Between Rebels and Uprising

Intersecting Networks and Discursive Strategies in Rebel Controlled Syria

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Abstract

In the article I explore how, at the individual level, participation in *multiple* networks opens up questions regarding the *classification* of social activism. The central contention thereby is that as mobilization networks increasingly intersect, explicit discursive designations of activism (being 'political' or 'nonpolitical, social') by individual activists becomes more prevalent. I substantiate this argument with an in-depth exploration of the Syrian uprising. I show that as two distinct networks—one that emerged around nonviolent activism, another that emerged around a violent uprising—increasingly intersected, activists began to use specific discursive strategies. On the one side, a strategy emerged that emphasized the nonpolitical nature of mobilization, thereby *distancing* activism discursively from intersecting networks. On the other side, a strategy emerged of politicizing collective identities, thereby *bridging* discursively various mobilization networks. The article thereby adds to existing studies on the intersection between network structure and individual activism. The analysis builds on more than a hundred primary sources from various rebel groups and relevant local actors in addition to thirty interviews with relevant players among activist, rebel and public services organizations.

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Introduction

How did different social networks in the Syrian uprising influence mobilization strategies of individual Syrian activists? In the article I explore how, at the individual level, participation in *multiple* networks opens up questions regarding the *classification* of social activism. I thereby provide a critical reply to studies that explore how the intersection between different types of social networks─especially regarding the intersection between 'local everyday' and 'national political' networks─relate to individual mobilization. I argue that typologies of social networks do not reflect empirical observation but rather social classification. When exploring the relationship between social networks and individual mobilization, what should therefore be explored is not how different types of networks intersect, but how the intersection between networks shapes discursive classifications of activism. Following this line of argument, the central contention of this article is that as mobilization networks increasingly intersect, explicit discursive designations of activism (being 'political' or 'nonpolitical, everyday') by individual activists becomes more prevalent.

I substantiate the argument with an in-depth exploration of the Syrian uprising between 2012 and 2014. The exploration builds on more than a hundred primary sources from various rebel groups and relevant local actors, in addition to (Arabic, English and French) secondary sources. This is on top of hundreds of sources from governance related actors and around thirty interviews with relevant players among activist, rebel and public service organizations.[2] Interviews took place during four research stays in Istanbul and Gaziantep (Turkey) between August 2012 and October 2016.

On the basis of this data, I make four observations. First, I explore the emergence of nonviolent activism in the early days of the uprising. I observe that the networks constituting this activism did not have clear boundaries, nor were they explicitly political or nonpolitical: They emerged around *social* activism that constituted an explicitly *political* uprising. Second, I explore the emergence of the Syrian armed, rebel, uprising in subsequent months. I observe that networks within this rebel uprising were also not stable or clearly defined, but that they *were* different and clearly defined from nonviolent activism. Activists initially organized violent and nonviolent mobilization separately, as the use of violent repertoires could delegitimize nonviolent activism. Practically, this ensured a clear demarcation between the two types of networks. Third, I show

that these two initially independent networks began to intersect around the delivery of public services in rebel controlled areas. Two important examples in this respect—which will be explored in more depth below—were the rebel controlled cities of Aleppo and Raqqa.

Finally, I observe that as these networks increasingly intersected two types of discursive strategies emerged. On the one side, some activists began to emphasize the nonpolitical nature of their mobilization: In effect, these activists distanced their activism discursively from rebel networks. On the other side, some activists emphasized a collective identity as a unifying framework for different types of activism. They thereby bridged discursively the two mobilization networks. These strategies were not a structural characteristic of the Syrian uprising; nor were they a social mechanism that emerged within its collectivity. Rather, these were particular types of strategic choices made by individual activists, related to the networked context in which they found themselves.

