



Perspectives on the rebel social contract: Exit, voice, and loyalty in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the concept of the rebel social contract by examining the case of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. The concept of the social contract is a cornerstone of political theory and is increasingly invoked in discussions of civil war and authoritarian regimes, when prospective rulers offer political protections and social benefits in return for the allegiance of citizens. The social contract is often assumed to exist, but is rarely evaluated empirically. It remains difficult to distinguish between political stability derived from consent and stability derived from coercion and domination given their observational equivalence. Civil wars, in which rebel groups seek to supplant the state, provide opportunities to observe the construction and negotiation of new social contracts. The article uses Hirschman's exit/voice/loyalty typology to develop a qualitative empirical method for evaluating evidence of the rebels' "offer" of a social contract to civilians and their acceptance or rejection of that offer. We demonstrate this method by applying it to the case of IS using evidence including official IS documents, social media posts from within IS-controlled territory, and interviews with individuals who have personally experienced IS governance. We conclude that while IS leadership wanted to gain voluntary assent, most of the civilian response to IS rule suggested domination and authoritarian forms of social-contract building. This finding is illustrative of the analytical and methodological challenges involved in studying the social contract in rebel governance and the importance of considering domination, not just reciprocity, as the foundation for political order.

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This article seeks to build a methodological bridge between theoretical and the empirical approaches to the study of social contracts in periods of state breakdown and civil wars. Scholars of civil war increasingly describe reciprocal relationships between rebel groups and civilians. Rebels need the populations under their control to recruit fighters, extract resources, and legitimize their political authority. In return, they allocate material and symbolic resources to try to win support from the population (Duyvesteyn, 2017; Huang, 2016; Ismail, 2016; Milliken & Krause, 2002; Terpstra & Frerks, 2017; Wickham-Crowley, 2015). Reciprocal relationships between rebel groups and civilians are negotiated not only during war but also after the cessation of violence through ceasefires and other conflict resolution mechanisms that create new political orders (Sosnowski, 2018).

Yet, similar to discussions of authoritarian social contracts in this special issue, there is a disjuncture between theories of social

contract and empirical research on the exchange between rebel groups and the civilians they aspire to rule. While political theorists offer increasingly elaborate and abstract argumentations to explain the origins of social order, empirical research on rebel social contracts is considerably less developed. The "contract" between rebel rulers and civilians is often treated as a kind of "tacit" arrangement, not a real negotiation or agreement (Kasfir, Frerks, & Terpstra, 2017). Although there have been discussions of social contracts in the context of undemocratic states, variation in the reciprocity and voluntariness of bargains between rebels and civilians has been under-studied in the field of rebel governance. This article addresses the methodological and theoretical challenges that emerge from considering the rebel social contract.

The article first considers social contract theory and offers a methodology to collect evidence of the ways in which rebel rulers and civilians enter into contract-like relationships. We operationalize Hirschman's exit/voice/loyalty (EVL) typology (Hirschman, 1970, 1978) to describe a spectrum of potential civilian responses to rebel governance and relate these responses to social contract theory. The second section illustrates these different responses

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with evidence from the case of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria.

We use the EVL typology to evaluate original data that describes IS's purported social contract from the perspective of both the rebels and civilians. The data includes social media posts, official IS documents, and interviews with IS members and civilians who lived in IS-controlled territory. We describe what IS claimed to be offering to civilians: forms of procedural and economic justice derived from its harsh and selective interpretation of sharia (Islamic law). We then examine civilian responses to IS's assertion of statehood and its social contract. Our empirical findings reveal two gaps between rebel and civilian understandings of the social contract. First, many civilians either did not believe or never received IS's communications of the terms of its social contract. Second, even when civilians appeared to comply with the terms of IS's social contract, they often did so for instrumental reasons (particularly the need for survival), not because of ideological and normative agreement. We conclude by discussing challenges inherent to empirically evaluating the rebel social contract. In cases of authoritarian rebel social contracts such as that of IS, civilians have limited leverage to negotiate its terms and protections. Instead of thinking of the social contract as the foundation of an alternative political order, we suggest that it serves as the focal point for asymmetrical contestation between rebels and civilians in the case of IS.

1. The rebel social contract in theory and practice

The social contract is a cornerstone in normative political theory. Contractarian approaches hold that individuals' rational self-interest leads them to consent to governing authority. The contract is, in this sense, transactional and utilitarian. On the other hand, contractualists hold that the social contract comes about through deliberations that reach common moral and normative ground, not just expediency (Cudd & Eftekhari, 2018; Darwell, 2008; Moehler, 2018). Conducting empirical research on the social contract has been very challenging. Many suggest that domination is a more important determinant of state-society relations than reciprocity (Sulkunen, 2007). One of the key challenges facing researchers who seek to empirically measure the presence of a social contract is to assess whether subjects accept rule voluntarily or under duress. Given power imbalances, subjects often falsify their preferences, expressing allegiance to rulers to avoid recrimination while quietly awaiting a chance to resist (Kuran, 1997).

