Civil Organizing in War: Evidence from Syrian Facebook Communities

Rana B. Khoury and Alexandra A. Siegel

Where, when, and why do civilians organize during war? We propose a research agenda that expands the scope of variation in civil organizing and identify mechanisms to explain its emergence and evolution. Drawing on a large-scale original dataset of public Facebook posts produced by Syrian organizations from 2011 to 2020 and qualitative case studies based on 10 months of field research among Syrian activists in Turkey and Jordan, we systematically examine geographic, temporal, and substantive variation in civil organizing. We find that civil organizing can persist in the face of ongoing violence and displacement, focusing not only on concerns of protection and survival, but also on governance and even contentious politics. This organizing increasingly shifts from within Syria to border states, with translocal organizations—operating both inside and outside Syria—playing a particularly active role. This work contributes to literature on conflict processes and contentious politics by emphasizing the importance of organizations, centering refugees and civilians as agential and strategic actors, and using novel evidence to describe variation in wartime organizing over time and space.

During war, civilians exert agency for their survival and self-protection. But even in the face of violence and displacement, civilians also participate in diverse forms of nonviolent action. From mobilizing protests to providing services, civilians are often proactive, organized, and involved. Yet the scope of this *civil organizing* during war is underexplored. Where, when, and why do civilians organize during war?

To answer these questions, we propose a research agenda of civil organizing during conflict. First, we contend that civil organizations are key wartime actors that are not merely reactive to violence and immediate safety concerns, but also work to achieve long-term social and political goals. Second, we expand the scope of civil organizing to include not only civilians inside war zones, but also refugees, members of the diaspora, and collaborations between these actors. Third, we identify three mechanisms—shifting political opportunity structures, tactical adaptation, and access to resources—that shape the emergence and evolution of civil organizing during conflict.

We present original evidence on civil organizing during the Syrian war to document where, when, and why civilians organize. We combine large-scale analysis of social media data and in-depth qualitative fieldwork to offer rich empirical descriptions of civil organizing during conflict. First, we use computational text analysis to capture the breadth and variation of civil organizing, drawing on eight million public Facebook posts produced by Syrian organizations located inside and outside Syria. Specifically, we analyze how activity varies by organization location, how it changes over time, and how organizations' attention to survival and humanitarian needs, governance, and contentious politics varies spatially and temporally (Khoury and Siegel 2024). Our analysis of millions of Facebook posts highlights how civil organizing persists in the face of ongoing violence and displacement. It also demonstrates the importance of translocal organizing, or collaboration between civilians inside and outside the country in conflict, as well as how civil organizing increases in border states over time. Finally, our analysis suggests that organizing is not limited to immediate concerns of survival, but also focuses on contentious politics, especially in the early days of the conflict, and increasingly emphasizes issues of governance over time.

Second, we use qualitative case studies of two Syrian organizations—based on 10 months of immersive and interview-based field research in Turkey and Jordan—to

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explore how our proposed mechanisms explain the spatial, temporal, and substantive variation that we show in our quantitative analysis. Specifically, we identify opportunity structures and resources that facilitated translocal organizing, why organizers adapted their tactics as the nature of the conflict changed over time, and the ways their motivations and goals intertwined as they sought to protect, govern, and contend on behalf of their communities.

Together, this work offers several contributions to literatures on conflict processes and contentious politics. By centering organizations as key actors in war (Parkinson and Zaks 2018), we demonstrate how collective civilian nonviolent action persists in the face of violence and displacement (Avant et al. 2019; Barter 2012; 2014; Jose and Medie 2015; J. Krause, Masullo, and Paddon Rhoads 2023; Kreft 2019; Orjuela 2005; Yadav 2020). We also show that civil organizing is not only focused on immediate concerns of survival and protection (Arjona 2017; Finkel 2017; Kaplan 2017; J. Krause 2018; Masullo 2021; Milliff 2023; Schon 2020); it exists simultaneously in the conflict zone, in border states where refugees continue to engage actively, and among the diaspora (Betts and Jones 2016; Bradley, Milner, and Peruniak 2019; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016; Hamdan 2020; Jacobsen 2019; Khoury 2017; Moss 2020; Van Hear 2006). Additionally, this work contributes to a growing body of literature on online activism and transnational activism (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Esberg and Siegel 2023; Lewis, Gray, and Meierhenrich 2014; Nugent and Siegel, forthcoming). Finally, this project centers the voices of Syrians—both through large-scale analysis of the content they produce on social media and through ethnographic evidence from interviews—to describe how civilians in Syria, refugees in border states, and members of the diaspora jointly engage in organized nonviolent action.

Civil Organizing in War

Organizations are central to conflict dynamics (Asal, Brown, and Dalton 2012; Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour 2012; Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020; P. Krause 2014; Parkinson 2013; Pearlman 2011; Staniland 2012; Weinstein 2007). As Parkinson and Zaks (2018, 271) describe, "Dynamics that produce patterns of violence, nonviolent strategy adoption, long-term resilience, and postconflict transformation—to name just a few—all occur at the organizational level." We make the case for attention to what we call *civil organizing*. By "civil," we mean action that is nonviolent and carried out by civilians, including those who have crossed international borders.[1] By "organizing," we refer to "groups of individuals who allocate tasks between themselves to contribute to a common goal" (Fowler 1997, 20). Organizations need not be formal or legally registered to fit this definition (20). Civil organizing, therefore, refers to collective efforts undertaken, without the use of arms, by civilians inside and outside the conflict state to achieve one or more goals.

Conflict scholars have paid increasing attention to civil action during war, and observers of forced displacement have identified the agency of refugees despite their victimhood. Literature on diaspora mobilization has pointed to the role of transnational politics in local conflict dynamics, and studies of rebel governance have emphasized how armed actors forge institutions and social orders during war. However, these distinct literatures are rarely in dialogue with one another, and we have lacked a comprehensive framework for understanding the scope of civil organizing. We propose a research agenda that bridges these literatures to highlight understudied forms of civil organizing, such as that between refugees and civilians in borderlands. Focusing on the "where," "when," and "why" of civil organizing, we demonstrate this dynamic scope and identify mechanisms related to political opportunity structures, tactical adaptation, and access to resources that may explain this variation.

Where

First, we consider the geography of civil organizing. As Arjona (2014, 1362) has established, we should focus "on the locality because war often segments territory, making localities the key locus of choice." As she asserted, "new forms of order" arise in these spaces (1362). Does civil organizing occur under these new "orders" that emerge during conflict? We argue that it does, particularly where rebels allow for, benefit from, or cannot fully control civilian participation. Civilians respond to opportunity structures; they organize where it is conducive or possible to do so (McAdam 1996; Meyer 2004; Tarrow 2011; Tilly 1978). Whether concerned with humanitarianism, governance, advocacy, politics, or other goals, a range of actors from women to Islamist activists have organized under rebel rule around the world (e.g., Barter 2015; Brockett 2005; Kreft 2019).

But limiting our lens to territory inside the civil war state obscures our view of civil organizing. Rather than assume that civilian agency dissolves during a border crossing, we expect opportunity structures to shape civilian behavior beyond the conflict zone as they do in rebel-held territory. Adopting Kalyvas's (2003) conception of the "locus of agency" in civil war, where local and supralocal identities and actions mix in complex and ambiguous ways, we consider interactions among civilians, refugees, and diaspora networks.

It is commonly accepted that diasporas engage with politics in their home state (Østergaard-Nielsen 2006). Diaspora networks and exiles often enjoy resources and open political opportunity structures in the Global North (Adamson 2013; Esberg and Siegel 2023; Wayland 2004).

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Refugees in the Global South may also enjoy resources and political opportunities, though these are likely to differ qualitatively (Betts and Jones 2016; Brees 2010; Van Hear and Cohen 2017). Refugees' displacement destinations are often proximate to salient divisions in territorial control in the conflict state, such as border regions controlled by rebels from where refugees originate and with whom refugees may sympathize (Lichtenheld 2020; Steele 2019). Refugee host states can facilitate civil organizing by permitting refugees' mobility, employment, and cross-border passage (Khoury 2017). This permissiveness may be motivated by sympathy with a coethnic displaced population, geopolitical interests (especially rivalry) toward the conflict state, or even a strategic indifference that gives latitude to international aid organizations engaging in conflict response (Abdelaaty 2021; Moss 2020; Norman 2020). Those international aid actors bring with them resources, infrastructure, and reliance on ground-level actors to provide emergency relief or in pursuit of other objectives (Autesserre 2021; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2018; Hamdan 2020; Khoury and Scott 2024; Mukhopadhyay and Howe 2023; Scott 2022; Yadav 2020).

