

Review – Rebel Governance in the Middle East

Written by Francis O'Connor

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Rebel Governance in the Middle East
Edited by Ibrahim Fraihat and Abdalhadi Alijla
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Unlike some other overlapping fields, such as social movement studies, which are characterised by historical western-centricity, the field of rebel governance was originally pioneered in non-western cases (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015; Mampilly 2011). However, with some notable exceptions, including some contributors to this volume (Schwab 2018; Furlan 2022), the Middle East has been somewhat underrepresented in the field. Accordingly, Fraihat and Alijla's edited volume is a most welcome and original effort to address this geographical gap in the field, particularly in light of the significant presence of multiple armed groups of varying ideological orientation across the region.

The volume begins with a well put together introduction by the two co-editors, although the first page argument that rebel governance is an understudied topic seems difficult to justify. Recent years have seen multiple monographs in the most high-profile university presses and special issues and individual articles in highly prestigious journals. While one could query the theoretical ambition and creativity of this broader output, rebel governance has undoubtedly taken root in the mainstream study of conflict (see Teiner 2022). Commendably, the volume includes multiple authors from the region and, even more importantly, contributions from research institutions in the region, adding locally informed expertise to the field often absent in external western analysis of conflict in the Middle East.

Geographically, the book includes three cases from Syria, two addressing the governance efforts of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and one looking at service provision and legitimacy in predominantly Kurdish areas of Northern Syria. One looks at the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon and a further chapter looks at the evolution of Iranian backed militias in Iraq and how their presence undermines state institutions. The only chapter which attempts a comparative assessment across state boundaries looks at the propagandistic use of rebel governance by ISIS in Syria and Iraq. A theoretically robust chapter by Furlan assesses the role of ideology in rebel governance implementation across two time periods of Al-Qaida rule in Yemen, thus innovatively providing historical, within-case comparison. A chapter on Afghanistan, often not categorised as a Middle Eastern country, looks at the critical importance of the Taliban's relationship with its supportive constituency. Other chapters include a focus on tribalism in Libya, how Hamas has used governance to consolidate power in Palestine, and the final contribution looks from an interdisciplinary perspective at the reach of international criminal governance in the cases of Hezbollah and ISIS.

There are a few standout chapters which will certainly make a substantial contribution to our field. Grant-Brook's argument about state-insurgent interactions and the blurry boundaries between armed groups, the state, and local elites is particularly well founded and convincingly illustrated. Schwab's chapter on competitive rebel governance builds on her earlier work and is also theoretically ambitious, generating theoretical insights from the empirical cases rather than wholesale importing existing templates of rebel governance and testing them in the Middle East context. It is regrettable that the two chapters do not interact with one another, as there would have been ample scope for complementary insights because they look at chronologically distinct phases of HTS/Jabhat al-Nusrah's evolution. Furlan's chapter is one of the few to reference other chapters in the volume and presents findings that will certainly resonate beyond discussions on rebel governance in the region. Ezbidi's case study of Hamas rule in Gaza takes

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account of its conceptually ambiguous role as government and resistance movement, creatively fusing the literatures on governance and rebel governance. Other chapters by Al-Aloosy and Bakir were very informative and engaging to read but did not engage in any substantial fashion with the literature on rebel governance and came across more as high-quality, long-read forms of journalism rather than academic texts.

As is almost inevitably the case in edited collections, there is a degree of inconsistency across the volume. Some chapters are written in an academic fashion, but most include no mention of data or methods, erratically engaging with the literature on rebel governance. One of the volume's strengths is the diffuse background and locally informed provenance of many of the authors, but this also presents certain challenges; language editing was not comprehensive in certain chapters, potentially undermining readers' ability to fully engage with their content. This, however, is rather a reflection on the publisher's engagement with the publication process rather than the efforts of the authors' themselves.

As somebody working on Kurdish armed movements, albeit not in Syria, the chapter on governance and legitimacy in Qamishli by Alijla stood out for a number of reasons. It is rooted in a highly contestable premise that the history of Kurds in Syria shows that a visible coexistence was possible. This "Syria for all" (p.43) perspective downplays the mass denial of citizenship to Kurds during the Assad regime, the policies of Arabization, and the huge Kurdish discontent with this "Syria for all" as evidenced by the Qamishli uprising in 2004. While the author can reasonably question the non-state or post-state ideology of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) (see for e.g. Leezenberg 2016), one could argue that the PYD's claims to not wish to install a separate state in the region is a medium-term strategy to consolidate support before then launching a subsequent campaign for a state. But to simply ignore that the PYD and its allies explicitly reject a state as its goal, is problematic. Particularly when, due to its governance model's decentralised nature, it allows other ethnic and religious communities to substantially rule themselves, unlike the centralising tendencies of the Assad regime.

In summary, this book makes a substantial contribution to understanding practises of rebel governance in societies and conflicts which have been heretofore neglected within the sub-field. It has helped consolidate a broader agenda on rebel governance in the Middle East which goes beyond focusing on Islamist exceptionalism. I have no doubt that it will be broadly cited and has hopefully laid the foundation for a more theoretically ambitious understanding not only of rebel governance in the Middle East but in rebel groups globally.

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