The increasing prevalence of civil wars since the end of the Cold War has prompted researchers to return to questions about the basis of political order (Arjona, 2015, 2016; Mampilly, 2012). The breakdown of states that had once monopolized violence grants civilians opportunities to renegotiate existing relationships. Some rebel groups operate as would-be states, competing with states or other armed actors to attain a monopoly over political violence and authority within the territory they control (Bakonyi & Bliesemann De Guevara, 2009; Kalyvas, 2006; Staniland, 2014). Civilians can pressure competing armed actors to offer different kinds of protection and services (Baines & Paddon, 2012; Kaplan, 2017). Weinstein sees cooperation between rebels and civilians largely as a function of material self-interest, mirroring utilitarian contractarianism (Weinstein, 2007). Civilians provide political and economic support through their compliance with taxation and conscription. In exchange, rebels establish and operate institutions devoted to healthcare, education, dispute resolution, and the regulation of economic markets (Arjona, 2014). Other scholars highlight the moral and symbolic language that rebels use to justify new modes of social relations (Mampilly, 2012; Schlichte,

2009; Wickham-Crowley, 1987). This perspective concords with contractualist notion of social contract's normative groundings.

Although periods of civil war and state breakdown create opportunities for the study of new political orders, these same conditions pose profound ethical, logistical, and methodological problems for the conduct of research (Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016; Nissim & Tamar, 2011; Wood, 2006). Travel and research within rebel-held territory is often difficult or impossible. Both civilians and researchers may feel pressure to self-censor to avoid reprisals in such anarchic conditions, and researchers must consider the ways in which their contact with human subjects has the potential to cause harm. Kasfir observed how Ugandan peasants aided rebel troops seemingly freely and willingly. The rebels cited these donations as proof of their popular legitimacy. Still, Kasfir notes that "most peasants probably felt an underlying sense of coercion, even if they were not open about it" (Kasfir, 2005, p. 285). Examining the formation and operation of a rebel social contract, then, requires a methodology that is attentive to asymmetries of power and differentiates between coerced compliance and voluntary consent. Other scholars have documented coercive forms of rebel governance (Hoffmann & Verweijen, 2018; Kasfir, 2005; Terpstra & Frerks, 2017), but the challenge of collecting and interpreting evidence from cases of asymmetric and authoritarian rebel social contracts has not been sufficiently studied.

In order to address these obstacles, we operationalize a methodology for evaluating rebel social contracts derived from the EVL typology. We define the rebel social contract as a system of governance produced through a reciprocal exchange between rebel rulers and civilians. There are two necessary elements to the social contract:

- 1) A rebel group must *offer* a set of protections and benefits to the population in expectation of receiving *support*, defined as obedience and cooperation with the rules imposed by the rebel group, which often include regulations governing behavior, religion, economic activity, and obligations to provide material support in the form of taxes or labor;
- 2) Civilians must *accept*, either voluntarily or involuntarily, the rebel offer as evidenced by observable expressions of obedience and cooperation.

Drawing upon legal theories of contract formation (Katz, 1990), we argue that neither *offer* nor *acceptance* alone is sufficient for the establishment of a social contract: both must be present in order for the exchange to be reciprocal. Importantly, our definition allows for variation in rebel social contracts, ranging from relatively democratic and inclusive systems of governance that include institutions such as elections (Arves et al., 2019; Ginsburg, 2019; Stewart, 2020) to coercive, authoritarian systems of governance such as that established by IS, in which the rebel government guarantees little more than protection in exchange for obedience (Achy, 2014).

Our definition of the rebel social contract is related to but distinct from collaboration with rebel rulers, which Kalyvas argues is a function of territorial control rather than of the legitimacy of the rebel group (Arjona, 2014, 2017; Kalyvas, 2006, 2012). Kalyvas argues that territorial control is the primary determinant of civilian collaboration with either rebels or states, regardless of the presence of bargaining or negotiations between rebels and civilians over the rules of governance. Our article builds on Arjona's work on rebel social contracts, finding that rebel groups are most likely to establish a social contract with civilians when they have a long as opposed to short time horizon. Rebels' expectation of long-term territorial control creates incentives to regulate civil life through a social contract. Arjona describes variation in the degree to which a rebel social contract intervenes in preexisting civilian life, ranging

from a minimalist “aliocracy” to a more interventionist “rebelocracy” (Arjona, 2016). Still, most previous work on rebel social contracts has been largely theoretical, and there is a need for methodological frameworks to collect data on and analyze different types of rebel social contracts and variation in civilian responses to them.

One source of evidence for rebels’ offer of the social contract is official discourse and propaganda. These communications signal how rebel organizations intend to balance the promise of reciprocity and the threat of coercion, what specific benefits and protections are on offer, and how individuals and social groups (e.g., tribes or ethnic groups) enter into the social contract. The second step is comparing discourse to action to show the extent of commitment rebels display to upholding their own promises and whether ideology actually constrains behavior (Sanín & Wood, 2014; Schubiger & Zelina, 2017).

Making inferences about civilians’ acceptance (or lack thereof) of a rebel social contract is considerably more difficult due to the scarcity or absence of visible evidence. We adapt Hirschman’s EVL typology to describe a spectrum of potential civilian responses to rebel governance (Barter, 2016). Different kinds of responses can be assigned different dispositive weights according to the logic of process tracing, a qualitative research method that is commonly used to investigate complex mechanisms and causal processes that cannot be revealed by quantitative analysis alone (Bennett & Checkel, 2015; Collier, 2011; Mahoney, 2012). In wartime settings where quantitative data may be difficult or impossible to collect, process tracing is a particularly useful tool to study the rebel social contract. Below, we suggest ways of interpreting evidence of rebel social contracts through process tracing.

