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Introduction by Jessica Maves Braithwaite, University of Arizona

In their book, *Good Rebel Governance: Revolutionary Politics and Western Intervention in Syria*, Dipali Mukhopadhyay and Kimberly Howe consider variation in the practice of “counter-state” governance in Syria between 2014 and 2016, particularly emphasizing that it is imperative for would-be and actual governors to maintain a closeness with their constituents in order to be seen as the legitimate authority. This closeness arises when institutions are rooted in “kinship networks, revolutionary aspirations, and shared experiences of the war-torn communities” being governed (13). Such a conceptualization builds upon ideas from Charles Tilly and Ibn Khaldun, departing from traditional studies of (rebel) governance that largely argue that legitimacy is derived from the features and activities of the governance institutions themselves; Mukhopadhyay and Howe instead bring into consideration the people who both constitute and are served by these governance institutions. The authors argue that this institutional closeness can even help to compensate for material deficits that otherwise tend to complicate the process of governance, particularly in conflict-affected areas like Syria.

Mukhopadhyay and Howe then further analyze these systems of counter-state governance from the perspective of foreign intervention, specifically, the ways in which Western powers ultimately undermine counter-state governance projects by requiring local rulers to establish their own legitimacy while also being beholden to the priorities of an external sponsor.

The authors examine variation in counter-state governance projects and the effects of Western intervention (or lack thereof) in four Syrian cities: Raqqa under rebel rule by the Islamic State, as well as Saraqeb, Darayya, and Aleppo under the leadership of civilian-led councils. They emphasize that being overly reliant on material capital and coercive rule (as was the case in the Islamic State’s Raqqa) limits the true legitimacy and staying power of rebel governance. Further, external capital from donors poses similar challenges for governance projects by undermining connections between the elites in power and their constituents, as exemplified by the local council in Saraqeb. While competition from too many aspiring governance actors and security threats complicated efforts of counter-state rule in Aleppo, the local council in Darayya was able to establish and maintain local authority through deep institutional closeness with civilians, even in the face of significant material shortcomings.

Jori Breslawski, Steven Heydemann, Isak Svensson, and Niels Terpstra offer insightful commentaries on Mukhopadhyay and Howe’s book. They agree that this work offers considerable value in extending our conceptualization of rebel governance beyond the constraints of more commonly investigated institutional and bureaucratic capacity and service provision. By instead emphasizing an understanding of governance as it is shaped through interpersonal connections and shared experiences, we are able to gain new insights into the relationships between rulers and the ruled, as well as the consequences of third-party interventions that augment or undermine those governance-oriented relationships.

Breslawski and Terpstra both highlight another valuable contribution of this book, noting its thoughtful discussions of methodology and the ethics that are involved in field and desk-based research in conflict contexts. Mukhopadhyay and Howe provide excellent insights for scholars who are considering engaging in similar lines of inquiry and approaches, such as the use of qualitative and quantitative data collected by others.

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Several contributors raise questions about the way in which Western intervention is addressed in the book. They share concerns that have the potential to advance this particular research agenda in some novel and worthwhile directions. Heydemann leverages his own professional engagement with some of these very interventions to challenge some of the seemingly stark contrasts that are drawn in this book between preferences for and approaches to governance, instead suggesting that both Western interveners and local populations and governors find value in moving between bureaucratic rationality and sociopolitical connections. This perhaps also connects with one of Svensson’s points related to the lack of attention the authors devote to different forms of aid and variation in donors when discussing Western interventions; this calls for future work to investigate which types of support and which third parties are perhaps optimally poised to assist with what the authors call “mini-maximalist” (20) interventions related to peacebuilding, democracy promotion, and other community-oriented engagements.

The contributors also all offer important points that warrant further examination regarding the extent to which institutional closeness and connections between the ruler and the ruled are an asset, or a liability, for promoting legitimacy in counter-state governance projects. It is worth considering the ways in which this closeness arises in the first place, and how it may be rooted in some problematic pre-war relationships and practices. Similarly, it could be worth considering the extent to which these sociopolitical connections are formalized through pre-existing institutions, versus norms and relationships that are more informal and fluid in nature (but which may need to be codified and formalized in order to advance an effort to legitimate a governance project). Such variation in the sources and features of institutional closeness could have important implications for our understanding of what is possible and problematic in the realm of counter-state governance.

In their response to these contributions, Mukhopadhyay and Howe further emphasize the importance of such connectivity and institutional closeness for the establishment of legitimacy within counter-state governance projects, as these dimensions also shape how governors use the tools of coercion and capital, which can be the undoing of their authority. The authors also reiterate that foreign intervention of this peacebuilding, democratizing variety often undermines the very forms of responsive local governance it purportedly seeks to promote. Though this is perhaps a somber note upon which to end, this book and the resultant dialogue offer essential insights regarding the negative consequences of interventions, as well as the fascinating, heroic efforts at mutual aid and community organizing in the face of the most challenging of circumstances in Syria.

Contributors:

Jessica Maves Braithwaite is an Associate Professor of Political Science in the School of Government and Public Policy at the University of Arizona. Dr. Braithwaite’s research examines the formation and evolution of violent and nonviolent dissident organizations, collective responses to state repression, and the organizational networks that comprise anti-government campaigns and peacebuilding efforts.

Dipali Mukhopadhyay is Associate Professor in the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. She is the author of Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and, with Kimberly Howe, of Good Rebel Governance: Revolutionary Politics and Western Intervention in Syria (Cambridge University Press, 2023). She serves as Senior Expert on Afghanistan with the US Institute of Peace and Vice President of the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies.

Kimberly Howe is Research Director of Conflict and Governance at the Feinstein International Institute at Tufts University. She is co-author of Good Rebel Governance: Revolutionary Politics and Western Intervention in
Syria (Cambridge University Press, 2023) with Dr. Dipali Mukhopadhyay. In addition to directing research on gender and conflict, she regularly provides consultation to governments, international organizations and NGOs on their humanitarian, development, and stabilization polices and initiatives.

Jori Breslawski is a Senior Lecturer of Political Science at Tel Aviv University and a fellow at the Centre on Armed Groups. Her research investigates the causes and consequences of rebel governance as well as the challenges associated with delivering aid in conflict-affected areas.

Steven Heydemann, in addition to holding the Janet Wright Ketcham 1953 Chair in Middle East Studies, with a joint appointment in the Department of Government at Smith College, is a nonresident Senior Fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy of the Brookings Institution. From 2007–2015 he held a number of leadership positions at the US Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C., including Vice President of Applied Research on Conflict and Senior Adviser for the Middle East. From 2011–2015, Heydemann directed USIP’s Syria program, including The Day After project (TDA), in which the institute facilitated a transition planning process for Syria led by prominent figures in the Syrian opposition. Prior to joining USIP, he was director of the Center for Democracy and Civil Society at Georgetown University and Associate Professor in the Government department.