We expect that civil organizing may emerge in rebel-held territory, in border states, in the broader diaspora, and in combinations thereof. We also expect that civil organizing in border states will grow over the course of the conflict as displacement escalates and refugees take advantage of opportunities to organize in their new host countries. Border regions may even constitute subsystems of nonviolent action where local, refugee, regional, and international actors enact political, diplomatic, humanitarian, development, and other objectives. In this way, civil organizing may be jointly produced by supralocal and local actors (Kalyvas 2003; Schneckener 2011). Such subsystems have emerged in borderlands that include those in southern Sudan and Kenya (Riehl 2001), Tunisia and Libya (Moss 2021), and most recently Ukraine and Poland (Barbarani 2022). This may facilitate the early emergence and persistence of translocal civil organizing as civilians connect with refugee populations and the broader diaspora.

When

Next, we consider the temporality of civil organizing in war. A common popular and scholarly view suggests that violence overwhelms nonviolent actors. In social movement theory, the idea of protest cycles conveys that movements come in waves or heightened moments of intensity, followed by periods of quiet or stability (Beissinger 2002; Della Porta 2013). Movements eventually demobilize due to sheer exhaustion, or through factionalism wherein some "radicals" take up violence and other "moderates" institutionalize (Tarrow 2011). These may indeed be common pathways for social movements, including those that transform into civil war participants (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). In the face of protracted repression or violence, individual activists may disengage due to exhaustion, disillusionment, or simply from concern for their professional and familial needs. If individual disengagements aggregate, whole movements will demobilize (Fillieule 2015).

But we might also expect civil organizing to persist despite violence. Advances in the study of civilian agency and protection suggest that civil action can manifest during war (Avant et al. 2019; Barter 2012; 2014; Howe 2023; Jose and Medie 2015; J. Krause, Masullo, and Paddon Rhoads 2023; Kreft 2019; Orjuela 2005; Yadav 2020). With the passage of time—and the associated compounding of needs, deepening political divisions, physical and security threats, and quotidian demands on civilians to make a living—civil organizing is likely to change to address exactly these kinds of shifts. We expect civil organizing to adapt its tactics (McAdam 1983) to patterns of violence, displacement, territorial control, international response, and border-country politics, among other things.

Indeed, scholars have argued that war transforms social processes over the longue durée (Wood 2008). Nordstrom (1997) describes how individual coping strategies to deal with uncertainty and violence can accumulate to the societal level. Such strategies may be reactions to violence (Arjona 2017; Finkel 2017; Kaplan 2017; J. Krause 2018; Masullo 2021; Milliff 2023; Schon 2020), but they also can constitute choices that enable the pursuit of social agendas and life projects (Lubkemann 2008). This can include political mobilization, a kind of macrotransformation that can characterize the aftermath of even the most severe types of conflict (Berry 2018).

Thus, while we might expect engagement to shift away from large-scale collective action as violence takes hold, we also expect smaller-scale civil organizing to persist over time as civilians adapt and take advantage of new opportunities and resources within rebel-held territory, in border states, and across the diaspora.

Why

Finally, we examine how the goals of civil organizing during war may shift across time and space. Goals describe "organizational aims and end games," and motivate organizational behavior (Parkinson and Zaks 2018, 275). In practice, civil organizations may pursue goals related to survival and protection, governance, and contentious politics simultaneously. Yet our framework demonstrates that each can be a rich area of action.

First, we consider the saliency of survival and protection issues. A burgeoning literature on civilian agency has largely focused on individual actions and civilian responses to armed actors, ranging from defection and resistance to

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adaptation and cooperation, among other forms of survival and self-protection (Arjona 2017; Finkel 2017; Masullo 2021; Milliff 2023; Schon 2020). However, some have considered these interactions with armed actors to be more proactive, social, or collective in nature (Avant et al. 2019; Jose and Medie 2015; Kaplan 2017; J. Krause 2018; Parkinson 2023; Rubin 2020). A few scholars have widened the analytical lens to consider civilian protection efforts that mitigate threats that are directly *and indirectly* related to the conflict or physical presence of armed groups. This includes "disruptions to livelihoods, inadequate access to healthcare, food, shelter, and water … and social instability" (Paddon Rhoads and Sutton 2020, 372; see also Howe 2023). Like scholarship on civilian protective agency, work in refugee studies has also highlighted the efforts displaced people take on behalf of their communities' needs (Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria 2020). We expect that civil organizers in both rebel-held territory and in refuge, and combinations thereof, would be concerned with matters like emergency relief, humanitarian aid, and the provision of food, shelter, and medical care. We also expect to see this increase over time as a conflict escalates and greater needs arise.

Second, we consider civil organizers' attention to issues of governance, which scholars of rebel governance define as "the administration of civilian affairs" (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015, 2). We draw on conceptions of wartime governance that have recognized a role for civilians in such administration (Hyyppä 2023), which Kasfir (2015, 34) has observed can "flow through formal or informal rebel-sanctioned structures, either those that rebels create or civilian structures that they accept in territory they control." Refugee organizers have also engaged in what Jacobsen (2019) has called "self-governance," establishing institutions for political action from exile. We expect civil organizers to focus increasingly on governance, local administrative councils, courts, and long-term service provision—including education and economic development—as new opportunities and resources for governance arise in both rebel-held territory and across the borders in refugee-receiving states.

Third, we assess civil organizers' concern with contentious political issues. Scholars have found that nonviolent contention can cycle in and out during war rather than demobilize altogether, and that unarmed and armed groups often overlap or have ties between them (Brenner 2018; Brockett 2005; Parkinson 2023; Van Baalen 2024). Scholars have also shown that refugees engage in contentious politics, including protest (Clarke 2018; Irfan 2020; Murshid 2014) and other forms of advocacy and activism, such as the formation of unions and popular organizations (Brynen 1990; Irfan 2023; Mundy 2007). Thus, we examine civil organizers' attention to justice, freedom, rights, and revolution, as well as to protest and other resistance activities like strikes. Such political agency is often overlooked, including by international actors that undertake peacebuilding efforts (Autesserre 2014; Yadav 2020). But scholars would do a disservice to civilians to downplay their "political entanglements and identities" (Mazur 2022; see also Van Baalen 2024). Indeed civilians, refugees, and members of the diaspora often organize and work together to achieve political goals. We expect that the focus on contentious politics, and particularly calls for large-scale collective action, will be present beyond the conflict zone—especially through translocal organizing. However, such focus on contentious politics may decrease in the face of violence, particularly within the conflict zone.

Systematically examining the spatial, temporal, and substantive scope of civil organizing will improve our understanding of these complex dynamics and center actors that are often missing from academic and policy debates. Grasping how civil organizing shifts, spreads, or contracts across these dimensions through well-established mechanisms sheds light on civilian agency in nonstate territory and among refugees, transnational engagements in conflict processes, and the cycles of contentious politics from which "civil wars emerge and to which they may eventually give way" (Tarrow 2007, 596).

Civil Organizing in Syria's War

To advance this research agenda, we analyze Syrian civil organizing between 2011 and 2020. Headed by the al-Assad dynasty since 1970, the Syrian regime has historically proscribed political dissent and pushed opponents into prison or exile (Ismail 2018; Lefèvre 2013). Civil society, deemed a "wasteland" by close observers (Pace and Landis 2009), was delimited to "merely functional" faith-based charitable associations with "few human resources" (Pierret and Selvik 2009; Ruiz de Elvira and Zintl 2014). Fragmented diaspora networks sometimes mobilized from abroad (Moss 2016). The 2011 Syrian uprising—part of the "Arab Spring" social movements in the region—and the war that followed dramatically altered civil organizing among nonviolent actors.

Syrians organized nonviolent collective action, including protests, which peaked during the summer of 2011 (Leenders and Heydemann 2012; Mazur 2021). They also adopted a wide range of civil actions (Pearlman 2019; Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2016). For instance, activists documented events and established media operations (Badran 2020; Issa 2016), conducted civil resistance campaigns such as strikes and sit-ins (Khalaf, Ramadan, and Stolleis 2014; Khoja 2016), delegated uprising labor through "local coordination committees" that would later become the basis of local governance councils in rebel-held territory (Hallaj 2017; Munif 2013), and organized relief and medical efforts to address the fallout of repression (Abdelwahid 2013; El Nakib and Ager 2015; Ruiz de

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Elvira 2019; Sweis 2019). Ultimately, civil organizations grew among civilians in rebel-held territory, in border states, and further abroad.

Nonviolent civil organizing did not subside, even as the war worsened. This persistence likely reflects not only Syrians' adaptability and resilience, but also international resources and infrastructure in countries neighboring Syria engaging in cross-border operations to serve people in need in rebel-held territory. For example, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs counts the number of "partner organizations" for cross-border operations from Turkey each month, which increased nearly tenfold over a mere three years (Khoury and Scott 2024). That remarkable growth represented only Syrian humanitarian organizations in northwest Syria engaged within this formal humanitarian channel.