The first option for civilians confronted with the offer of a rebel social contract is *loyalty*, of which evidence can be found in expressions of support or voluntary compliance with the rebel group’s rules and orders. Sometimes, civilians offer affirmative signals of their assent, such as by participating in rituals of legitimation, expressions of obedience, or payment of taxes and other forms of material support. These could indicate acceptance of the social order, either active or tacit. Yet, as discussed above, these outward signs of loyalty are not strongly dispositive. Compliance induced by legitimacy and compliance induced by fear are observationally equivalent. Moreover, some people who seem to be practicing loyalty may actually be undertaking a quiet exit, withdrawing from the public sphere and adopting a quiescent or cynical posture (Haggard & Noland, 2010). Based on the logic of process tracing, we can consider such indicators of loyalty to be an evidentiary “straw-in-the-wind.” It increases the plausibility of the existence of a social contract but alone is inconclusive.

The second option available to civilians is *voice*. Hirschman defines voice as any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to higher authority with the intention of forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion (Hirschman, 1970, p. 30).

Voicing complaints is futile if there is no expectation of improvement. At the same time, those who complain can suffer recrimination. Some rebel groups create institutional mechanisms for civilians to lodge complaints and demands for accountability. Expressing their grievances through institutional procedures, as opposed to violent resistance or fleeing, suggests that civilians anticipate some degree of receptivity by the rebel government and regard its institutions as at least minimally legitimate and effective (Dimitrov, 2014). In terms of evidentiary weight in process-tracing, these acts of dissent and criticism from within may be interpreted as “hoop test” evidence of civilians’ acceptance

of the legitimacy of the social contract. In the logic of process tracing, a hypothesis must “jump through the hoop” to remain plausible, but passing the test does not alone affirm the hypothesis (Collier, 2011).

The final civilian option in EVL is *exit* (migration out of rebel-controlled territory), which provides evidence of rejection of the rebel social contract. However, we acknowledge that migration and displacement decisions are highly complex and are influenced by numerous variables including social networks and information (Moore & Shellman, 2007; Schon, 2019), economic resources (Adhikari, 2013), geography and transportation infrastructure (Czaika & Kis-Katos, 2009), levels of violence (Steele, 2009), and identity traits (Balcells, 2018; Steele, 2018). We do not claim that rejection of the rebel social contract is the sole determinant of migration and displacement decisions, only that it is one of many contributing factors.

Migration is the most easily observable form of exit, although more subtle forms of withdrawal from the public arena are also possible. Exit is the clearest signal that civilians hold little hope for improvement if they stay in their current location (Birch, 1975; Pfaff & Kim, 2003). If and when a regime allows civilians to “vote with their feet,” the decision to exit is a strong signal of rejection of the social contract offered by the new regime in favor of a preferable outside alternative (Hoffmann, 2005; Warren, 2011). Exit also provides another indirect form of evidence. Those who flee rebel-held territory are the least likely to express positive views about the former rulers whom they are fleeing (Jung & Dalton, 2006; Okamoto & Wilkes, 2008). Given this likely bias, a slightly favorable opinion expressed by someone who fled a rebel group’s system of governance—such as acknowledging the quality or efficiency of rebel courts or services—makes inference all the stronger. Exit, therefore, can provide especially strong evidence of acceptance or rejection of the social contract.

Ours is not the first effort to develop a typology of civilian responses to a rebel group. Arjona identifies three categories of civilian responses: cooperation (including obedience, spontaneous support, and enlistment), non-cooperation (disobedience, resistance, and defection), and migration (Arjona, 2017). Loyalty is a form of cooperation and migration a form of exit. Although our typology bears similarities—cooperation is a form of “loyalty” and migration is a form “exit”—we differ in our demarcation of an intermediary category, “voice,” which includes elements of cooperation and non-cooperation. Civilians who express grievances against the rebel group engage in contestation and resistance within a rebel social contract that they accept as minimally legitimate.

1.1. Studying the social contract in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

As many of the contributions to this special issue argue, the 2011 Arab uprisings stemmed from the perceived failures of the old authoritarian social contract (Hinnebusch, 2020; El-Haddad, 2020; Loewe and Zintl, forthcoming). Both Iraq and Syria relied on broadly redistributive policies as part of their efforts to formulate social contracts that would bind their precarious political communities together (de Elvira & Zintl, 2014; Ismael & Ismael, 2015). At the same time, regime propaganda also tried to tap into the symbolic and normative ideals of nationalism and group identity. As Wedeen argues, Syrians often met these efforts with subtle forms of dissimulation and preference falsification that challenged the state’s ability to define the terms of citizenship and obligation (Wedeen, 2015).