Isak Svensson is Professor and holder of the Dag Hammarskjöld Chair in Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University. His most recent (co-authored) book is Confronting the Caliphate: Civil Resistance in Jihadist Proto-States (Oxford University Press, 2022), and his most recent (co-edited) book is Conflict Mediation in the Arab World (Syracuse University Press, 2023).

Niels Terpstra is Assistant Professor in Conflict Studies at the Centre for International Conflict Analysis and Management (CICAM), Radboud University. His research focuses on the dynamics of civil war, political violence, insurgency, and terrorism. He is particularly interested in governance and legitimation practices of non-state armed groups during and after civil war. Furthermore, he is interested in foreign policy, particularly the political and strategic dimensions of peace-building and statebuilding missions.
Good Rebel Governance is a thought-provoking and impressive book which will be of interest to both academics and practitioners who focus on civil war or foreign aid in conflict-affected areas. Dipali Mukhopadhyay and Kimberly Howe paint a rich picture of life in opposition-controlled cities in the Syrian civil war, questioning which constellations of factors resulted in high levels of governing authority. By drawing upon the first-hand accounts of civilians who lived in rebel-held territory, as well as a host of informants who worked in the foreign aid space, the authors question existing assumptions of what it takes to be a good ruler, and they challenge the benefits of providing foreign aid to bolster the authority of rebel rulers.

The study of rebel governance, for most of its existence, has been dominated by conceptualizations of governance as rationalized service delivery. According to this conceptualization, rebels govern when they provide dispute resolution, education, and health care.1 Good Rebel Governance questions the limitations of this conceptualization and raises the importance of nonmaterial forms of power, joining the work of a growing chorus of scholars who have questioned traditional conceptualizations of how rebel authority is established.2 This perspective argues that the field’s view of rebel governance has up until now been too narrow, and dominated by state-based conceptions of governing authority which are measured by materialist, rational metrics of coercion and capital.

Mukhopadhyay and Howe argue that what is missing from current conceptualizations of governing authority in war is an understanding of the links between ruler and ruled. In constructing this argument, they innovatively bring together the Tillian concept of connection—“relations among social sites (persons, groups, structures, or positions) that promote their taking account of each other”—and Ibn Khaldun’s concept of asabiyya—“social solidarity with an emphasis on group consciousness, cohesiveness, and unity” (3).3 In drawing upon the works of these two scholars, the authors argue that Weberian notions of governance that focus upon predictable service delivery and bureaucratic capacity are not suitable for the chaos that accompanies violent conflict. Instead, they argue that governing authority can only be achieved by those who share a strong attachment with their constituents, fostered by kinship, aspirational, and experiential solidarities.4

In their investigation of governance in the midst of violent conflict, Mukhopadhyay and Howe also explore the consequences of foreign aid on rebel governing authority. This line of research provides a novel perspective on the effect of foreign aid on civil war outcomes: whereas much of the existing research focuses on how foreign aid has (or has not) bolstered incumbent governing authority in places like Afghanistan, Iraq,

and the Philippines, *Good Rebel Governance* focuses on how foreign aid did (or did not) bolster the governing authority of the opposition in Syria.\(^5\) The investigation pairs nicely with the authors’ rejection of Weberian notions of governance and their focus on the importance of the connection between ruler and ruled. Indeed, foreign aid from the West, which is focused on winning hearts and minds, pursues a strategy of rationalized service delivery. According to Mukhopadhyay and Howe’s argument, this logic misunderstands how governing authority is established in times of great uncertainty, such as war. This misconceptualization has detrimental consequences: specifically, the prospect of foreign aid can incentivize rebel rulers to tailor their political project to the preferences of donors, which can often clash with the preferences of their own constituents, thereby weakening the connection (if there ever was one) between ruler and ruled.

To investigate the role of connection in establishing governing authority as well as the effect of foreign aid, Mukhopadhyay and Howe examine four Syrian cities, whose characteristics vary along traditional predictors of governing authority—coercion and capital—as well as their theoretical focus of connection. They paint a picture of governing authority in these cities through the eyes of the civilians who reside there, primarily drawing upon interviews conducted by the Office of Transitional Initiatives (OTI)—a subsidiary of US Agency for International Development (USAID). The authors take an incredibly transparent approach to their analysis, which does not bind itself to the positivist norms adopted by much of the political science community, and instead allows the authors to conduct the analysis in a way that does not fabricate control where it cannot be achieved. An entire chapter is devoted to the strategies and justifications behind the methodological and epistemological choices of the book, which includes insightful discussions of ethics and uncertainty, as well as the benefits and pitfalls of the data that the authors rely upon. This chapter joins a growing movement amongst scholars of violent conflict to lay bare the challenges of conducting research on conflict-affected areas.\(^6\) This transparency helps to develop more ethical methods and will better prepare scholars who plan to undertake research on violent conflict.

*Good Rebel Governance*, like most good books, left me with a number of questions. The largest is how we should understand the meaningfulness and impact of connection between rulers and ruled? Despite the book’s focus on the importance of connection, the empirical chapters seem to illustrate that rulers can be successful without connection (the case of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS]) as well as unsuccessful with connection (the case of the rulers of Aleppo). In the case of the former, despite a lack of connection between ISIS and the citizens of Raqqa, ISIS managed to rule authoritatively. In the case of the latter, the authors conclude that despite the connection between the city council and Aleppoines, the council was perceived as less potent due to the fact that it was financially supported by foreign backers. Similarly, in Saraquib, foreign aid diminished the effect of the initial connection between ruler and ruled after it led to patronage politics. How should we understand the importance of connection if governing authority can be established without it and its effect on governing authority can be diminished by foreign aid? The authors themselves seem somewhat ambivalent to the role of connection, concluding that it “cannot substitute for


other governing fundamentals,” yet at the same time, its presence can “compensate for significant material deficits” (14).

Part of the answer may lie in more clearly distinguishing governing authority from similar outcomes, such as obedience. It would help to differentiate governing authority from other outcomes both conceptually as well as in terms of operationalization, in order to clarify how we know governing authority when we see it. I also suspect that part of the ambiguity is due to the authors’ commitment to painting an honest portrait of life under rebel rule, rather than delivering neat, parsimonious findings. Governing authority in war is messy, determined by a host of factors, and, in all likelihood, somewhat idiosyncratic. This renders it all but impossible to draw clear connections between any one causal factor and an outcome of interest. Still, I was left wondering what definitive conclusions could be drawn about the trajectories of rebel rulers who possess and do not possess connections with their constituents.