Hundreds more organizations emerged there and elsewhere among civilians, focused variously on civil society, governance, development, and stabilization. For instance, Syria observers have examined the role of civilians in governance in rebel-held territory (Ali 2015; Carnegie et al. 2021; Favier 2016; Hyyppä 2023; Martínez and Eng 2018; Mukhopadhyay and Howe 2023). This research has shown that civil organizers who engaged in governance during the war were motivated by their experiences in the nonviolent social movements from which the war escalated, that they were regularly targeted and threatened for their nonviolent action, and that they were connected to counterparts in refugee host states as well as international actors who provisioned aid and support.

Meanwhile, Syrians were fleeing some of the worst violence of the twenty-first century, especially to the bordering countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. Yet many Syrians were active from refuge as well. It is hard to know exactly how many Syrian organizations were eventually established in Turkey, a particularly receptive host state for Syrians' civil organizing. In Gaziantep, a border city in Turkey that became home to hundreds of thousands of Syrians and a hub for the international response, estimates run into the hundreds (Alzouabi and Iyad 2017). Even in host states less inclined to facilitate Syrians' activism, like Lebanon and Jordan, smaller numbers of Syrians developed organizations primarily to attend to humanitarian needs in refuge (Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Clarke and Güran 2016; Khoury 2017; Ruiz de Elvira 2019).

Diaspora networks were also involved in nonviolent action. Early on, they acted as "brokers" between protesters and "the outside world" (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013), used the relatively open political opportunity structures of the Global North to advocate on behalf of the movement (Moss 2021; Sadiki 2012), and directed material resources and supplies to protesters, such as satellite phones and pharmaceuticals. Diaspora actors transformed into "unexpected humanitarians" as the conflict militarized (Dickinson 2015), though they eventually struggled to meet the overwhelming needs of people inside Syria.

These civil actors took to Facebook to give public representation to their nascent groups and organizations. Syria has been one of the most "socially mediated" conflicts in history (Lynch, Freelon, and Aday 2014). Facebook as a platform enjoyed particularly high saturation in the population: 97% of Syrian social media users turned to Facebook, above any other app, in the period of interest (TNS 2015). Facebook pages were a "vital" means for collective action during the uprising and thereafter for organized groups to project their messages and activities to each other and to the outside world (Toumani 2016). Survey research also suggests that social media has been an important source of information for Syrian refugees during their journeys and upon arrival in host countries (Dekker et al. 2018). In short, Facebook was the primary information ecosystem in the Syrian context. By using it, Syria's civil actors have offered observers a real-time view into their priorities, concerns, and activities.

Research Design

We present original evidence of civil organizing inside and outside Syria from 2011 to 2020. Our use of multiple methods enables rich empirical descriptions of the scope of civil organizing and the proposed mechanisms that may explain its spatial, temporal, and substantive variation. First, computational text analysis captures the breadth and variation of civil organizing among a population of organizations that produced large-scale textual content throughout the war. Specifically, we analyze posts from public Facebook pages run by Syrian organizations to demonstrate where civil organizing occurs (inside Syria, outside Syria, and in combinations thereof); how organizing changes over time; and how organizations' attention to survival and humanitarian needs, governance, and contentious politics varies spatially and temporally. In the following sections, we describe how we identified pages for inclusion in the analysis; inferred the locations of the organizations that the pages represent; and collected and analyzed the millions of posts, mostly in Arabic, from the pages.

Second, qualitative case studies based on in-depth fieldwork elucidate mechanisms that explain this variation by offering a deeper view into the evolution of individual organizations during a protracted crisis characterized by high levels of violence, displacement, and changing territorial control. Case studies of Syrian organizations are based on 10 months of immersive and interview-based field research among Syrian activists in Turkey and Jordan conducted by one of the authors from 2014 to 2017. Immersion highlights "insiders' views, performances, and understandings of membership, it privileges interlocutors'

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experiences of the organizational worlds that they inhabit rather than relying on external categorizations" (Parkinson 2021, 66). Interviews reveal individuals' trajectories and interpretations of their own position and those of others within these organizations (Fujii 2017). The interviews were conducted primarily in colloquial Syrian Arabic, and efforts were taken to protect participants and their confidentiality.[2]

Identifying Civil Organizations on Facebook

In 2018 we conducted an audit of public Facebook pages representing nonviolent Syrian organizations using preexisting lists of nonstate media and civil society organizations (Alzouabi and Iyad 2017; Issa 2016), keyword searches, and snowball sampling of related pages.[3] The 1,362 pages included are outward-facing representations of formal and informal groups of Syrians in the country, border states, and further afield. They include community-based, faith-based, and nongovernmental organizations, as well as coordination committees, opposition governance bodies, media outlets, art collectives, and human rights advocates.[4]

Even counting formal organizations, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), is known by scholars of organizations to be "problematic," and existing strategies "all imperfect" (Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012). Directories, if they exist, often both under- and overcount, excluding smaller organizations while including nonoperational ones (Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012). These problems are amplified many times in contexts of authoritarianism, war, or both, given that independent or formal organizing may be high risk, illicit, or simply infeasible in contexts of shifting administrative, governing, and territorial control. While Watkins and coauthors (2012, 291) bemoan that "creating a list of active NGOs is like aiming at moving target," they suggest that researchers "do their own shoe-leather mapping of NGOs, as well as community organizations and faith-based groups" (304).

Fieldwork in Turkey and Jordan over 10 months from 2014 to 2017 made us familiar with the civil organizers who had emerged during the Syrian war, enabling us to embark on such shoe-leather mapping of formal and informal civil organizations. Still, we expect that our list of organizations suffers some shortcomings, including the underrepresentation or exclusion of some groups. First, absent groups may include those whose existence was ephemeral, like informal coordinators of contentious action during the 2011 uprising who ceased to use Facebook to organize protest activity as the conflict escalated into civil war. On the other hand, many such organizations did persist in civil involvement in conflict processes—a transformation we explicitly seek to capture.

Second, it is also plausible that groups that operated completely underground or in private are missing from our data. By virtue of auditing public pages, we are necessarily including only those organizations that are willing to make their existence known. This is also an important ethical consideration: individuals posting in groups that are operating privately have different expectations of privacy than those operating in public groups.

Third, we may underrepresent organizations in government-held territory. Because of the closed and repressive nature of the Syrian regime, it is difficult both to conduct research on, and independently organize in, areas under government control. That is, the same conditions that prevent a proper audit of civil organizing in these territories are likely to limit such organizing in the first place. Like other scholarship on civilian agency during war, we attend primarily to those civilians living under rebel control. However, we expand on this scholarship by also accounting for those in refuge and in the diaspora, often in areas bordering rebel-held territory.

Finally, it is possible that we underrepresent religiously inspired groups or politically Islamist organizations. Our audit is inclusive of faith-based organizations engaged in civil organizing. However, some donors and international organizations encouraged their contracted local partner organizations to take up practices of transparency and accountability, which could include opening a public Facebook page; it is unclear if religiously motivated donors sought to persuade their local partners to take such actions. We therefore expect some bias in the direction of more secular, professional, groups.

At the same time, we believe our mapping has distinct advantages. By tracking the volume of posts, rather than just pages, we can observe their vitality—and lack thereof. Groups that are inactive fall out of the temporal analyses. Likewise, by tracking the content of posts, we can observe how substantive concerns adapt to conflict processes. For example, if a group that was once engaged in a contentious collective action like protest became more concerned with humanitarianism over time, we should see those concerns reflected in their post content. Thus, unlike lists of NGOs, which are static snapshots in time, the Facebook data offers dynamic accounts of organizational trajectories.

Identifying Organizations' Locations

We infer the locations of organizations represented by these Facebook pages to understand the geography or the "where" of civil organizing. We classify page locations as (1) Syria, (2) border states, (3) nonborder states, and (4) translocal. Syria proxies for domestic civilian organizations. Border states are Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan—top host states for refugees and proxies for refugee-led organizations. Nonborder states are all other countries, and proxy for diasporic groups. Translocal organizations

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are those whose locations can be traced to more than one of these three categories.

Our location measure captures organizations' locations, and/or the location of their primary activities, based on page content, including self-reported locations, descriptions, names, photographs, linked websites, phone numbers, and so forth. For example, an organization's location may be stated in the "About" section of the page, or in the group's name—for example, "Aleppo Media Center," or other page content. We identified a location in 975 of the pages, or 80% of the 1,215 pages from which we have collected posts. If we could not infer a location, we did not supply one.

Although we do not conduct a subnational analysis in this project, we note the strength of this measure is evident in its unique granularity at the subnational level. Locations could often be inferred at the province level (equivalent to US states) within Syria. For instance, posts from the pages of organizations operating in Syria's northwestern provinces of Aleppo and Idlib, which were largely rebel-held for much of the conflict, account for about 36% of all Syria posts.

Researcher-inferred location data was also traceable to border and nonborder countries other than Syria for hundreds of pages, more than half of which were in Turkey. These findings from inside and outside Syria align with our qualitative observations and other research on Syria that suggest that civil organizing largely took place in these cross-border regions, where political activists, humanitarian organizations, and others converged to pursue their various goals during the conflict.