IS originated as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which formed early in Iraq’s civil war of the mid-2000s. AQI exploited Sunni grievances, promising to oust the U.S. occupation and overturn what it deemed the heresy of a Shi’a-dominated government. They capitalized on

disaffection and fears of abuse at the hands of the U.S. and Iraqi governments. Following internal feuds and ideological disagreements, AQI leadership broke with the main arm of al-Qaeda and renamed itself the “Islamic State.” IS expanded its operations when civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, taking Raqqa as its operational capital. By 2013, IS had established courts and began providing other services to civilians. In June 2014, IS seized a large swath of territory in west-central Iraq. IS dismantled part of the colonially-imposed border between Syria and Iraq, symbolically signaling its intent to establish a social contract with new spatial as well as substantive dimensions. IS’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the establishment of a “caliphate” following the conquest of Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city. While some analysts regard IS as a millenarian cult or predatory criminal enterprise (Stern & Berger, 2015), in this article, we take seriously IS’s aspiration to establish a state-like “caliphate” based on the model of Islamic governance first laid out by the Prophet Mohammed (Bunzel, 2016; March & Revkin, 2015). Ultimately, however, IS’s attempt at rebel governance crumbled as the group overextended to far flung territory and faced increasing military pressure in both Syria and Iraq. By late 2019, the group no longer controlled significant territory, although its remaining fighters continued to perpetrate bombings, assassinations, and other attacks on civilian and military targets.

2. Methodology

This article examines IS’s system of governance and civilian responses to it in Iraq and Syria during the years 2014–2017, when the group controlled substantial territory in both countries. We rely on qualitative data sources to describe the elements of the social contract that IS claimed to be offering to civilians, and to evaluate variation in civilian responses. These include official IS documents, interviews with Syrians and Iraqis who have knowledge of the organization’s policies including victims of violence and ex-combatants, and social media posts published by individuals who claimed to be in or near IS-controlled areas.

IS’s bureaucracy produced a vast number of documents and other forms of written, audio, and visual communication. These included several forms of propaganda, rules and religious edicts to regulate the conduct of civilians as well as its own members, court verdicts, and transactional documents such as receipts and contracts. Some of these documents (particularly propaganda) were widely circulated by IS members or supporters over social media and messaging applications. Other documents were smuggled out of IS-controlled territory by civilians or combatants, in hard copies or photographic form. Although IS forces often destroyed incriminating documents in territory that they anticipated losing, many archives have been discovered in areas from which the organization has retreated. Since conflict-affected individuals are often reluctant to discuss traumatic experiences, these documents are a vital complement to interview data (Revkin, 2020).

A second source of data is semi-structured interviews with individuals selected for their knowledge of or personal experience with IS. The paper cites interviews with 13 Syrians drawn from a larger set of more than 300 interviews with civilians and combatants from IS-controlled areas collected by one of the authors (Revkin). These individuals were identified through snowball sampling over the course of four research trips to southern Turkey between July 2015 and April 2017.¹ Snowball sampling is often the only way to

access clandestine populations (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). Fieldwork was conducted in the southeastern cities of Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa, which are close to the Syrian border and therefore were ideal locations in which to meet civilians and combatants from IS-controlled areas.

We also draw on social media data (Twitter posts) written by individuals who claimed to be in or near IS-controlled areas. Given the inaccessibility of these areas to researchers, such data provides rare insights into events and experiences that would otherwise be invisible to outsiders. Twitter data was collected using the Twitter search API (Application Program Interface) for posts containing Arabic keywords associated with governance, courts, policing, taxation and, service provisions (Appendix). Less than 1% of Twitter posts are geotagged by the authors (Sloan & Morgan 2015). We infer the location of the Twitter posts cited in this article by the authors’ self-reported locations in Iraq or Syria or other contextual information, but we acknowledge that we cannot externally verify the locations of non-geotagged posts.

2.1. What IS claimed to offer

IS began publishing constitution-like “charters of the city” (*wathīqa al-madīnah*) documents in 2014 in Raqqa and Mosul. Similar documents, with only minor variations, appeared subsequently in other IS-controlled areas of Iraq, Syria, and Libya. In 2015, IS issued an electronic version of the document addressed to all residents of the “caliphate” (Islamic State, 2016). Collectively, these documents are the most explicit articulation of IS’s vision for the social contract.

The *wathīqa* was inspired by a text allegedly drafted by the Prophet himself to govern the city of Medina in the year 622. It lays out IS’s approach to governance and the relationship between the caliph and civilians whom IS refers to as *an-Nās* (“the people”) and more paternalistically as *ri’aya* (“the flock”) (Islamic State, 2016). These texts enumerate the obligations of IS to its subjects and vice versa. The preamble explicitly describes the document as a “contract” (*’aqd*) that “defines the *shari’a* principles and Islamic regulations by which the shepherd and the flock are bound.” The provisions can be distilled into a few common themes, including the right to justice and due process under an Islamic judicial system, security of persons and property, and the duty to adhere to IS’s interpretation of Sunni Islam, including abstention from alcohol and drugs, and the entitlement to public goods and services provided by IS.

Coinciding with the publication of these texts, IS attempted to establish a monopoly on violence and excluded rival groups from its territories. One of the first moves IS made upon expanding into Syria in 2013 was to assert exclusive jurisdiction over the resolution of tribal disputes (Revkin, 2016b). The Raqqa *wathīqa* states that “councils and associations and banners with various names are absolutely unacceptable” and continues, “God commands that you join [the Islamic State] and renounce factions and strife” (Islamic State, 2014d). IS’s demand for absolute allegiance is best articulated through the mandatory oath of allegiance (*bay’a*). Like the *wathīqa*, the *bay’a* is laden with historical significance dating back to the Prophet Muhammed and early caliphs.