Another question is how to conceptually distinguish between rulers and ruled, rebels and civilians. The question of who counts as a rebel and who counts as a civilian is a common source of uncertainty in most work on violent conflict, and is also relevant from a legal standpoint for understanding who is a legitimate target in war. However, the distinction between ruler and ruled, rebel and civilian, is crucial for the book, given its focus on the connection between them. On the one hand, the theory requires that these two actors are distinct, so that the connection between them may be measured. On the other hand, the authors explain that they “did not conceive of counter-state institutions as existing atop societies but rather as existing within them” (9). This is intriguing, since existing work largely conceives of rebel governance as the provision of governance by armed actors. In contrast, the majority of cases in Good Rebel Governance—those in Saraquib, Darayya, and Aleppo—are cases of civilian governance in the midst of war. Because some cases in the book focus on armed rulers while others focus on civilian rulers, the reader may benefit from more clarity on the conceptual breadth of the term rebel ruler, and clarification on the question of whether the expected connection between ruler and ruled is influenced by the ruler being either civilian or military.

The concept of connection, which is at the theoretical heart of the book, evokes what I perceive to be one of the most crucial yet difficult to answer questions in the study of violent conflict: what is meant by civilian support of armed actors? This also relates back to my question of what exactly is meant by the term “governing authority” and how it differs from other similar outcomes like obedience. How would we know if civilians genuinely support armed actors, or if they are instead behaving in a way that mimics support out of fear? Good Rebel Governance provides insight to this question in a way that many scholarly works cannot through the rich accounts of civilians who live under rebel rule. What sets Good Rebel Governance apart from many existing works is the sheer number of civilian accounts the authors discuss, as well as the diversity of civilian perspectives and experiences. These accounts reveal the complex ways in which civilians perceive governing authority—that is, civilians can at once appreciate the services that are provided by armed actors and reject their authority, or simultaneously feel frustration and disappointment while holding out hope that authorities will align their governing strategies with civilian expectations.

Good Rebel Governance has implications for our understanding of governing authority in countries at war as well as for our understanding of foreign aid in conflict-affected areas. In conjunction with research that has investigated the hearts and minds strategy in counterinsurgency operations, the evidence that Mukhopadhyay
and Howe present should make practitioners and policymakers think twice about providing aid to rebel rulers in the hopes of advancing their own country’s strategic goals.\(^7\)

This volume is an important contribution to the study of rebel governance in Syria. Empirically rich and deeply informed by the authors’ engagement with wide-ranging theoretical literatures on state building, rebel governance, and civil war, it adds significantly to the growing body of social science literature on Syria’s devastating and ongoing conflict. The book’s strengths reflect the authors’ years of research on and engagement with US efforts to support the development of local governance in conflict-affected states. Its findings bring Syria more firmly within comparative research programs on these topics and highlight the value of the Syrian case for the development and testing of theory. The book also holds valuable lessons for policymakers and practitioners who work to construct effective and legitimate forms of governance in contested spaces. In both its theoretical and its applied insights, Good Rebel Governance gives us ample ground for debate, disagreement, and dialogue about the forms, content, and effects of US intervention in Syria and, by extension, of similar interventions in other conflicts, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, that have been at the center of American foreign policy for the past two decades.

Focusing on the period of most active American involvement in the Syrian conflict, roughly 2011-2016, the book’s central claim is that interventions undertaken by the US to support communities in rebel-held areas of Syria were based on assumptions that were profoundly out of touch with the Syrian context. Despite their professed commitment—in the anodyne vernaculars of development and peacebuilding—to “empower local stakeholders,” “do no harm,” and “prioritize local needs”—Western interventions instead embodied disparities in wealth, power, and privilege that distanced practitioners from local “implementing partners” and those designated as “beneficiaries.” The inevitable outcome, the authors claim, was interventions that imposed Western priorities and practices to which local counterparts were compelled to adapt. “[N]o amount of foreign support,” they argue, “could compensate for the persistent, pernicious effect of the power differential between the world’s most formidable states and an aspiring counter-state” (4).

Read superficially, this argument presents as a familiar critique of the distortions and dysfunctions that accompany well-meaning but ineptly designed interventions by Western governments, international institutions, and Western NGOs across the Global South. Left at this, Good Rebel Governance tells us little that we don’t already know. Critiques of Western intervention and its distorting, if not destructive, effects are commonplace in both academic and practitioner assessments of what constitutes good governance, how it should be organized, and the kinds of institutions needed to deliver it.2

Fortunately, Dipali Mukhopadhyay and Kimberly Howe do not leave it at that. They go on to situate external-local disconnects theoretically, bringing useful new insight to familiar topics. For American practitioners, they note, legitimate authority is defined in Weberian terms. It arises from institutions that exhibit bureaucratic

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rationality and rule-based, impersonal practices that are the necessary conditions for good (effective and legitimate) governance. In the Syrian case, the development of such institutions also signified the possibly for a democratic future: they expressed democratic forms of authority that would constitute a potent rebuke of the Assad regime’s personalism, brutality, and corruption. Rebel actors were thus cast as the potential carriers of a future democracy. To gain international backing and win local support rebels and community leaders had to act accordingly: to demonstrate their willingness and capacity to serve as brokers and enablers of Western-Weberian conceptions of governance in the territories they controlled.

The authors argue, however, that these rebel actors were the products of a sharply different theoretical tradition, one that drew for its model of good governance not on Weber but on Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth-century Muslim scholar and author of a seminal work on the rise and fall of states, *al-Muqadimah (The Introduction).* Ibn Khaldun set out a theory in which the strength, legitimacy, and durability of states is dependent on the presence of social solidarities, or *asabiyya,* that constitute the basis of social cohesion, unity of purpose, and legitimate rule. It is not bureaucratic rationality that defines good governance—and endows a state with legitimacy—but connectedness, the closeness that rulers establish between themselves and those they govern. To be effective, institutions must embody and enact the interpersonal, relational qualities associated with *asabiyya.*

In Mukhopadhyay and Howe’s telling, American interventions to promote good rebel governance can be understood as a clash between Weberian and Khaldunian conceptions of legitimate authority and how it should be organized. They trace the US role and its effects on local rule across an array of cases in which governance outcomes during periods of rebel control differed. Their cases include Syria’s second largest city, Aleppo, where rebel armed groups controlled about half the city from 2012 to December 2016; Derayya, a southern suburb of Damascus and opposition stronghold; Raqqa, an eastern city that was held by the Islamic State from January 2014 to June 2017; and Saraqeb, a small market center in Syria’s northwest Idlib Province. Through interviews and extensive use of primary and secondary sources, the authors unpack the often malign effects of US interventions.