Table A2 in the appendix demonstrates the global distribution of posts in our dataset. It is important to note that our location measure can span multiple countries. An organization with relief operations in northwest Syria, for example, may be led by Syrians across the border in Turkey. We categorize these groups as *translocal* in our analysis, indicating they have presence in more than one of our primary three location categories. The vast majority of translocal pages in our dataset—85%—are a combination of Syria and border states, mainly Turkey. Again, this finding is supported by qualitative and existing research on Syria that indicates Turkey hosted large numbers of Syrian organizations, geopolitically supported the opposition to the Syrian regime, and enabled cross-border activity for a significant period of the conflict.

Nevertheless, our location indicator has some disadvantages. First it is possible that self-reported page location and page activity do not accurately reflect organizations' true locations. This concern is somewhat alleviated, however, by the fact that our researcher-inferred measure of location is highly correlated with Facebook's automated measure of page-manager locations based on device location.[5] Our organizational case studies and qualitative research more generally reveal that organizational locations do sometimes shift during the conflict, often in the direction of becoming more translocal or concentrated in border regions; for instance, organizations that start off in rebel-held territory or in nonborder states adopt a translocal character by establishing a presence in a border state. The case studies that follow our text analysis highlight these spatial dynamics. Second, it is possible that some groups strategically chose or declined to evince location information; this strategic behavior could reflect shifts in territorial control and support for, or opposition to, the respective armed actors (Gohdes and Steinert-Threlkeld 2024). However, most of this strategic behavior has been documented in the context of individuals enabling geolocation settings on Twitter, rather than organizations manually editing their page's location information. Moreover, the fact that we can infer location metadata for 80% of our organizations, whereas geolocated Twitter data typically constitutes only 1% of total tweets (Kruspe et al. 2021), helps to alleviate some of these concerns.

Collecting and Analyzing Facebook Data

We used the Crowdtangle application programming interface (API) to download all posts and engagement data (including "likes," reactions, and comments) from pages in September 2020. Crowdtangle is a social media analytics platform owned by Meta that tracks public posts on Facebook made by public accounts or groups as well as public interactions with posts, such as likes and comments. Crowdtangle tracks 99% of public posts on pages with over a hundred thousand likes, as well as many pages with smaller followings. We added all pages that were not already in the Crowdtangle database.[6] We were able to collect data for 1,215 of the 1,362 pages we identified, or 89%. Missing pages had either been deleted or made private between the time we initially identified them and the time of data collection. We collected all posts still available across our pages as of September 2020, going back to the first post on each page. This yielded a dataset of almost eight million posts from across the 1,215 pages for which we were able to collect data.

We analyze post volume across time and space to understand the "where" and "when" of civil organizing. We analyze the content of those posts primarily across three categories to capture the "why," or goals, of civil organizations, related to survival and protection, governance, and contentious politics. To identify posts that reference these topics in our data, we use a word2vec model (Mikolov et al. 2013) trained on the entire corpus of Facebook posts in our dataset.[7] We begin with a set of Arabic seed words that we identify as being relevant to the concept of interest (e.g., "ثورة," "revolution," which captures a component of contentious politics). Following Esberg and Siegel (2023), we then used our word

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Table 1.
Representative Posts from Our Substantive Categories of Analysis Reflecting Civil Organizers' Goals.

Goals	Original post	English translation
Survival and protection	تتواصل حملة #يد_دافئة بتوزيع #بطانيات على النازحين من #حلب تنفذها #جمعية_الأيادي_البيضاء بتمويل #فريق_شباب_الخير_التطوعي.	The #Warm_Hands campaign continues to distribute #blankets to displaced people from #Aleppo, implemented by the #White_Hands_Association with funding from #Team_Youth_Goodness_Volunteers
Governance	# المجلس المحلي في مدينة #الحجرالأسود:: المكتب الإعلامي:: نتيجة استمرار انقطاع المياه عن الحجر الأسود المحاصر لليوم الخامس على التوالي قام المجلس المحلي وعبر مكتبه الخدمي بتسيير صهاريجه وتفعيل منهل مياه وتأمين المياه للأهالي	#The Local Council for the city of #al-Hajar al-Aswad:: Media Office:: Due to the continued water outage in besieged al-Hajar al-Aswad for a fifth day in a row, the Local Council Services Office operated its tanks, activated a water source, and provided water for the people.
Contentious politics	اعلاميون بلا حدود #الرقة #RAQQA استشهادعبد الباسط #الساروت متأثرا بجراحه في معارك ريف حماه الشمالي . لقب الساروت ب #حارس_الثورة وأطلق منذ بدايتها العديد من الأناشيد الثورية فكان أيقونة بصوته والتحق بصفوف القتال . أسرة إعلاميون بلا حدود— الرقة تنعي شهيد الثورة كما ينعيه اليوم أحرار ثورتنا بعد كفاح ضد الاسد استمر لثمان سنوات. يذكر ان عبد الباسط هو الشهيد السادس لعائلته .	Reporters without Borders #Raqqa The martyrdom of Abd al-Baset #al-Saroot, wounded in the battle of the northern Hama countryside. Al-Saroot was nicknamed the #Revolution_Protector, and he emerged from its beginning with a number of revolutionary chants and his voice became iconic and he joined the fighting ranks. The family of Reporters without Borders—Raqqa mourns this martyr of the revolution as all the free people of our revolution mourn him today after the struggle against al-Assad that has lasted eight years. We note that Abd al-Baset is the sixth martyr of his family.

embeddings to identify other terms that are semantically related to the seed words in the data.[8] This includes hashtags, dialect-specific terms, and other words and phrases that are relevant to each topic of interest. A full list of seed words for each topic are displayed in table A1 in the appendix. We validate these measures by training native Arabic speakers as human coders to manually classify random samples of a thousand posts in each category as relevant or not relevant, as well as using the ChatGPT API to classify the same samples of posts.[9] Table 1 provides examples of representative posts in each of these categories.

Quantitative Results

Analysis of public Facebook pages run by Syrian organizations demonstrates three patterns in line with our theoretically motivated expectations. First, civil organizing activity inside Syria, outside Syria, and translocally persisted throughout the conflict. Second, translocal organizations engaged in the highest levels of activity, followed by organizations inside Syria and those outside Syria. Third, contentious politics dominated civil organizing in the early years of the conflict, followed by a rising focus on both survival and protection and governance in the later years.

"Where" and "When" of Syrian Organizing

Looking at the total volume of posts produced by organizations within Syria, in border states, nonborder states, and translocally, figure 1 demonstrates that translocal organizations were most active in aggregate, followed by organizations within Syria, those in border states, and those in nonborder states. This high level of activity by translocal organizations might reflect that particularly active organizers may have been forced to flee, and that larger organizations may be more likely to maintain a presence both within and outside the conflict state. This finding supports our contention that civilians organizing across borders and borderlands can be loci for nonviolent action.

Plotting the daily volume of posts produced by organizations in Syria, border states, nonborder states, and translocally between 2011 and 2020, we can see how spatial variation in civil organizing changes over time. Figure 2 demonstrates that pages located within Syria consistently created content throughout the conflict. Organizing in border states became increasingly prominent over time, beginning around 2014; this trend tracks the pace of Syrians' displacement that began in earnest in 2013.[10] Nonborder-state organizations produced relatively limited content, suggesting that diasporic groups were relatively quiet compared to their conationals closer to home. Finally, translocal pages dominated the production of posts through the first two years of the conflict, and along with pages in Syria remained active producers of content throughout the study period.

Overall, post volume suggests that Syrian civil organizing has persisted throughout the conflict period, despite the violence that has surrounded—and displaced—

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Figure 1.
Total Volume of Posts Produced on Organization Facebook Pages, 2011–20.