For IS, a declaration of *bay’a* is both personal, to al-Baghdadi as caliph, and institutional, a declaration of loyalty to the caliphate. According to one IS document, the *bay’a* is “a pledge of obedience in which the pledger delegates to his leader the authority to oversee his affairs and the affairs of society” (Islamic State, 2015). Once the *bay’a* is offered, there is no right to rebellion. However, al-Baghdadi himself alluded to the importance of holding leaders accountable if they fail to govern according to *shari’a* in his first official speech as caliph: “If [the caliph] orders the people to fear Allah and he is just, then he is rewarded. And if he orders anything

¹ This field research was covered by [removed for blinding] University IRB Protocol #1506016040. For ethical and security reasons, interviews were conducted anonymously and all subjects are referred to by pseudonyms.

else, then he will be held accountable for that" (Al-Baghdadi, 2014).

The *wathīqa* also sought to define the relationships among civilians. A recurring theme in IS propaganda was the requirement of fair treatment of Sunni Muslim civilians, regardless of economic or social status (Islamic State, 2014e). Police "are to be selected from among God-fearing men who show no favoritism, such that he who has committed a *hadd* [crime] will receive the full punishment without any mitigation" (Islamic State, 2015b). IS claimed that its own leaders and officials were not above the law: "The Islamic State is just and there is no distinction between a soldier and a Muslim [civilian]. In the *shari'a* courts, all are held accountable and no one has immunity, just as the Prophet would have cut off the hand of Fatima [his youngest daughter] if she had committed a theft" (Islamic State, 2014b). An official textbook stated that civilian bureaucrats and military personnel were to be appointed on a meritocratic basis rather than through nepotism (Islamic State, 2015b).

As part of its social contract, IS also created a legal system for resolving disputes amongst citizens and between civilians and the IS government. A document describing the activities of the IS police department in Raqqa claims, "The holder of a right has redress, and the grievance of an injured party will be answered" (Islamic State, 2014c). Although the rights of women were severely restricted by IS—for example, women could not travel outside of their homes unless accompanied by a male guardian—they could still bring grievances to the court system. According to a report issued by IS's female police force, "A woman can go to the court and present her grievance with complete freedom, and she will find that [the judge] listens to her and guarantees her right without bargaining or bribes" (Islamic State, 2015a, 21). IS made efforts to portray its justice system as both fairer and more efficient than the legal systems of the Syrian and Iraqi governments.

While IS claimed to guarantee the equality of (male) Sunni Muslims, it simultaneously enforced a sectarian hierarchy in which non-Sunni and non-Muslim communities were treated as inferior. Adherents of Abrahamic religions were entitled to some protection and freedom of worship in exchange for their payment of a special tax known as *jizya*. The *jizya* pact stipulated a ban on construction or repair of houses of worship, possession of weapons, engaging in religious rituals outside of the church, or giving sanctuary to spies (Islamic State, 2014a). The rights of Christians living under IS rule were much more limited than those of Muslims, but Christians were nonetheless entitled to some protection. Much lower on the ethno-sectarian hierarchy were communities IS deemed to be apostates or "unbelievers," such as the Yezidis. IS asserted the legal authority to kill or enslave apostates and unbelievers because they were considered too deviant to be integrated into its social contract (Mirza, 2017; Ahram, 2015).

Another element of the IS social contract was the protection of private property and public safety. According to the Raqqa *wathīqa*, "The people in the shadow of our rule are secure and safe." The document specifies additional protections for private property: "No one is permitted to reach out his hand to loot or steal ... [and anyone who does] will be brought before the *shari'a* judiciary" (Islamic State, 2014b). Importantly, these benefits are not necessarily limited to Muslims. A photograph posted on Twitter by an IS supporter showed an IS guard outside of a church in Mosul, purportedly to protect Christians who had paid the *jizyah* tax.² This evidence is consistent with IS's claim that all of its subjects—including certain religious minorities—were entitled to protection.

² Photograph posted on Twitter by @abdoshado50 with the caption, "A church under the protection of soldiers of the Islamic State. ... After [Christians] paid the *jizya* [tax]." October 27, 2014. <https://web.archive.org/web/20160825131549/https://twitter.com/abdoshado50/status/526960761340690432>.

IS's social contract also included the provision of essential services and public goods including electricity, infrastructure, sanitation, and health care. IS claimed that it was bound by a divine obligation to allocate resources in ways conducive to the welfare of its subjects. As the Raqqa *wathīqa* states, "Funds will be spent in the *maṣlaha* [public interest] of the Muslims" (Islamic State, 2014b). Another document emphasizes the importance of maintaining "consistent monetary revenues whose value remains stable at all times and places" in order to satisfy the material needs of the people (Islamic State, 2015d, 11). As one propagandist wrote in an article directed at prospective recruits, "Do not worry about money or accommodations for yourself and your family. There are plenty of homes and resources to cover you and your family" (Islamic State 2014b, 33). IS prioritized restoring basic services in newly-captured territory and provided humanitarian relief through activities including the distribution of subsidized bread and the opening of orphanages (Revkin, 2016a).