In some cases, notably Aleppo and Saraqeb, the allure of US funding sparked competition among local actors, fragmenting nascent civil societies and weakening local solidarities. American practitioners relied on models of intervention framed in the argot of Weberian-style good governance (“rule of law,” “accountability,” “transparency”). Together with the expectation that local partners would (and had the capacity to) comply with the exotic bureaucratic requirements of donors, American interventions led to cascades of unintended yet malign effects, undermining the legitimacy of US-backed rebel actors and weakening their standing in the communities they governed. Weberian conceptions of good governance ultimately failed. US-backed local councils were often aligned with or dominated by armed groups. These two cases were not outliers. Though councils in dozens of opposition-held towns and villages held elections, outcomes tended to reassert longstanding social hierarchies. Often, elections affirmed the power of leading families and local armed groups that these families dominated. Such outcomes fueled complaints about clientelism, exclusion, and corruption. In these cases, coercion underpinned authority rather than connection.

Derayya is the counter case. There, rebel actors besieged by the Assad regime from 2012 till its fall in 2016, lived alongside residents in conditions of extreme deprivation (death from starvation was not unusual in Derayya during the period when it was most severely isolated by regime forces). Largely cut-off from the outside world, rebel actors built a governance model reflecting Khaldunian attributes. An elected local council

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rather than armed actors exercised authority over civic affairs. Council members cultivated close ties with residents, reinforced by popular awareness that community leaders were living through the same hellish scarcities that they themselves were forced to endure. Shared experience contributed to an “authoritative intimacy” (106) between leaders and the community. In this environment of shared suffering, community leaders “generated a set of institutions…that wove civic engagement and military struggle together as a function of new ideas about the organization of politics” (109). These ideas and institutions were legitimated through elections that endowed the local council with legitimacy. It was social connectedness, social cohesion, the mindful cultivation of asabiyya by rebel actors, that expressed the most compelling and effective alternative to the regime’s authoritarianism, and to the governance models extolled by the US. In the case of Saraqeb, connection underpinned authority rather than coercion.

To their credit, Mukhopadhyay and Howe do not construct caricatures of coercion versus connection. They are attentive to the messiness of their cases, the extent to which connection and clientelism intersected, the value that communities under rebel rule placed on Weberian-style administrative efficiency, and the precariousness of asabiyya, even among armed rebel groups and local councils drawn from and operating within their own communities. Further, they know that it is not simply the misplaced Weberian commitments of US practitioners that doomed Western interventions: their fate was in fact overdetermined. Vectors of failure proliferate in the book. American efforts fell short in part because of a “willful disinterest in the complex ecosystems that harbor those injustices they wish to stop” (172), and an “NGO-ization problem” (173) that amplified power disparities between interveners and the intervened upon. Also responsible was the fickle, lackluster US commitment to sustained social and institutional change in Syria; Washington’s disenchantment with an armed opposition increasingly dominated by extremist Islamist movements; and plain old bureaucratic dysfunction.

Attentiveness to the complexities of local ecosystems serves the authors well. In the end, however, it is an emphasis on contrasts that drives their argument. The weight of their narrative rests on differences and divergences: between Weber and Ibn Khaldun, Western and local, connection and coercion. There is also a less explicit contrast drawn between regime and rebel modes of authority. It is these contrasts, ultimately, that the authors depict as consequential, even determinative, in accounting for the shortcomings intrinsic to Western interventions.

Yet it is precisely the weight attached to these contrasts, and the conceptual framing on which they rest, that leaves me most unsettled. To explain why requires that I situate myself (as briefly as possible) in relation to the text. From 2007–2015 I served as vice president at the US Institute of Peace (USIP) where one part of my portfolio included grantmaking to local NGOs (non-governmental organizations) in conflict-affected states. These grants supported activities similar to those described in the book. From 2011–2015, I also directed the Institute’s Syria program. In this latter capacity, I collaborated with Syrian colleagues on a Syrian-hosted project we called “The Day After” (TDA). The purpose of the project was to enable Syrian opposition activists to explore how Syria might navigate the transition to a post-Assad Syria. The project is mentioned in the book (28) and my work with USIP is quoted once (19). (Full disclosure: I have had no contact with the authors about USIP’s Syria work.) The project issued a final report in September 2012. Its Syrian executive committee then requested USIP’s assistance in establishing an NGO to carry forward the ideas and values contained in the report.

USIP ended its relationship with the NGO in 2015 but TDA’s work continues into the present.4 Beyond the TDA project, through USIP, I approved funding for and at times observed activities similar to those critiqued

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4 For more information, see https://tda-sy.org/.
in *Good Rebel Governance*, including workshops held in Gaziantep, Turkey for the commanders of armed battalions about how to manage relations with civil society and local councils. For my own research, I traveled to Turkey a number of times, including to Gaziantep, then a hub for Syrian NGOs, to conduct interviews. I recount all of this to inform readers of the basis on which I express reservations about some of the authors’ claims, and to acknowledge that for some readers I may not be seen as a disinterested party in commenting on the book.

Writing as a former intervener and practitioner, the actual practices I observed, participated in, and studied fit uneasily, at best, with the authors’ characterization of US interventions. In practice, US practitioners were more supple and fluid in how they managed interventions than the authors suggest. I encountered few who exhibited a willful disinterest in the ecosystems in which they worked. Those I worked with in the field were deeply committed. With notable exceptions, they were eager to learn and immersed themselves in the nuances of these ecosystems. They often struggled with their own bureaucracies—which were invariably cautious, hesitant, intensely risk averse, and mindful to a fault of Congressional oversight—to create as much space as possible to operate in fields that were saturated with multiple often conflicting local solidarities. Deft practitioners of the art of hidden transcripts, what US field staff conveyed to headquarters was often sanitized, designed to avoid unwelcome micro-management from Washington and preserve their room for maneuver. Importantly, local staff were mindful of power imbalances and struggled to minimize their disruptive effects, including through programming that built on and engaged local solidarities. There was more of Ibn Khaldun in US interventions than the authors suggest.

Similarly, Weberian notions of bureaucratic rationality were often valued and seen as crucial for good governance within Syrian communities under rebel rule. This was especially the case for those whose lives were governed by regressive, hierarchical, exclusionary, patriarchal, coercive forms of solidarity that left them precious few avenues through which they might secure their own survival, much less access to essential goods and services. According to the authors, the Western notion that “rationalized service delivery can yield political legitimacy” was found “wanting” (166). Yet from the text itself—as in my own experience—many residents under rebel rule valued rationalized service delivery and viewed it as a marker of the legitimacy of a local council. In Derayya, for instance, rationalizing service delivery happened through deliberative processes that included local residents, lending outcomes additional legitimacy. Yet the outcomes that residents desired reflected their appreciation of how Weberian norms and practices reinforced their own efforts to overcome the patrimonial, clientelist, exclusionary (if not coercive) forms of solidarity that far too often characterized the conduct of local councils. Alternately, connection did not always mitigate coercion, even in Derayya. Rebel commanders observed the guidance of the local council at times, yet were fiercely protective of their autonomy and often acted with an impunity that reflected their control over the means of violence.

