamic identity in relation to other forms of collective identity. It is an issue that is distinct for jihadist governance attempts. It is an issue that reflects in how groups present themselves: Ahrar al-Sham as very localized and decentralized; the Nusra front as representation of a global jihad coming to aid a nationalist uprising, and Daesh as the embodiment of the Islamic State.

The second challenge relates to legitimacy. How does one balance popular representation and religious authority as a source of legitimation for governance decisions? Does jihadism provide legitimacy because it represents a global jihadist movements with all its prior governance experiences or because it incorporates local initiatives and communities? Ahrar al-Sham had no problem with incorporating local initiatives, as long as organizations followed its branding. The Islamic Board in Aleppo, while controlled by the Nusra Front, co-opted initiatives that aligned with a jihadist collective identity. In Raqqa, instead, the Nusra Front seemed to play nice with local activists, in an apparent attempt to gain legitimacy by providing security. Daesh, finally, aimed to show the extent that an Islamic State — as the bureaucratic expression of a global jihad — provides good, non-corrupt and effective governance. The approaches taken by Ahrar al-Sham, the Nusra Front and Daesh vary in the answers they provide to the issue of legitimacy. But the issue itself is distinctly jihadist.

The answers to these two issues are not static. They emerge from dynamic interactions between jihadist and nonjihadist rebel groups; and from interactions among jihadist groups themselves. Ahrar al-Sham, the Nusra Front, and Daesh all actively used religion to construct collective identities and legitimize their actions. This brought up a necessity to bridge religion — and especially the public authority and collective identity associated with a jihadist project — to the popular legitimacy and local identities on which governance projects ultimately depended. When these groups implemented governance initiatives, they had to define the actual practice of these relations. As we saw above, it was a source of constant tensions and struggles between (jihadist and nonjihadist) rebel groups. Religion does not define the characteristics of jihadist governance; but jihadists' use of religion does engender a distinct set of issues for rebel governance. Insights from scholarship on rebel governance can be used to investigate these distinct issues and how they shape the multilayered and dynamic realities of jihadist governance.

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Author’s Information:

Teije. H. Donker is a Bye Fellow at Murray Edwards College; University of Cambridge. His academic interests stand at the intersections of political sociology, sociology of religion and Middle East area studies. Dr Donker’s research focuses on the emergence and transformation of social movements in contentious episodes. He investigates Islamist movements as distinct social practices, specifically in the period following the 2011 Arab Uprisings. His publications have appeared in *Religion & Politics*, *Social Movement Studies* and *Mediterranean Politics*; in addition to publishing a co-authored book, *Social Movements and Civil War*, with Routledge.