Social Networks and Contentious Mobilization

The relation between network structure and individual activism is a much researched topic in social movement studies. There are studies that analyze the influence of networks on activist recruitment and their mobilization repertoire (Diani, 2008; Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-Olson, 1980); how individual positions of activists within networks shape their mobilization efforts (Diani & McAdam, 2003; Gould, 1993) and the influence networks have on the socialization of individuals within these networks (Baldassarri & Diani, 2007; Passy, 2003; Passy & Giugni, 2001; Singerman, 2004). What is similar in these approaches is an assumption that the structure and position in a *singular* network defines the relationship between network and (characteristic of) individual mobilization. As result, these approaches have a relatively singular view of the individual-network interaction.

Increasingly, scholars argue that individuals participate in multiple social networks, and that this network multiplexity (Gould, 1991) should be taken into account when analyzing the influence of social networks on individual mobilization (see also Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Mische, 2003). Although the focus on network multiplexity and intersections is commendable, I critique a specific issue that emerges in a number of these contributions: the conflation of typologies of social action (especially between everyday and unintentional, and political and intentional) with

social networks' characteristics. Practically, as we will see, this causes problems with, first, the conceptualization of network boundaries and, second, internal network structure.

Regarding the first, in reality types of social action are not clearly differentiated (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Jean-Klein, 2001) and neither are the networks that emerge from them. The distinction between 'unintentional everyday' and 'intentional political' activism is often hard to make in reality. As result, social network boundaries do not neatly follow these kinds of distinctions. It is not a problem when network boundaries are used purely analytically (see Diani's work on the green movement, 1995) but it does turn problematic when it is implied to reflect empirically observable network divisions. This is for instance the case in Clark's (2004) exploration of recruitment efforts by Islamist organizations in Yemen and their influence on social network formation. She implies a clear separation between political organizations and everyday networks; a separation that is difficult to observe in the reality.

Regarding the second, it cannot be assumed that different types of social action result in different types of network structure. From this follows that if the relationship between social action and network structure is not explicitly defended, the concept of networks is analytically empty: What is explored is not the intersection between types of networks but types of activism. A good example to clarify this point is the classic study of Gould (1991) on the importance of network multiplexity. In the study he explores the intersection between informal social networks (constituted by ties of everyday social solidarity within neighborhoods) and formal organizational networks (constituted by battalions of the National Guard) in the Paris commune mobilization of 1871. As individual activists could enlist in multiple battalions, a network of overlapping enlistments emerged: one that linked battalions across neighborhoods and neighborhoods across battalions. Gould shows that the structure of this network correlates with levels of neighborhood mobilization and argues that this implies an interdependence between neighborhood networks of social solidarity, and the formal networks of the Paris National Guard battalions. I would argue instead that without a discussion regarding the specific network structure of neighborhood solidarities and National Guard battalions, he renders their networked character irrelevant. As result, he ends up analyzing how a single network emerged at the intersection of social solidarity and a formal organization. Although interesting in and of itself, it means he does *not* analyze the influence of network multiplexity.[3]

This is not to argue that we should not analyze the relationship between networks on the one hand, and different types of activism on the other. But one thing should be taken into account. The designation of a network's aim─to be political, everyday, green, LGTBQ+ rights, etc─is not one of empirical observation (either related to network boundaries or internal structure) but one of social classification. In other words: social networks are not coalitions or organizations. They are not coherent entities that have a decision making body. Their boundaries and internal structures are not defined in any predictable way by the type of social activity that was at their inception─they are historically contingent. As we will see in the Syrian uprising, activists increasingly emphasized explicit nonpolitical or political characteristics of their activism─but they only did so after two previously independent social networks in the uprising began to intersect. When exploring the relationship between social networks and individual mobilization, what should therefore be explored is not how different types of networks intersect, but how the intersection between networks shapes discursive classifications of activism by individual activists.