In practice, therefore, the boundaries between what the authors characterize as the hubris-laden Weberian assumptions of Americans and the mostly benign solidarity-based Khaldunian assumptions of local actors were always intensely porous. The distinction often collapsed as American practitioners adapted to and learned from local counterparts, and as local actors used Western interventions to overcome the constraints of regressive solidarities. Through regular, occasionally courageous acts of benign subversion, American practitioners pursued Khaldunian ends, while Syrian counterparts embraced Weberian norms—for their own instrumental purposes. Nor should we overlook the potentially negative effects of Khaldunian norms, especially when they are endowed with authority and legitimacy that reproduces unjust outcomes—however such outcomes might be defined.

Alongside these concerns about how the authors characterize US intervention are questions about concepts such as connection and solidarity—and related terms such as authoritative intimacy—that rest at the heart of the book’s critique of Western intervention. These concepts turn out to be exceptionally difficult to pin.
down. Local councils, including some with which I worked, operated with conceptions of connective solidarity and legitimate governance that were hierarchical, nondemocratic, and patrimonial. Local solidarities meant that powerful families of the pre-war period were able to dominate rebel governance institutions during the conflict. These local notables sustained practices that were anchored in connective solidarities that reproduced pre-war patterns of exclusion and impunity. The authors are aware of this. They know that solidarity is no guarantee of inclusion, fairness, or legitimacy. They write that this “brand of authority…does not necessarily produce the open, inclusive, secular politics advocates of liberal institutionalism herald” (167).

How then do Khaldunian (or Weberian) worldviews, norms, and practices generate such widely varying outcomes? Short answer? We do not really know. The authors’ argument seems to be that the regime’s siege of Derayya insulated it from Western intervention, leaving more space for Khaldunian practices to take hold. Yet TDA and other Western-backed NGOs supported programming in Darayya pretty much up to the day it fell to the regime. A general theory of when, under what conditions, connection and solidarity produce distinct kinds of politics—when and under what conditions connection mitigates coercion and for whom—is needed to arrive at a more complete understanding of how external interventions interact with local contexts to produce politics that are inclusive, fair, and legitimate even if not secular or democratic.

What emerges, then, from my own intense immersion in the Syrian conflict over the past twelve years, is an understanding of US interventions as encounters between two complex ecosystems: practitioner ecosystems, on the one hand, and the social, institutional, political ecosystems of communities in rebel-held areas, on the other hand. Both contain diversities of outlook and practice. Both manifest conditions that are consequential in determining what happens when these ecosystems come into contact. Both appropriate and deploy creative combinations of Weberian and Khaldunian approaches in their efforts to improve governance.

This is not to suggest a false equivalence in the position of actors within each of these ecosystems. The authors are correct to note the disparities in power and resources that shape interactions between interveners and local actors in conflict-affected settings. They are also correct in pointing to the systemic dysfunctions associated with US interventions, and their often malign effects on local societies. I saw these far too often at first hand, including in USIP’s own programming, to fail to appreciate their importance. Yet the lived realities of both Western practitioners and local actors fit less neatly into the contrasting categories deployed by the authors than is evident in their account—as layered and attentive to nuance as they are.

These concerns aside, I close by noting my appreciation for the book. Through this study, observers and interveners alike can become attuned to the real, troubling, and disturbingly resilient dysfunctions that plague US interventions in conflict-affected settings. They also now have recourse to potential alternatives and the need to integrate them and institutionalize them more fully into the routines and processes of the US government, NGOs, and international institutions. Good Rebel Governance is thus a step forward in our efforts to understand and theorize the interlocking, and in many respects mutually constitutive, ecosystems that define conflict-affected landscapes, whether in Syria or elsewhere. Not least, it helps us refine and sharpen questions about Western interventions that should continue to command our attention. For the sake of those yet to be intervened upon such attention remains a matter of urgent importance.
How can international actors help to build a credible counter-state in the midst of an ongoing revolution? In order to understand this, we first need to step back and understand the fundamental processes of building revolutionary institutions in a civil war context. Through a deep and careful examination of four local councils that operated during the Syrian civil war, Dipali Mukhopadhyay and Kimberly Howe’s new book, *Good Rebel Governance: Revolutionary Politics and Western Intervention in Syria*, provides us with a better understanding of precisely this: the formation processes of revolutionary statebuilding, which provides a basis for an evaluation of how external intervention can facilitate or jeopardize these processes. This is an important and well-researched book that should be read by scholars and students who are interested in Syria, but also those who are interested more generally in rebel governance as well as the challenges of external aid and other forms of interventions. The civilian perspectives and their voices on different rebel governance projects are primarily heard here. The book focuses on how civilians perceive the different forms of rebel governance projects, and how these change over time as the conflict evolves.

The Syrian nonviolent revolution in 2011 metamorphosed into a full-scale civil war. As the Assad regime lost control over the last areas of territory, rebels stepped in to fill the void and sought to establish themselves and make the revolutionary project manifest. From the Syrian revolution grew a plethora of “proto-states,” which revealed different types of rebel governance systems. The local councils, of which there were hundreds in towns and villages, functioned in parallel with armed groups, sometimes as implementing agencies for the armed group’s political aspirations, sometimes as sort of mediating agencies between the armed groups and the civilians over which they aspired to rule. The subnational variations between local councils create opportunities to learn about the creation and resilience of local counter-state institutions. By following their trajectory over (a section of) time and having access to unique material from interviews (albeit interviews which were made by others than the authors), the authors are able to draw together a comprehensive story of the challenges of counter-state institutions.

Seeking to create a synergy between the work of Charles Tilly and Ibn Khaldun,¹ the authors identify three basic parameters by which rebel governance projects can be evaluated: coercion, capital, and that more intangible asset they call “connection” (13). They derive this term from Tilly and combine it with Khaldun’s concept of *asabiyya*—social solidarity and group cohesion—together in the concept of “institutional closeness”—which occurs when “rebel governors have access to key intra-community solidarities” (3). Coercion, capital, and “institutional closeness” are all essential, but it is the latter which glues the other two together, and which, to some extent, can compensate for a lack in financial resources or the ability to maintain security and protection. Ultimately, the key to successful institution-building, Mukhopadhyay and Howe argue, is the combination of all three dimensions: to have the material resources to help to secure service provisions for the population, and to have access to coercive capacities to protect the community from external threats (in this case, primarily from the Assad regime) and to uphold internal order and rule of law, as well as to have institutional closeness in terms of alignment with the people in terms of kinship, aspirational solidarity and a common mutual experience. For example, in Raqqa, the administration of the Islamic State (ISIS) had the means of harsh coercion and, partly because of this, also effectively executed service provisioning to its people (for example, rubbish removal was seemingly more effective during rebel rule than during the reign of the Iraqi government), but it remained vulnerable because it executed this rule

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without aspirational or kinship solidarity. As a result, the jihadist project did not find wider resonance among the population, and foreign fighters were seen as alien to the local population.