In exchange for its provision of services, IS demanded *zakāt*, a mandatory charitable contribution that is the functional equivalent of an income tax, in addition to border taxes, excise taxes, fines, licensing fees, property taxes, and services fees (Revkin, 2020). These taxes and fees were an important source of revenue for IS. According to one estimate, IS derived \$56 million from taxes on cereal crops in the year 2015 alone (Jaafar & Woertz, 2016). *Zakāt*, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, is obligatory on all Muslims with sufficient means to pay. An official IS video identifies eight areas of public spending for which *zakāt* revenues can be allocated including: helping those in "absolute poverty," proselytizing, freeing Muslim slaves or liberating Muslim prisoners captured by non-Muslims, and supporting jihad (Islamic State, 2015c). An official IS textbook implies that tax evasion is a breach of the social contract: "If a group of people refuses to pay [*zakāt*], this group will be fought the same way Abu Bakr [the first successor the Prophet Muhammed] ... fought those who refused to pay *zakāt* because they are considered rebels" (Islamic State, 2015b). According to an official IS video, anyone who denies the obligation to pay *zakāt* is a *kāfir* ("unbeliever"), and anyone who "resist[s] its payment with force" is guilty of apostasy from Islam (Islamic State, 2015c). Since apostasy is a capital crime in IS's legal system, civilians can in theory be executed for refusing to pay *zakāt* (Revkin, 2016b). IS also collected property taxes known as *khāraḡ*. A Syrian merchant explained that IS tax collectors used the number doors on a shop as a proxy the size of business in assessing taxes.³ Interviewees confirmed that civilians who evaded or missed payments were often subjected to fines or imprisonment.⁴

Taxes were imposed not only on civilians but also combatants according to both IS documents and interviews with former combatants.⁵ Fighters were required to pay a tax of 20 percent all spoils of war acquired during military campaigns, including land, buildings, weapons, antiquities, and slaves.⁶

Assessing both official discourse and actions in governance, it is clear that IS leaders claimed to be offering a robust and explicit social contract. This contract promised physical protection and economic well-being to those who abided by its rules. But IS clearly hoped for more than just transaction-motivated compliance with this contract. IS envisioned a morally and spiritually reformed society based on the model of the original caliphate. It would be

³ Interview with Yahya, Gaziantep, November 2015.

⁴ Interviews with "Fares" and "Yayha" in Gaziantep (July 2015) and "Samer" and "Firas" in Sanliurfa (November 2015).

⁵ Interviews with "Ammar," in Sanliurfa, Turkey (March 2016) and "Ali," Online, (February 2016).

⁶ Islamic State, Media Office of North Baghdad Province, "Photographic Report: Aspect of the Spoils of the Islamic State in the Battle of Nazem with the Safavid Army Near the Nibai Region," April 30, 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20160530085534/https://justpaste.it/we_sh_bag01.

tempting to dismiss this utopian claim as empty rhetoric intended to legitimize highly coercive power and violence. This, however, would discount the time and resources expended by IS ideologues in developing this complex message. The choice to characterize its system of governance as a “caliphate” reflected deep-seated theological objectives that set IS apart from other radical Islamist groups. Like the Arab autocracies it aimed to displace, IS took pains to offer a social contract that was not just about material goods but normative fulfillment. It promised not just political order, but moral order based on a particular interpretation of Islam. In this sense, IS aspired to more deep-seated contractualist form of covenant with society.

2.2. Evidence of civilian response to the social contract

While IS’s official publications and statements provide strong evidence that the group claimed to be offering civilians a kind of social contract—albeit a highly authoritarian and asymmetric one—the attitudes of civilians toward this purported social contract are much harder to ascertain. Still, the EVL typology can help to illuminate and explain the range of civilian responses to IS governance and its explicit offer of social contract.

2.3. Loyalty: expressions of allegiance

IS propagandists have used rituals like *baya’* to bolster their claim to legitimacy by publicizing instances in which other groups and individuals undertake the oath of loyalty, including non-contiguous “franchises” in countries including Nigeria and Afghanistan (Zelin, 2015). Those who attended Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s sermon in Mosul on July 5, 2014 were perceived to have made the *baya’*, substantiating the caliphate. IS media published announcements both of individuals offering the oath, as well collective pledges of allegiance by whole tribes or large groups of people gathered in public squares.⁷ New IS recruits and enemy combatants who defected from rival groups to join IS were required to repent and swear *baya’* as well.⁸

In the early stages of IS’s territorial expansion, supporters praised the group for providing essential services and redistributing resources from the rich to the poor. In June 2014, one IS supporter wrote on Twitter that “[i]n our state, the Islamic State, there are no poor and no needy because *zakāt* is taken from the rich and given to the poor.”⁹ Another described how, “In the village of Hamima in al-Badiya [near the Syrian city of Homs] the Islamic State is taking *zakāt* from the rich of the village and giving it to the poor amid the joy of the villagers over the performance of a divine obligation.”¹⁰ In October 2015 another IS supporter on Twitter pointed out that “The [Islamic] State marries its youth and guarantees them housing.”¹¹ One interviewee from Aleppo reported that his cousin joined IS after he was impressed by its speedy resolution of a decades-old land dispute for his aunt.¹² Even though the IS court ultimately ruled against his aunt, the efficiency and procedural fairness of the process was more important to him than the outcome,

consistent with other research on the procedural foundations of legitimacy (Tyler, 2006).

Of course, civilians can feign expressions of loyalty. As IS’s system of governance became increasingly repressive over time, civilians overwhelmingly complied with the group’s strict rules regulating behavior and religious practices. Accordingly, instances of behavioral compliance with IS’s policies should be interpreted as “straws in the wind,” having limited evidentiary weight in evaluating the social contract. It is difficult to discern the meaning of cooperation in such an authoritarian context since compliance motivated by fear and coercion is observationally equivalent to compliance motivated by genuine belief in the legitimacy of IS rule.