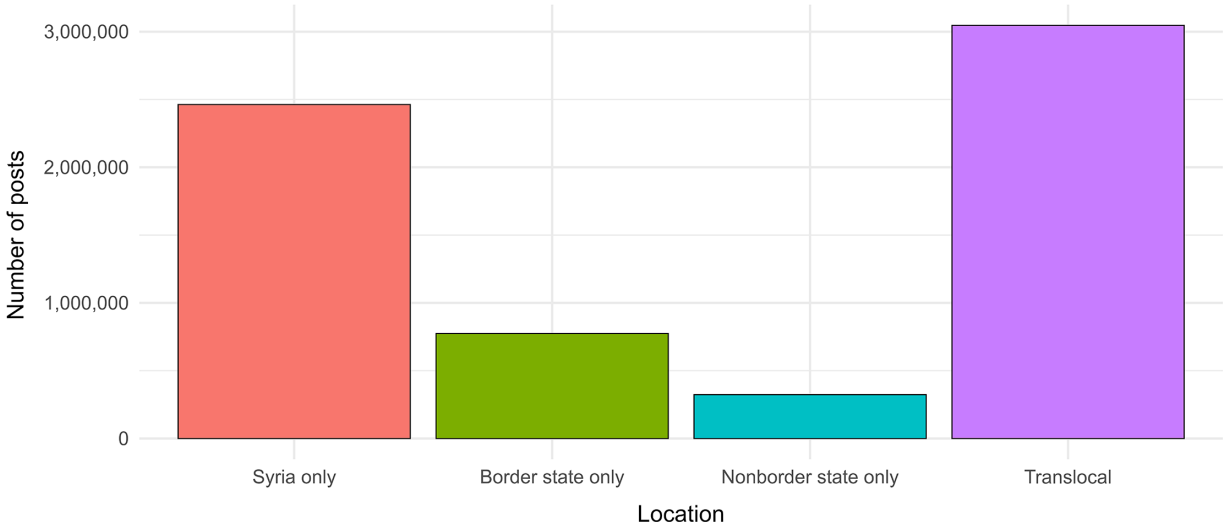
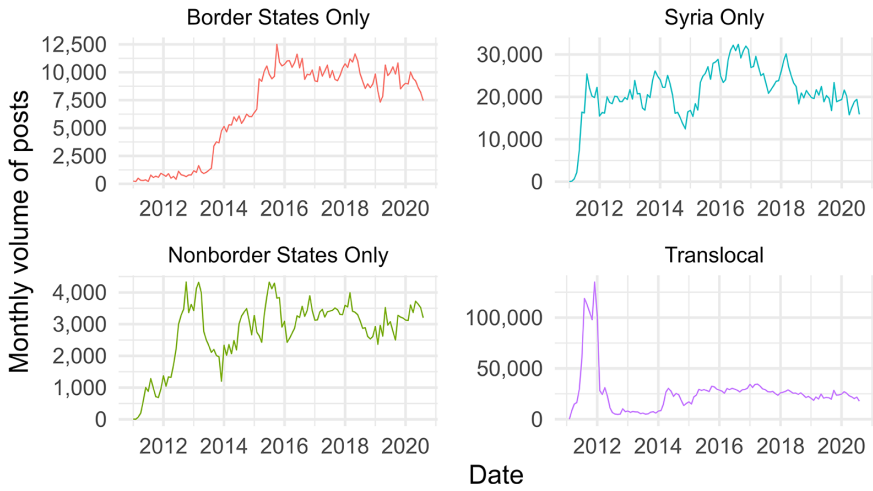


Figure 2.
Monthly Volume of Posts Produced on Organization Facebook Pages, 2011–20.



Note: Note distinct y-axes.

civilians. To demonstrate this temporal persistence, figure 3 plots monthly post volume and annual conflict deaths. Tracking conflict deaths has been so difficult a task that the UN suspended its attempts to do so in 2014. But several Syrian civil organizations, all notably represented in our dataset, kept up their efforts. In 2019 the UN Human Rights Council (OHCHR) reinforced its statistical and monitoring capacity, linked the records kept by these Syrian organizations, and produced a comprehensive annual analysis (OHCHR 2021). Although post volume decreased in 2013 as the mass uprising gave way to civil war, it picked up and stabilized throughout the conflict period.

"Why" of Syrian Organizing

Turning to the substantive focus of civil organizing, we examine the relative importance of organizations' focus on survival and protection, contentious politics, and governance, as well as how these dynamics differ across locations and over time. *Survival and protection* focus on immediate humanitarian concerns related to violence or

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Figure 3.
Monthly Aggregate Volume of Posts Produced across All Locations Compared to Annual OHCHR Reported Conflict Deaths.

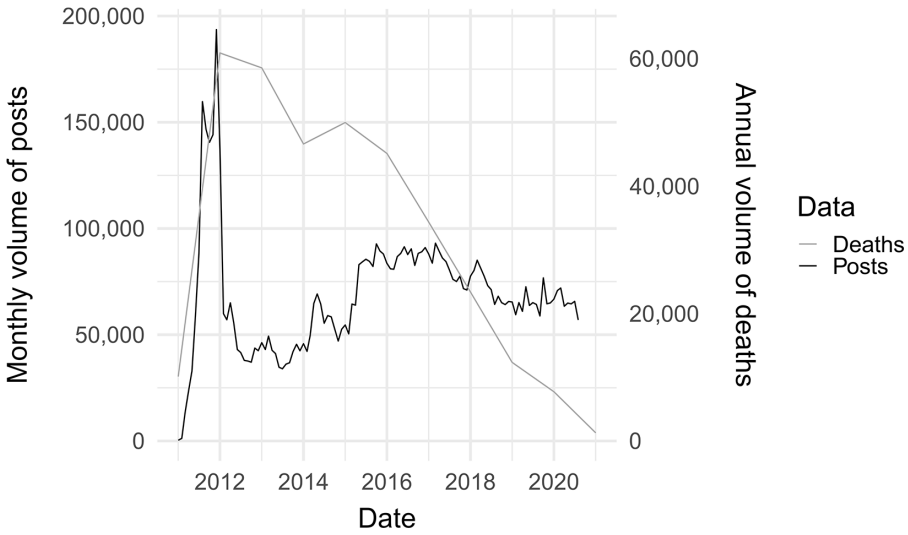
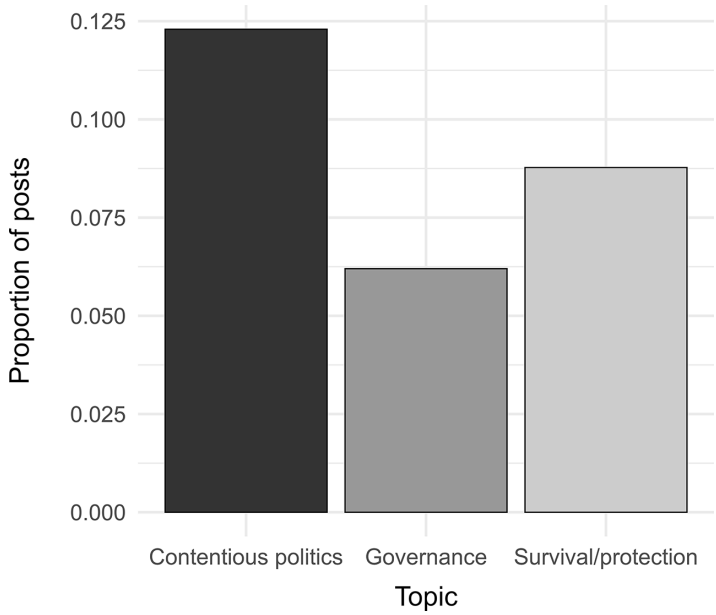


Figure 4.
Aggregate Proportion of Posts Focused on Contentious Politics, Governance, or Survival/ Protection on Organization Facebook Pages, 2011–20.



displacement, including the provision of food, shelter, and medical care. *Contentious politics* content reflects anti-regime sentiments, the 2011 uprising, and claims-making around freedom and justice, as well as collective action, such as protests, strikes, and sit-ins. *Governance* captures topics such as elections, governing activities of local councils, and long-term service provision, including education and economic development.

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Figure 4 indicates that contentious politics was by far the most salient topic, followed by survival and protection and governance. Together, contentious politics and governance were twice as salient as survival and protection, suggesting that civil organizing is not limited to immediate humanitarian concerns.

To capture a more granular and dynamic understanding of these areas of concern, we disaggregate them spatially and temporally. Examining the salience of these topics by location, we see in figure 5 that the dominance of contentious politics discourse was especially driven by activity in nonborder states and translocal organizations. This activity may have been dominated by political exiles and activists who, as political opponents to the regime targeted for persecution, were displaced in the years prior to the war or at its start. In border states, survival and protection and governance were more salient than contentious politics, and in Syria contentious politics accounted for a similar proportion of posts to survival and protection. As individuals experiencing a severe humanitarian crisis, it is unsurprising that they were concerned with these issues in addition to those that animated the uprising and opposition to the government. Finally, evidence that diaspora organizations were more vocal in their contentious politics than in any other area lends support to the idea that diaspora networks took advantage of political opportunity structures, like democratic

Figure 5.
Proportion of Posts Focused on Contentious Politics, Governance, or Survival/Protection Produced on Organization Facebook Pages, 2011–20.