The book is squarely situated in the emerging literature on rebel governance, and contributes both empirically and theoretically in critical and significant ways to this emerging field of literature. I think, however, that the book has wider theoretical ramifications. The authors have not engaged directly and explicitly with the literature on nonviolent resistance, but this book needs to be brought into the scholarly conversation about the challenges and possibilities of civil resistance. Let me point out three possible entry points for such a conversation.

First of all, the book shows that the nonviolent uprising did not stop when the Syrian conflict deteriorated into civil war, but instead took new forms through the building of local councils. How a revolution organizes itself not only in terms of mobilization of resistance but also how to construct the alternative to what it challenges—Mahatma Gandhi used the term “the constructive program”—is of central importance for nonviolent resistance. We can see this most clearly in the case of the local council of Darayya, in the way it sought to remain close to the people and to the revolution’s aspirations. One of the potential reasons why we see a decrease in the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance over the last years, may be that uprisings have focused on counter-mobilization at the expense of counter-institutionalization, and thus, the nonviolent revolutions come to stand on loose sand.

Moreover, Mukhopadhyay and Howe show how civilians also used means of disobedience to exercise their civil agency under rebel rule. The literature on civil resistance has traditionally focused on civilians who challenge various forms of authoritarian regimes that hold the power of a state. Increasingly, though, attention has been paid to the development of resistance against rebel governance.

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Howe make a strong contribution by showing that a lack of institutional closeness can lead civilians to protest against rebel rulers. For example, the 2015 demonstrations by civilians in Saraqeb seem to have been critical in leading to the re-connection of the council with local people—it led to increasing use of consultations and “a restored faith in the fairness of the council” (100). As in other instances, the book shows how “protest provoked change” (3). Mukhopadhyay and Howe demonstrate that civilians are not only passive victims, but are also agents of change, and that civilian protest creates change even in the dire situations of ongoing civil war.

For the long-term effect of rebel governance, there is a need for civilian collaboration. A vast number of assignments need to be accomplished in order for the rebels to be able to implement their decisions. Power is constructed and constantly re-constructed with the help of civilians who uphold the pillars of power. Mukhopadhyay and Howe show some of the ways in which civilians empower themselves—particularly by taking to the streets and protesting—while less attention is put on other forms of disobedience. Civilians can decide to not collaborate with the people in power (non-cooperation) or they can show their discontent through more subtle forms in their day-to-day practice (everyday resistance). The full scale of the civilian repertoire that women and men can employ in order to resist is not shown in this book, and a more direct engagement with the civil resistance literature would broaden the analysis further.

Now, let us turn to the other part of the argument: the challenges of intervention. Are interventions in support of rebel governance—fostering good rebel governance—really invariably doomed to fail? Mukhopadhyay and Howe reach a pessimistic conclusion when it comes to the impact of intervention. In Syria, the West tried a sort of light external intervention where it tried to influence the dynamics of the conflict without stepping in with boots on the ground. Western governments thus tried to use the local actors on the ground to promote their shifting agenda: first regime change, and then, as the insurgency radicalized and the intensity of the conflict escalated, measures against violent extremism as well as the stopping of the flow of refugees.

The book makes a strong case for the wicked problem of intervention. The authors point to three (partly reinforcing, partly contradictory) causal processes at play. Intervention may, according to Mukhopadhyay and Howe’s analysis, lead to corruption and alienation from the local base (104). This was the case of Saraqeb council, where US resources and Western patronage led to corruption, lack of autonomy, and local perceptions of the council as undemocratic, unresponsive, and driven by elite bargains. More generally, the support from the West turned local actors into aid recipients and created a fundamentally unhealthy asymmetrical dependency relationship. The effect of Western intervention—economic support and capacity development—undermined the institutional closeness of the local councils, as attention was shifted to Western priorities and funding obligations.

Or, as an alternative causal process, intervention may disempower the national level administrations by directing resources and attention to local councils and thereby undermining the national level capacity (141). In the Syrian case, Western intervention created a situation where the national opposition government was first recognized and empowered and later, as the priorities of the Western states changed and the disillusionment of the opposition’s lack of local anchoring grew, disempowered through the strategy of directing aid directly to local councils. The West supported the local councils’ function in service delivery in different parts of Syria and sought thereby to empower them as a way to legitimize a revolutionary counter-

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state in the making. However, this weakened the national level and contributed to creating an even more fragmented landscape of the revolution. Aid thus undermined the legitimacy of the evolving counter-state project by directing the attention to the preferences of the local actors.

A third causal pathway identified is when external intervention sends signals that create unrealistic expectations that encourage rebellions and extend their duration. In the case of Syria, the West’s rhetorical support was not matched with the kind of support it was willing to give. Western support raised expectations amongst revolutionary Syrians, but such expectations were never really met (171).

Based on the three claims, Mukhopadhyay and Howe conclude that “nonintervention may be the most responsible path” (17). Yet, each of these three claims merits a more thorough evaluation. Such an evaluation is dependent on identifying the conditions under which these causal processes occur more precisely. It is not impossible to imagine situations where strategies of localization aid can serve to build a solid base for a counter-state in the making, for example with stronger and more elaborated coordination mechanisms. Are there any conditions under which the West’s support for local councils could have facilitated the development of a more coherent counter-state project that could have effectively challenged the Assad regime, instead of deteriorating into a fractured and fragmented opposition?

And while it is well known from the study of development aid that support can create dependency relationships, that may not be the case for all types of donor support. The authors do not distinguish between different forms of aid and donors: providing military support, donating resources, and conducting training do not necessarily have the same type of impact. The West is not a unified category and aid interventions come in a plethora of forms. Exploring Western intervention without disaggregating it into who is doing the intervention and what type of intervention is being undertaken may be to generalize on the basis of a too narrow piece of evidence. It is also important to point out that the reasons for the shift in Western aid (at least partly) were based on the changing character of the Syrian uprising, with its more radicalized opposition and in particular the growth of ISIS which fundamentally altered the basic calculus of the West.

Mukhopadhyay and Howe are able to identify the challenges of local councils in Syria and thereby explain the interdependent trilateral relationships between civilians, local councils, and rebel groups. However, the jury is still out when it comes to the question of intervention. After all, the alternative—to sit back and do nothing—is not without costs either. Mukhopadhyay and Howe focus explicitly on Western intervention, and not on the extensive intervention done by other states. The West was outperformed because other donors with more illiberal agendas were more light-footed and quick on the ground. It was the lack, and not the presence, of Western intervention that created a vacuum in which Russia and Iran, as well as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, could step in.10 And if we want to understand why the revolutionary agenda of the uprising was undermined and rebel governance projects were not able to build a basis for a democratic development that challenged the regime in power, we probably need to turn the torchlight to the various forms of interventions that happened in Syria from other, illiberal, states and actors.