2.4. Voice: critique from within

Voicing criticism publicly or through rebel institutions provides an important window into whether the public accepted IS’s social contract. As discussed earlier, acts of criticism, dissent, and official complaints may be interpreted as “hoop test” evidence of a civilian’s acceptance of the terms of the social contract in a process-tracing analysis. IS claimed to hold its own officials and fighters accountable to the organization’s rules. Accordingly, special offices known as *dawawīn al-mazālim* (“departments of grievances”) received complaints against IS members and combatants (Revkin, 2016b, 26). In some areas, IS issued public statements inviting civilians to report misconduct by its members.¹³ According to one report, IS placed a “complaints box” at a mosque in Mosul.¹⁴ IS publicized the complaints procedures, but the extent to which civilians actually utilized these accountability mechanisms is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, there are indicators that some civilians trusted IS’s institutions enough to voice complaints and criticisms. If all civilians believed that these institutions were fundamentally illegitimate or that complaints would expose them to the threat of retaliation, we would expect to find little to no evidence of such complaints.

However, some civilians did file formal complaints about the quality of public services and abuses by IS administrators or fighters who violated the group’s own rules. Others attempted to appeal IS court decisions. In addition to formal complaints, in the early stages of IS control, civilians occasionally organized public protests and demonstrations. The following anecdotal examples of complaints are not necessarily representative but illustrate some of the ways in which civilians attempted to hold IS accountable to its own social contract. In the Syrian city of al-Bukamal, one Twitter user reported that a group of civilians “went to the [IS] police department to complain to them about their conditions without electricity and rising prices for water and food.”¹⁵ In Raqqa, an IS police officer was reportedly fired by court order after he hit a nurse for making his ill wife sit in the hospital waiting room for too long, and the nurse complained to the local IS court.¹⁶ In Deir Ezzor, an IS court was pressured to reconsider its decision sentencing an epileptic man to death on charges of blasphemy after 100 members of the community signed a petition opposing the verdict and doctors testified that the defendant’s blasphemous statements were the involuntary result of his medical condition. According to a Syrian from the city of al-Bab, an IS traffic police officer was harassing and extorting civilians. After several complaints, IS officials investigated the police

⁷ Tweet by @Rawdatmouhib. “Bay’a of the Muslims to Caliph al-Baghdadi,” March 4, 2015. Originally at pic.twitter.com/RJ540x10ju and on file with the authors.

⁸ Tweet by @MuhammadHijrah5. “Repentance of one of the soldiers of the Alawite regime ... in a sharia court.” December 17, 2014. <https://twitter.com/MuhammadHijrah5/status/545431979227742208>.

⁹ Tweet by @salamkhaled988. June 23, 2015. https://s4.postimg.org/r7469v0lp/Screen_Shot_2016_08_20_at_12_35_40_PM.png.

¹⁰ Tweet by @Alhadf0. July 9, 2014. https://s3.postimg.org/a88cn06qr/Screen_Shot_2016_08_20_at_12_41_51_PM.png.

¹¹ Tweet by @sebe_1212. October 25, 2015. <https://s4.postimg.org/wrfqsrckd/574.jpg>.

¹² Interview with “Bassam” in Gaziantep, Turkey (March 2016).

¹³ Islamic State, “General call to the people of the Islamic State,” Aleppo Province (October 10, 2014). On file with authors.

¹⁴ Tweet by @adh22236, “...Complaints box in one of the mosques in Mosul in the province of Ninewa.” Tweet, August 9, 2014. <https://web.archive.org/web/20160530045804/https://twitter.com/adh22236/status/498210364576649216>.

¹⁵ @aymanprince2020, August 27, 2015, 2:49 AM. Tweet (Arabic). <https://web.archive.org/web/20160410015223/https://twitter.com/aymanprince2020/status/636837957140369409>.

¹⁶ Interview with “Khaled” in Sanliurfa, Turkey (November 2015).

officer, found him guilty, and executed him. His body was crucified in a public square, displayed with a sign that stated, “This was one of our officers. Because of his corruption, he has been punished according to sharia.”¹⁷ These examples suggest that some civilians had enough confidence in the fairness of IS’s institutions to utilize the group’s formal complaints procedures, and that IS was in some cases responsive to public pressure and opposition.

2.5. Exit and after

A third potential response to IS’s offer of the social contract was exit. A civilian’s decision to exit the social contract can manifest either in flight from rebel-controlled areas or in armed rebellion. Exit generally reflects a civilian’s rejection of the very terms of the social contract. The fact that an estimated half million people fled Mosul as IS fighters conquered the city is strong evidence of rejection of IS’s social contract. Many of those who fled were Shia, Christians, other non-Sunni minorities, or those with ties to the central government—people who are considered to be religious deviants or political opponents by IS and therefore likely targets of persecution.

As discussed above, those who flee rebel-controlled territory often harbor grievances against the rebel group and are motivated to denounce it. Therefore, when such individuals express favorable opinions toward a rebel group, their statements may provide the strongest evidence that the rebel social contract is not only offered, but also accepted and respected at least by some segments of the population. IS initially allowed civilians to enter and exit its territory for the first several months of its rule, enabling a sorting process in which supporters (including tens of thousands of foreign fighters) entered its territory while many of those who were opposed to its rule left.