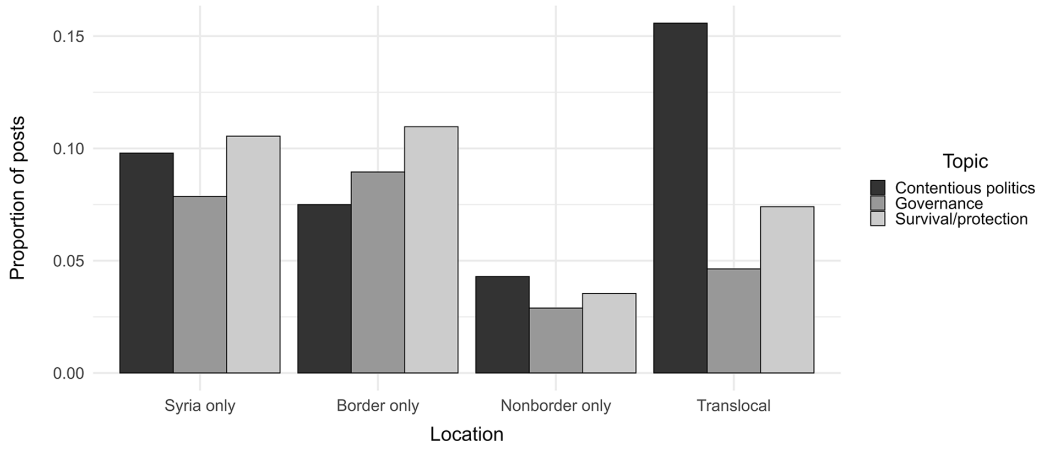
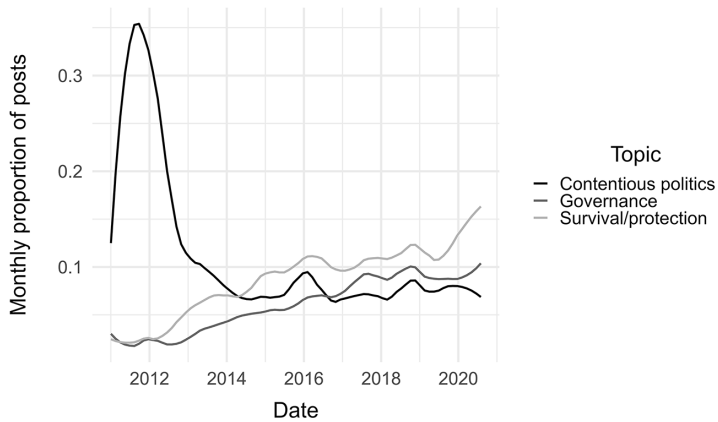


Figure 6.
Monthly Proportion of Posts on Organization Facebook Pages Focused on Contentious Politics, Governance, or Survival/Protection, 2011–20.



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regimes and media access, that facilitate more political voice than their counterparts back home.

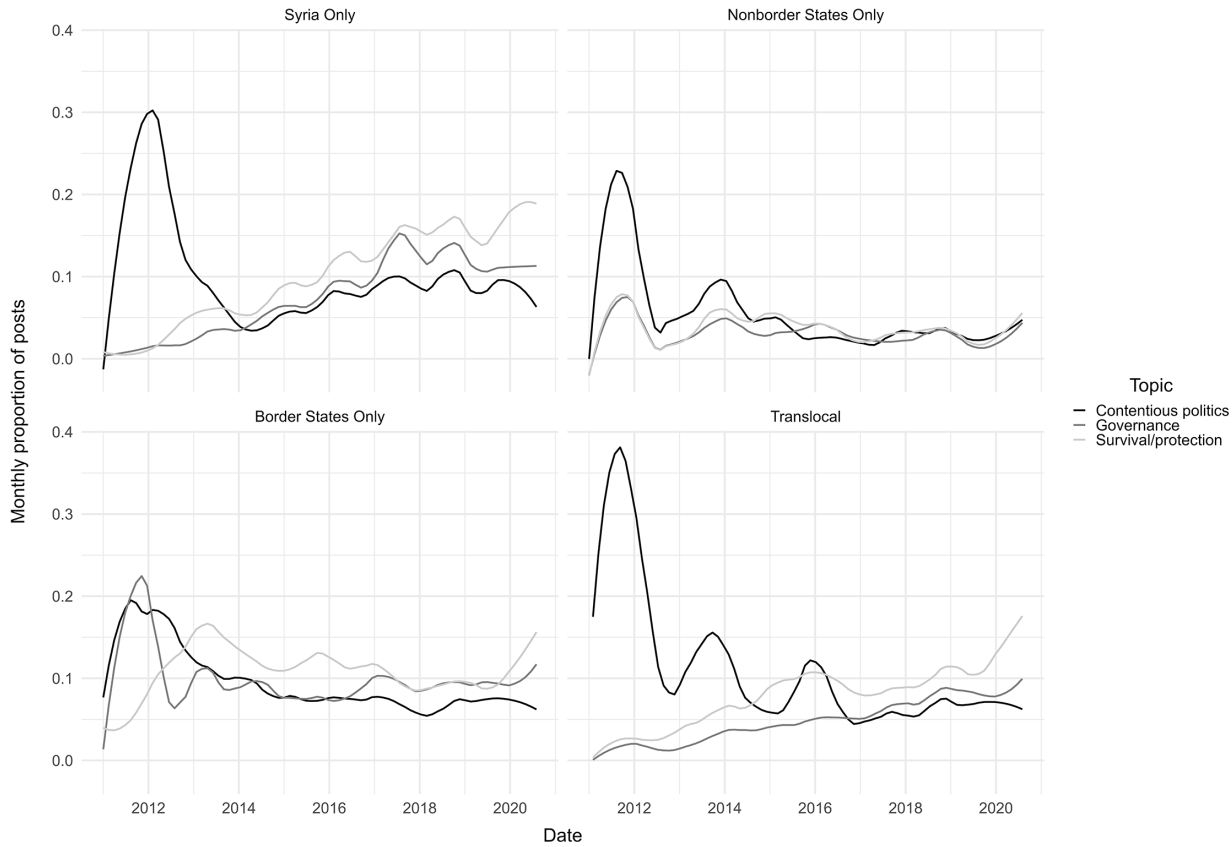
Examining these dynamics over time in figure 6, we find that contentious politics was highly salient in the early years of the conflict, representing over 35% of total posts in 2012. The salience of survival and protection discourse grew steadily over time, surpassing contentious politics in 2014 and comprising 15% of total posts by 2020. Finally, the salience of governance also grew over time, becoming greater than contentious politics in late 2016, but never becoming as salient as survival and protection.

Examining variation in topic salience across time and space, figure 7 demonstrates that contentious politics discourse dominated everywhere except for border states in the early years of the conflict, peaking between late 2011 and early 2012. The subsequent downward trend in all locations may reflect Kalyvas's (2006) assertion that prewar preferences give way, over time, to local dynamics of violence. Yet revolutionary discourse never receded despite the militarization of the conflict. Among within-Syria, border-state, and translocal groups, civil organizers maintained political commitments and produced political sentiments throughout the war.

Exploring change in the salience of survival and protection rhetoric, we see a growth in the engagement of civil organizations in humanitarianism, with reference to implementation, distribution, and provision of emergency services. After a large spike at the start of the armed conflict, the salience of these issues increased over time across pages. There was more discussion of survival and protection issues on border-state pages than nonborder-state pages over the entire course of the conflict. Organizations inside Syria became increasingly involved as the war wore on, so that survival and protection came to occupy between 10% and 20% of posts from 2016 onward.

This rate of attention to survival and protection tracks both needs and actions. The UN-led cross-border international humanitarian response began in 2014 and ramped up operations across borders into rebel-held areas, in cooperation with Syrian organizations inside Syria who carried out most of the distribution. Often, these local

Figure 7.
Monthly Proportion of Posts Focused on Contentious Politics, Governance, or Survival/Protection Produced on Organization Facebook Pages, 2011–20.



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organizations in rebel-held territory, particularly in the northwestern governorates of Idlib and Aleppo, had management offices in Turkey that coordinated with international agencies. The case studies in the next section illuminate these translocal connections as well as adaptations toward issues of survival and protection even among organizers who began as political activists in the nonviolent uprising.

Finally, we see that governance became increasingly salient over time both for organizations within Syria and translocally. In both border and nonborder states, there was an initial uptick in discussion of governance in the earlier days of the conflict, followed by a decline in 2012 and fluctuation throughout the rest of the period. Governance never became as salient as either contentious politics or survival and protection, except in border states, where it briefly became the most salient issue in 2011—likely coinciding with the period when Syrian opposition bodies were formed in Turkey and received recognition from international actors.

Together, our analysis of millions of Facebook posts highlights how civil organizing persists in the face of ongoing violence and displacement. It also demonstrates the importance of translocal organizing, as well as how civil organizing increases in border states over time. Finally, our results highlight how organizing is not limited to immediate concerns of survival, but also focuses on contentious politics in the early days of the conflict and increasingly emphasizes issues of governance over time.

In the next section, we analyze these trends through qualitative case studies of two civil organizations that reveal mechanisms through which spatial and temporal shifts occur, as well as the intersections of organizations' substantive concerns.