Taken together, Good Rebel Governance is a well-argued book, building on new and fascinating empirical analysis of cases that have not received sufficient scholarly attention in previous research. It is a great and significant contribution to our common knowledge about the challenges of building counter-states in the midst of civil wars, and it opens important debates about rebel governance, civil resistance, and external intervention.

10 See, for example, Marc Lynch, The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).
In Good Rebel Governance: Revolutionary Politics and Western Intervention in Syria, Dipali Mukhopadhyay and Kimberly Howe move the existing rebel governance literature forward with innovative ways of understanding rebel authority and of analyzing the intricacies of foreign “good-governance” interventions during rebel rule. The book is a must-read for anyone interested in the contemporary conflict in Syria, foreign interventions, and the behavior of armed groups in conflict-ridden environments.

In my view, the book makes at least three main contributions. First, it has an elucidating way of theorizing rebel governance. Mukhopadhyay and Howe bring Charles Tilly’s theoretical notions of coercion, capital, and connection into conversation with Ibn Khaldun’s notion of asabiyya. Mukhopadhyay and Howe generally treat asabiyya, which is a concept with many definitions, as a type of solidarity. Applied to rebellion, they highlight three forms of this solidarity: kinship, aspirational, and experiential. These types together form the Tillian “connection” to scrutinize various shapes of (rebel) authority during violent conflict. Although coercion and capital have been studied extensively in the literature on state formation, connection, and especially treated as a form of solidarity, is a novel theoretical entry-point. In their thinking, Mukhopadhyay and Howe largely liberate themselves from the Western-centric Weberian notions of statehood and state formation, and the instrumentalist approaches to (rebel) governance and service delivery that have dominated some sectors of the existing scholarship. Throughout the book, the notion of solidarity proves to be an especially valuable theoretical approach for the analysis of different types of rebel rule in Syria in the wake of the 2011 uprisings.

Particularly striking is the way in which the authors establish how solidarity and institutional “closeness” are both an important and an understudied element of authoritative rebel governance. Solidarity is not only a necessary condition for authoritative governance to emerge, but also as a means by which the more extensively studied elements of coercion and capital get mediated in insurgent-controlled areas. Other authors in the rebel governance literature have emphasized the limited applicability of a rationalist service delivery logic in rebel ruled societies, showing a more relational understanding of governance through networks, symbols, narratives, and performances. Mukhopadhyay and Howe, however, revamp this scholarly direction


2 Tilly, Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990 (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990). Tilly’s account is one of the most influential ones in the contemporary field of state formation. Several influential scholars have followed this tradition, though not without criticism. To name a few of those accounts: Jeffrey Herbst, States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Miguel Angel Centeno, Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

convincingly with the notion of solidarity, and thereby expand the theoretical possibilities of future rebel governance analyses.

A second main contribution of the book lies in its empirical data, which is both informative in its own right and valuable in showing the importance of their theory for analyzing governance and authority in these kinds of situations. With its comparative set-up, the book contributes to our specific understanding of political order in four areas of Syria after the first uprisings of 2011. The authors’ model logically guides their case selection of Raqqa, Saraquib, Drayya, and Aleppo City. Amongst others, their analysis shows how the absence of either capital, coercion, or connection/solidarity shapes variations in governance and authority in these areas. Their empirical chapters show that while these four cases are explicitly distinct, on a higher level of abstraction they are analytically similar in the way in which subnational political order emerges after the (temporary) demise of an authoritarian regime.

As a third main contribution, the book explores whether certain institutions of insurgent rule can be cultivated through foreign intervention. Mukhopadhyay and Howe usefully guide the reader through the different “waves” of Western-led foreign intervention in the geopolitical arena, and thereby historicize the policy consensus that seemed to exist around the support for “local” institutions as a form of good governance promotion. The book reveals that by the time many Syrians revolted against the regime in 2011, the policy idea had emerged that Western interveners could encourage better governing institutions from the bottom up in conflict-ridden pockets of the world with the aim of countering civil war, violent extremism, and other “undesirable” effects of “state fragility.” Their analysis and conclusions indicate that the tried mini-maximalist approach of foreign intervention to promote good governance did not—and perhaps cannot—usefully contribute and cultivate democratic governance. Many of these external efforts appeared to designate contrary effects to what the (rebel) authorities required to develop and improve their rule.

Mukhopadhyay and Howe convincingly deconstruct the interventionists’ logic of supporting “local” arrangements of governance, an analysis which is largely congruent with other fundamental critiques on the “local turn” in peace- and statebuilding. They bring forward many of the dilemmas around the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) in exile and show how the coinciding logic of supporting local institutions came about with seemingly good intentions, yet undermined the opposition’s ability to centralize and consolidate power in the face of the incumbent regime’s might. Like many other aspiring counter-states, the SIG in exile needed to play both the international and domestic arena to garner support and to expand its power. Leaning too much to the international audiences and funding they accompanied, the SIG neglected too much of its asabiyya on the domestic stage in Syria.

The authors conclude that “in aggregate, the opposition’s exchanges with Western donors distorted—if not transmuted—a politics of protest into a collaboration that, paradoxically, both supported and undermined the project of rebel governance” (141). More generally, they reflect upon the inherent problematic power dynamics between the most powerful states in the international system and the aspiring counter-states, and that knowledge production and framing in the international community fail to acknowledge the importance of solidarity as a form of legitimacy and a condition to govern with authority. They thereby address a

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The legitimacy paradox that holds true for international engagements with the Syrian opposition as well as many other instances where powerful external states or coalitions get involved in “local” governance promotion.5

The book further contains an authentic and reflective chapter on the underlying methods and ethics of the whole project. Mukhopadhyay and Howe take a look in the mirror as conflict-researchers and encourage others to do the same. They turn their view inside and reflect upon their own connection/solidarity in the practice of doing (field) research. Research like this, as Romain Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay herself argued elsewhere, happens by a kind of “tribe-building” and/or closeness that affords access, protection and understanding.6 Generally, throughout the book Mukhopadhyay and Howe prove to be reflective, both upon their research practices and findings.