Interviewing “leavers” can provide some evidence of the existence of acceptance or at least compliance with a social contract, however unacceptable its terms may have been. Some civilians from IS-controlled areas expressed appreciation for IS’s consistent enforcement even though they objected to IS’s harsh rules. One Syrian from Aleppo said that although he disliked IS’s restrictions on music, smoking, and other activities deemed un-Islamic, he nonetheless felt confident that “as long as you follow the rules, you will be 100 percent safe.” In other words, IS had made a credible commitment to enforcing the terms of its own social contract. Such credibility was important to civilians as they considered their response to the IS offer. In another example, Syrians from Raqqa confirmed that although many Christians fled when IS took control, those who chose to stay behind and accept the terms of the *jizyah* contract were not harmed—although the main church in Raqqa was converted into an office for Islamic outreach and proselytism.¹⁸ Another Syrian from Aleppo explained, “Before the Islamic State, it was impossible to get through the day without paying five different bribes [to different armed factions within the city]. The people were tired of corruption, and the Islamic State offered them a solution.”¹⁹

Additional evidence of acceptance of IS’s social contract can be found by observing the decisions of some “leavers” to return to IS-controlled areas. During the first few weeks of IS rule, thousands of those who had fled Mosul²⁰ along with the retreating Iraqi Army decided to return after hearing from friends and relatives that life in the city was returning to normal and “calm” (Collard, 2014;

Zangama, 2014). The fact that some residents of Mosul decided to return to the IS-controlled city suggests that they were at least willing to tolerate IS’s system of governance, even if they did fully agree with it.

2.6. Conclusion: social contracts, rebel governance, and the ambiguities of domination

IS is a rich case in which to approach the rebel social contract empirically. IS’s state-like system of governance was premised on distinctly contractualist terms. The IS social contract aimed to remodel society along the lines of the earliest Islamic polity. Sunni Muslim men sat at the pinnacle of power, while non-Sunni Muslims, other religious groups, and women were to accept subservience or face punishment and perhaps death. However, despite the coercive and authoritarian nature of IS’s social contract, there was variation in civilian responses to it. An examination of the behavior of civilians under IS rule indicates that some segment of the population welcomed IS’s crackdown on crime and corruption, improvement of social services, and promotion of Sunni supremacy. Nevertheless, the evidence of civilian acceptance is inconclusive and often times appears to be driven more by fear than by actual loyalty. Support for IS appears to have eroded over time as it became increasingly repressive, its services provision broke down, and leadership proved unable or unwilling to discipline lower-ranking members for violations of group rules (Revkin, 2016b).

Hirschman’s EVL typology is a useful instrument for approaching the rebel social contract observationally, but it does not overcome the fundamental problem of conducting social science inquiry in the midst of profound insecurity and data scarcity. Public expressions of loyalty alone are not dispositive of civilians’ acceptance of IS as a legitimate government. Similarly, the evidence of civilian “voice” under IS rule is ambiguous. Although IS established some accountability mechanisms (such as complaints procedures), it is unclear if civilians felt free to use these mechanisms without fear of retaliation. IS’s punishment of its own personnel for corruption and other violations of the group’s rules could be taken as evidence of responsiveness to civilian complaints. But anti-corruption measures could be a pretext for political repression. Evidence of exit is similarly equivocal. Hundreds of thousands fled Mosul, Raqqa, and other cities as IS forces approached—a clear indication of rejection of IS. Yet millions of others remained and some even returned. Some were willing to risk their lives to live under IS’s strict rules, at least initially. Our findings highlight a significant gap between the kind of normatively-robust social contract that IS purported to offer and the more utilitarian civilian response.

Such findings complicate understandings of rebel governance. While scholars explore the possibility for reciprocal relationships between rebel rulers and civilians, the role of coercion in sustaining rebel rule is inescapable. This is both a methodological and conceptual problem. Hoffmann and Verweijen’s ethnographic study the Mai-Mai rebels in Democratic Republic of Congo and Klem and Maunaguru’s of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka situate the rebel social contract as emerging through contestation and negotiation as rebels try to enhance governmentality and simulate sovereignty, not the foundation of political order (Hoffmann & Verweijen, 2018; Klem & Maunaguru, 2017). Our findings are consistent with this alternative perspective and have broader implications beyond the case of IS in Iraq and Syria for the study of other rebel social contracts that are created through coercion. In the case of IS, the rebel social contract was a focal point of constant but deeply constrained and uneven contestation between rebel rulers and civilians. Although social contracts are supposed to articulate first principles, they are better understood as dynamic processes that

¹⁷ Interview with “Saad,” in Gaziantep, Turkey (November 2016).

¹⁸ Interviews with “Faisal,” in Gaziantep, Turkey (July 2015) and “Karam” in Sanliurfa, Turkey (March 2016).

¹⁹ Interview with “Samer” in Sanliurfa, Turkey (November 2015).

²⁰ “Iraqi refugees return to ISIS held Mosul,” *The Telegraph* (Jun. 14, 2014), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQm6ur_0_xY.

reflecting shifts in rebels' power and civilians' more limited agency in choosing exit, voice, or loyalty.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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