Qualitative Case Studies

We have proposed that civil organizations engage, coordinate, and persist in the pursuit of strategic goals during war. In this way, we have treated civil organizing as an *outcome* of interest. Our analysis of public Facebook pages representing Syrian organizations is well suited to understanding variation in this outcome over space, time, and substance. Case studies, by contrast, enable us to understand civil organizing as a *process*. Within-case analyses of the trajectories of two civil organizations help to explain why spatial, temporal, and substantive dynamics of civil organizing unfold in the ways they do.[11] In particular, we can identify mechanisms—including political opportunity structures, tactical adaptation, and access to resources—that reveal why locations become translocal, why their engagements shift as the nature of the conflict changes over time, and why their motivations and goals intertwine as they seek to protect, govern, and contend on behalf of their communities.

Cadre

The case of a civil organization we call Cadre illuminates the relationship between civilians and refugees in the process of civil organizing. Under relatively conducive political opportunity structures, Cadre's organizing became translocal. Their access to resources also allowed them to expand their efforts. Their case also demonstrates the ways their goals and organizational structure overlapped and adapted to war dynamics.

Cadre was founded in 2012 by a group of political activists who had mobilized during the Syrian uprising in a town on the outskirts of Damascus to provide psychosocial support to children. The town was an early stronghold for the unarmed, and then armed, opposition to the Syrian regime. For its rebellion, the town suffered intense repression and eventually besiegement by the state's armed forces. The activists, well-educated college graduates, began Cadre out of concern for the well-being of children in the area, for whom they established underground schools.

By 2014 the team included dozens of people, and they had expanded to towns across Rural Damascus province. Nonstate armed groups that had seized territorial control did not block their efforts. Cadre also expanded its substantive scope from psychosocial support and education to child protection, which seeks to monitor, report, prevent, and respond to the exploitation and abuse of children. The tactical shift was motivated by the revolutionary visions of Cadre's founders, including one whom we will call Ahmed. "The goal of the organization was to create a Syrian society in which children enjoyed their rights," Ahmed explained. "We believed that if we can create this among children, this will change the whole society in the future."[12]

While Cadre's programs were based inside Syria, its organizational structure evolved to include, and even depend on, Syrians in border states. Ahmed had escaped to Lebanon in 2014 after a year-long detention in Syria for his part in contentious civil resistance campaigns. He worked with Cadre remotely, directing project implementation. But Lebanon did not permit Syrian organizations to register—that is, political opportunities were precluded. Cadre's leaders wanted to register, however, at least to access resources, "for the sake of relations with donors, INGOs, and accepting money through a formal bank." Cadre's administrative board, therefore, held a meeting and decided that their external office should be in Turkey, where international aid actors had congregated in the southern city of Gaziantep. Cadre would become a translocal organization.

Ahmed went to Turkey and officially set up Cadre's office in 2015: its Syrian employees administered the organization from Turkey, which came to include offices like human resources and finance. Their budget expanded

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from less than $100,000 in 2014, when relations with donors began, to nearly $1 million at the end of 2016. At the time of writing, Cadre's website credits multiple well-known international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) for support.

In turn, Cadre's activities inside rebel-held Syria grew. They began to work in Idlib in northwest Syria, an outgrowth that occurred not from Rural Damascus outward, but from Turkey outward. For a time, Syrian activists could cross borders, so Cadre's people crossed from Turkey to rebel-held Idlib and trained people there directly. The organization engaged in the monitoring and documentation of rights violations, community empowerment, capacity-building training, advocacy against abusive local policies, as well as educational support.

Cadre was part of a milieu of translocal civil organizers: Syrian civil actors in Gaziantep engaged in the conflict response in interaction with civilians inside rebel-held Syria. Ahmed described to an author the culture of activists in Turkey, which revolved around working on behalf of the Syrian cause. "It's like a state of war when it comes to business" in Gaziantep, he explained. It is a "24-hours-per-day" commitment. All his friends were also part of NGOs and if they met socially, they would talk about work. Ahmed did not feel he could take a day off. If there was work on the weekends, he would be in the office. He would stay up late into the night, sometimes conducting meetings with Cadre fieldworkers inside Syria at 11pm, "because the internet is strong in Syria at that time." It is very stressful, he concludes. Yet he continues to organize with counterparts inside Syria to achieve their protective yet contentious goals: "We'll die fighting for a cause," he proclaimed. "We won't surrender. I will persist."

The Information Management Unit

In our second case, we again uncover processes through which civil organizing adopts a translocal character—in this case driven by a shift away from nonborder to border states. This spatial shift enhanced the organization's capacity and legitimacy to pursue protective goals despite its political motives, revealing the sometimes-complicated objectives underlying civil organizing under wartime pressures.

The Information Management Unit (IMU) is a semi-autonomous organization within the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), a Syrian NGO. At the start of the Syrian uprising and conflict, a familiar dynamic unfolded among external actors concerned with a war abroad: diaspora networks and foreign governments sought to advance their political objectives in the country from a distance. The United States and other countries sought opposition actors to help to achieve their objectives in Syria, be they toppling the regime or a political process (Phillips 2016). But donors like the US initially had almost no ties to activists inside Syria when the uprising began. So they headed to Turkey, where members of the diaspora gathered and formed a formal political opposition body in Istanbul in August 2011. The "Friends of Syria," a group of dozens of states that supported the opposition, deemed the group their principal assistance channel in 2012. The Friends of Syria later designated what became the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, or the Syrian Opposition Coalition, the "legitimate representative" of the Syrian people, and channeled hundreds of millions of US dollars in humanitarian, economic, and military aid into it, or indirectly into related efforts (Sayigh 2013). Political opportunity structures and resources characterized these dramatic developments.

In 2012, the Opposition Coalition founded the ACU to focus on humanitarianism—a tactical adaptation that responded to the descent into violent conflict. With the technical and financial help of the United Kingdom, the US, and INGOs, and the hospitality of Turkey (which supplied political opportunities and resources), the ACU was born. However, factionalism within both the opposition and the ACU was soon rife. The ACU, and the Opposition Coalition more broadly, were perceived by many to be on the receiving end of too much funding, corrupting them and increasing their distance from events —and the suffering—inside Syria (Alsarraj and Hoffman 2020). Condemnations of diaspora meetings in five-star hotels were commonly heard around Gaziantep. An American staff member described the ACU's donor relations portfolio as "schizophrenic" and the site of a "civil war."[13] From the US perspective, in the words of a government official who shepherded the US's response to Syria's crisis, "something terrible happened": Qatar dumped millions of dollars onto the ACU, and Gulf interests "ended up winning the fight entirely."[14] These episodes left the exiled opposition with a "major problem of legitimacy" among donors and Syrians alike (Alsarraj and Hoffman 2020).

Yet the ACU's IMU stood apart from the furor. Though the ACU's leadership was largely composed of prominent diaspora actors, the IMU's staff in Turkey and fieldworkers inside Syria were ordinary civil actors. The IMU could deploy hundreds of fieldworkers to enumerate and assess needs across Syria, especially in rebel-held regions. The IMU's ground-level advantages, including local knowledge and connections, convinced even international humanitarian organizations, wary of a political body charged with relief efforts, to work with it. INGOs and donors undertook capacity building, trainings, and staff secondments to develop the IMU's abilities in monitoring and assessment that would feed into INGO analyses (Slim and Trombetta 2014). UN leaders recognized the value of this branch of the ACU for its access (IRIN News 2013), and humanitarian evaluators conceded it used "professional needs-assessment methods" (Sida,

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Trombetta, and Panero 2016). Even those INGOs like Doctors without Borders that "kept a distance" from the ACU due to its "politicized approach" allowed that "pragmatic interaction has taken place in the exchange of data" (Whittall 2014).

Among the IMU's ground-level staff were activists who had cut their teeth during the uprising. They included a young man we will call Omar, who had been engaged in media activism when a contact informed him the newly formed ACU was looking for field staff in his rural Aleppo hometown.[15] Omar crossed into Turkey to attend a workshop about how to conduct a needs assessment and other fundamentals of data collection. He carried out the task and the IMU found, upon his reporting back in Turkey, that Omar exceeded expectations. He was hired and charged with ever-greater responsibilities and a wider remit across rebel-held Aleppo province. Omar traveled back and forth across the Turkey–Syria border, carrying out the work of the IMU, until his mother was killed by government shelling in rural Aleppo. Then Omar wanted to base himself in refuge, in Turkey. The IMU could accommodate this in its Gaziantep office. The connectivity of the borderlands made for a bustling locus of civil organizing.

Ultimately, the ACU lost support as diaspora networks floundered in donor rivalries. But the locally staffed IMU has maintained support and carried on with its politically inflected technocratic work up to the time of writing.

Conclusion

Our descriptive analysis of millions of Facebook posts produced by Syrian civil organizations systematically documents the spatial, temporal, and substantive scope of civil organizing. We find that civil organizing persists in the face of ongoing violence and displacement. Our analysis also highlights the importance of translocal organizing, as well as of how civil organizing increases in border states over time. Turning to the "why" of civil organizing, we find that organizations not only focus on the immediate concerns of survival, but also engage in contentious politics in the early days of a conflict and increasingly emphasize issues of governance over time.