Perhaps less enlighteningly, the book remains mostly on the surface as to why precisely influential individual states pushed for a mini-maximalist approach and not for a maximalist, or a maxi-minimalist approach in this specific case of the conflict in Syria. In general terms the authors claim that mini-maximalist approaches do not carry the same risks of overextension and quagmire that arise with maximalist campaigns. However, the book misses a discussion on the main considerations that prevailed amongst the political leadership of influential Western states in this specific case. In general, the book leaves the domestic political spheres of influential (Western) states, and how those individual foreign policy decisions came about, largely untouched. The “red line crisis” of the Obama administration, where a—later unenforced—red line on the use of chemical weapons was drawn towards the Assad regime, seems one crucial example of this. Furthermore, with crucial foreign policy decisions, countries tend to strike a balance between different kinds of strategic, political, moral, and legal considerations. In the book, the dimension of international law remains largely unaddressed. What inherent legal tensions and discussions prevailed in foreign policy circles in relation to the conflict in Syria? How did existing legal considerations dictate the perceived possibilities and impossibilities of the interventions? Hence, after reading the book, I was still somewhat left in the dark on the extent to which both domestic politics of influential Western states and legal considerations played decisive roles in how the contemporary history of the Syrian conflict and the Western interventions in the country unfolded.

Overall, Mukhopadhyay and Howe have made a theoretically strong, empirically elucidating, and reflective contribution to the field of rebel governance and the literature on external interventions in conflict-affected environments. This is essential reading for anyone who is trying to make better sense of what has happened in Syria since the uprising of 2011. The book is especially recommended for scholars and students in conflict studies, comparative politics, and international relations, as well as policymakers and practitioners in the field.

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It was with a sense of gratitude (and no small amount of relief) that we read the four reviews featured in this roundtable. Each author has approached our argument with great care and curiosity and, in so doing, engaged meaningfully with the effort we made in this book to examine the Syrian war and Western intervention therein. Their interpretations of the book’s argument reflect a deep understanding of our attempt to theorize anew about rebel governance, and their incisive questions set the stage for further debate about the thorniest aspects of foreign intervention, present and future. We will not use this limited space to respond to each of their queries and critiques, even as we acknowledge all of them as insightful and valid in their own right. Instead, we will attend to two broad areas of discussion that featured across the four reviews, namely the ontology of rebel governing authority as we articulate it, and the implications for the role of Western intervention in supporting revolutionary change in Syria and beyond.

At its core, this book represents an effort on our part to revisit the question of how those living through war conceive of governance. As we demonstrate in our chapter on the Islamic State’s reign in Raqqa, rebel rulers can establish control through coercion, and capacity through capital, and thus provide much-needed goods and services that yield some degree of popular appreciation. But, in reflecting on Jori Breslawski’s questions, we would reiterate that it is through the inhabitation of the connective bonds of kinship, aspiration, and experience that insurgent governors achieve a kind of institutional closeness through intimacy with their constituents that we understand as authoritative. Access to connective solidarities can also shape how wartime actors and institutions mobilize coercion and capital, even compensating for material deficits in important ways. But there are limits on the political work connection can do, and we explore those in our investigations of the besieged Damascene suburb of Darayya and the perennially contested city of Aleppo. Solidarity cannot feed starving people, nor can it introduce security in the face of anarchy, even as it enables empathy and perseverance in the midst of scarcity and suffering.

Institutional closeness, if achieved, is not a fixed outcome and, as Breslawski and Isak Svensson note, that fact complicates the relationship between ruler and ruled in ways that depart from conventional characterizations of governance and government. We embrace Svensson’s call for our argument to be put into conversation with work on non-violent resistance for the reasons he lays out, all of which center the importance of citizen agency. Authoritative rebel governance, as we conceive of it, is dialogical in nature, the product of an ongoing conversation between governor and constituent. If institutions that achieve closeness, like the Saraqeb Local Council, depart from the democratic aspirations of their constituents, those constituents may, like the townspeople of Saraqeb, have the capacity and inclination to reclaim their political project and demand something new. It is precisely this dynamism—and the various forms of back and forth it generates—that distinguish wartime politics from the more stable equilibria of peacetime governance, where categories like ruler and ruled (as well as civilian versus militant) are more easily distinguished. As Svensson puts it, “for the long-term effect of rebel governance, there is a need for civilian collaboration,” and that collaborative quality collapses what might otherwise be a more hierarchical or categorical set of interactions and outcomes.

As several of the reviewers suggest, the messy, ever-changing nature of rebel governance is but one of the many challenges that foreign interveners confronted in efforts to enable particular brands of insurgent rule in Syria. Laying out a number of those challenges, Svensson asks if there are “any conditions under which the West’s support for local councils could have facilitated the development of a more coherent counter-state project?” To start, we would point readers to the multi-methods analyses we conducted in collaboration with Allison Carnegie and Adam Lichtenheld in which we found, first, that aid improved popular perceptions of
opposition institutions when they were embedded in surrounding solidarities\(^1\) and, second, that its positive political effects were restricted to recipient communities unmarked by violent contestation.\(^2\) These findings made clear that, while all intervention was not futile, conditions mattered; and aid, far from enabling those conditions, only achieved its political goals when they already existed.

But, more importantly, an authoritative local council, even several of them, did not a counter-state make. Our book moves between the microcosms of rebel-controlled communities and the larger international ecosystem within which they resided precisely to expose the larger structures, incentives, and asymmetries that ultimately limit revolutionary politics from achieving their transformative goals. Moving between these two levels of analysis reveals the profoundly tragic fact that even good foreign intentions and local successes cannot often, if ever, outpace the perverse effects of intervention. We agree with Steven Heydemann that Western donors and Syrian actors shared many of the same ideas and commitments and that the former worked hard not to impose themselves on the latter, avoiding the more heavy-handed interventions taken in Afghanistan and Iraq. To Niels Terpstra’s point, this was part of the evolution in policy and practice that produced what we call a “mini-maximalist” approach. As we reflect on in our concluding chapter, the “shared reverie on the part of those who offered aid and those who needed it” (165) distinguished this effort from so many that came before.

And yet, in Heydemann’s words, “the disparities in power and resources that shape interactions between interveners and local actors in conflict-affected settings” prevailed. Terpstra correctly highlights the inevitable alchemy of political and legal considerations in Western capitals that shaped their approaches, while Svensson notes that numerous other countries, from Russia and Iran to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, had their own horses in the race and often engaged with a freer hand, only further complicating the scene. Might a more decisive Western intervention on behalf of Syria’s rebels have worked? We reflect on this question towards the end of the book—including a brief consideration of South Sudan—and conclude that no such confidence in the counterfactual is warranted. Instead, we leave our readers with the deeply discomfiting conclusion that foreign intervention of the mini-maximalist variety ultimately undermines the very revolutionary politics it claims to bolster. While, as Terpstra notes, normative commitments, shifting goals, and risk aversion on the part of the United States and its allies are all explicable and, perhaps, even rational, they help explain this paradoxical result. We hope that our readers will sit with this conclusion and the fact that it offers no clear remedy. We also hope that our book gives them the opportunity to bear witness to the extraordinary courage, creativity, and commitment of the Syrian revolutionary project, which, albeit unfulfilled, profoundly altered the nature of its country’s politics just the same.