Our social media data offers real-time measures of organizational behavior, enabling us to directly compare the behavior of organizations in Syria, in borderlands, and further afield throughout a decade of conflict. Our findings suggest that civil organizing emerges and persists in more places, times, and domains than is typically assumed. Additionally, qualitative fieldwork both informed the creation of our Facebook dataset and allowed us to explore the mechanisms underlying these broad trends to identify key moments when organizations' locations became translocal, and when they adapted their motivations and goals in response to conflict dynamics. We show that shifting political opportunity structures, tactics, and resources over the course of the Syria conflict shape the emergence and evolution of civil organizing.

First, supporting our expectations of where we should expect civil organizing to emerge, we find that most civil organizing takes place translocally, combining efforts by local actors with those by refugees in border states or by the diaspora. We also document how civil organizing in border states grows over the course of the conflict as displacement escalates and refugees take advantage of new opportunities to organize in neighboring host countries. Turning to our qualitative evidence, we show how Cadre moved into Turkey as opportunities to interact with international donors grew, which then gave the organization new opportunities to expand local work within Syria from Turkey. Additionally, we document how IMU shifted from nonborder to border states, highlighting spatial variance in transnational organizing over time.

Examining the "when" of civil organizing, we find that although civil organizing decreased in 2013 as the mass uprising gave way to civil war, it then picked up and stabilized throughout the conflict period. This is in line with our expectations, motivated by the social movements literature, that violence can demobilize organizing, as well as with theories in the civilian agency literature that point to civilian resilience and tactical adaptation during conflict. Our case studies further demonstrate how organizations work to persist even in the face of dislocation, violence, and loss of donor support. We show how organizing—and translocal organizing in particular—persists and evolves even in the face of major obstacles both within Syria and in border states.

Turning to the "why" of civil organizing, we find, in line with our expectations, that discussions of contentious politics declined over time as the conflict became increasingly violent. Discussions of contentious politics are particularly prevalent in nonborder states and translocally, perhaps highlighting how organizations that operate at least in part outside Syria have more opportunity and resources to focus on calling for long-term political change. We also see that survival and protection concerns were most dominant within Syria and in border states and increased over the course of the conflict. We find the highest proportion of governance rhetoric in Syria and border states. This rhetoric grew in salience over the course of the conflict as rebels, civilians, and refugees took advantage of new opportunities to engage in governance. Our qualitative case studies then show how these patterns emerged as civilians responded to shifting opportunities and resources and adapted tactically. We see that Cadre started to become more focused on contentious politics and then shifted to survival and protection needs, while IMU started with contentious US-influenced political goals and then shifted to focus more on survival and protection and governance needs over time.

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Our approach nonetheless has some limitations. First, our exploration of the scope of civil organizing and the mechanisms that may explain its variation does not explicitly make claims about *what* civil organizers accomplish on the ground. We remain agnostic as to whether civil organizers' public discourse is accompanied by physical action. Indeed, civil organizing can be purely discursive: for instance, human rights advocates can engage in claims-making through online awareness raising and digital documentation of conflict violations; journalists publish news and share updates online. While the discourse we document includes discussion of physical action, such as participation in protest or distributing food baskets, we do not measure the degree to which these actions were indeed occurring on the ground. Second, as we note in our description of our data, the 1,215 organizations whose Facebook pages we analyzed do not include all Syrian civil organizations. For example, we may be missing ephemeral groups such as informal coordinators of contentious action during the 2011 uprising who ceased to use Facebook to organize protest activity as the conflict escalated into civil war. Additionally, for practical and ethical reasons, we cannot analyze content from groups that operated completely underground or in private, or include in our spatial analyses groups that may have strategically withheld location information in their page content. As we described in our research design section, we may also underrepresent organizations in government-held territory. Third, our qualitative research could not overcome obstacles against independent, ethical, and safe research inside Syria.

Despite these limitations, our work offers several contributions. First, we have proposed a research agenda that expands the scope of civil organizing spatially, temporally, and substantively. Using large-scale analysis of social media data, we have documented the scope of, and variation in, civil organizing in the Syrian case. Second, we have identified and used qualitative case studies to document mechanisms that explain variation in the emergence and evolution of such organizing. Our work highlights the roles of political opportunity structures, tactical adaptation, and resources in fostering civil organizing in more places, times, and domains than is typically assumed.

By emphasizing the importance of organizations, centering refugees and civilians, and using diverse evidence to document variation in organizing over time and space, our work bridges literatures on contentious politics, conflict processes, and forced migration, while adding to a growing body of literature focused on online activism and transnational activism. Even in the face of challenging circumstances, our findings suggest that civilians and refugees are strategic and agential. Systematically examining the spatial, temporal, and substantive dynamics of civil organizing improves our understanding of these complex dynamics and elevates the voices of actors that are often missing from academic and policy debates.

Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001907.

Data replication

*Data replication sets are available in Harvard Dataverse at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/U6M7SQ

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Notes

1 This includes both refugee and diaspora communities.
2 Additional information is provided in section B of the appendix.
3 Citizens for Syria, itself a Syrian organization that emerged after 2011, audited and surveyed Syrian civil society organizations based inside Syria between 2015 and 2016. Antoun Issa audited nonstate media outlets in Syria for a 2016 publication of the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC. A Syrian research assistant (RA) based in southeastern Turkey was provided both lists as starting points, and tasked with auditing them and similar groups that had public Facebook pages representing Syrian civil society and governance bodies that are active on behalf of the Syrian cause, including those organizations, groups, or institutions that are based in or originating from Syria; those that predated the 2011 uprising; those that emerged during the 2011 uprising; and those that subsequently emerged in territory controlled by armed opposition groups, in refugee host countries, and overseas. Groups in or from areas under Kurdish or government control were included as they were discovered, as well as groups that may have been operating in areas under the control of extremist groups. Groups were audited following two additional

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approaches: snowball sampling and keyword searches. For snowball sampling, the RA was instructed to include pages that appeared in the "Related Pages" of identified groups that fit the study criteria. Keyword searches were primarily used to capture governance bodies and coordination committees because they did not have preexisting lists. For example, the RA was asked to search for "local council" (in Arabic) in the search bar and to view all results. Finally, the RA was asked to iterate between the approaches—for example, by using the results of keyword searches as a basis for snowball sampling, and so forth.

4 We eliminated pages that represented business entities, conveyed violent or individual (rather than group) engagements, and had fewer than five hundred likes. Our research assistant, a Syrian refugee in Turkey, was immersed in the field of Syrian activism as an emergency responder who partook in the 2011 protest movement. During the audit, we were often familiar with the groups associated with the pages, or else could discern their fit based on our acquired knowledge.

5 This automated measure of location is not available for all of our pages because Facebook only implemented it in 2018. It also does not capture shifting locations over time.

6 The use of Crowdtangle may raise questions of bias or ethics to audiences unfamiliar with the research tool. Crowdtangle only tracks content from public pages. Crowdtangle does not include paid advertisements unless they began as organic, nonpaid posts that were subsequently boosted using Facebook's advertising tools. Crowdtangle also does not track posts from private groups or pages, or posts only made visible only to specific groups of followers. See https://web.archive.org/web/20221114144848/https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/1140930-what-data-is-crowdtangle-tracking for an overview of what data is included through the API.

7 Word2vec models produce word embeddings built on shallow neural networks, which rely on the collocation of words in texts to create vectors of terms that represent each word. They can represent complex concepts from analogies to changing cultural meanings of words (Rodman 2020).

8 Semantic similarity is computed using cosine similarity on the word-embedding space.

9 Specifically, we use the ChatGPT API using the `openai R` package (Rudnytskyi 2023) and the GPT-3.5 Turbo model to classify these random samples of a thousand posts in each category as relevant or not relevant. Recent research suggests that ChatGPT outperforms crowdworkers on MTurk and even trained RAs on many data annotation tasks—including the annotation of political tweets (Gilardi, Alizadeh, and Kubli 2023). Our validation suggests that our dictionary method performs well for an automated text classification task. On average, 89% of contentious politics posts, 85% of survival/protection posts, and 78% of governance posts are relevant to the topics these models are intending to capture. Most irrelevant posts refer to these topics outside of the Syrian context.

10 See figure A2 in the appendix for a plot of displacement trends.

11 The first case, pseudonymously called Cadre, is a case in the Facebook dataset. The second case, the Information Management Unit, is represented in the dataset under its home organization, the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU). Because the ACU is very publicly known, we do not de-identify it for the case study.

12 Interview 105. 2017. Turkey.

13 Interview 76. 2017. Turkey.

14 Interview 115. 2019. Interviewed via Skype.

15 Interview 99. 2017. Turkey.

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