I am not the first to highlight the relationship between discursive processes and network structure. One early and classic approach is the exploration of the extent that collective identities and social networks coalesce. It is in a concept such as CatNets (Tilly, 1978) that this approach emerges and is later used in a variety of research on the political representation of social cleavages (for instance in the framework of the debate on "new" social movements, see Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak, & Giugni, 1995). But these approaches do not investigate the *interactions* between social networks and identity formation. Another classic approach is that of Harrison White (1992, 2008) who inverts social networks and discursive processes: social context is created through the networked discursive interactions between agents. It is an approach closely aligned to the work of Melucci (1996) and Touraine (2009) on the networked nature of struggles over historicity. But this inversion of networks into a purely discursive construct renders an investigation into the interaction between objective network structure and discursive strategies impossible.

One approach to solving the above issues is to explore how, at the individual level, participation in *multiple* networks opens up questions regarding the *classification* of social activism. How do

individuals attempt to bridge participation in diverging and intersecting networks discursively? The approach I take in this article is closely aligned with Ann Mische (2003) and her contribution regarding the discursive mechanisms that emerge when individuals navigate intersecting social networks. She argues that it is *because of* the intersection between multiple networks that individuals are forced to make explicit the social boundaries that structure their activism. As result, she argues, a number of social mechanism emerge: identity qualifying (making one's position explicit discursively), temporal cueing (making one's position bounded temporarily), generality shifting (being active at different levels of generality) and multiple targeting (targeting multiple audiences).

Focusing on the Syrian uprising, I add to the above scholarship in a number of ways. First, I highlight the particular impact violence can have on social network structure: facilitating the emergence of insular and hierarchical social networks. Second, I highlight the possible strategic use of religion as a discursive classification aimed to unify a diverse range of social activism. Taken together, I argue for the use of micro-level mobilization strategies, instead of social mechanisms, to explore these discursive observations (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Jasper, 2004; Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015; Volpi & Jasper, 2018). Although a full strategic approach is outside the scope of this article, I will highlight the importance of individual agency in social classifications of mobilization. I thereby show how a focus on social network multiplexity can be used to bridge structure and agency in studies on discursive processes in contentious mobilization. In doing so, I also implicitly─I do not refer to these debates at any moment in the following pages─provide a critique to the popular belief that a direct relation exists between religion (and especially Islam) and the use of violence in contentious mobilization.

Outline of the Argument
Taking the above into account, the question that will be explored here is: How has the intersection between two different networks in the Syrian uprising influenced Syrian activists' discursive mobilization strategies? In the remainder of the article I make four distinct observations. First, I explore the emergence of nonviolent activism in the early days of the uprising. This type of activism consisted of peaceful protests, activists coordinating initiatives, supporting others or providing emergency aid. Related networks emerged from, and were closely related to, everyday networks of kinship, friendship and neighborhood ties. These

networks included a variety of organizations—ranging from completely informal to formalized organizations—that sometimes worked together, at other times were at odds, but recognized each other as belonging to a shared uprising against Bashar al-Assad. These emerging networks did not have clear boundaries, nor were they explicitly political or nonpolitical: They emerged around *social* activism that constituted an explicitly *political* uprising.

Second, I observe the emergence of the Syrian armed, rebel, uprising. These activists responded to violent repression in kind. First legitimized as purely defensive and gradually turning more offensive, these activists initially formed small, insular, groups with friends to take up arms against regime forces. Gradually these groups developed into larger rebel organizations that challenged the Syrian army and its supporters. These groups, as was the case with nonviolent activism, initially emerged from preexisting kinship, friendship and neighborhood ties. They, also similar to nonviolent activist groups, sometimes worked together, sometimes were at odds with each other but generally recognized that they were part of a (violent) uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Crucially, even though emergent networks within this violent activism were not stable or clearly defined, they *were* different and clearly defined from nonviolent activism. As shown above, activists initially organized violent and nonviolent mobilization separately, as the use of violent repertoires could delegitimize nonviolent activism. Practically, this ensured a clear demarcation between the two types of networks.

Third, this clear demarcation did not last. The two different networks began to intersect as rebel groups took control over various parts of the country in late 2012. In these regions invariably problems emerged regarding the delivery of public services (such as food distribution, education, the provision of electricity and water)—especially in larger cities. Two important examples in this respect were Aleppo and Raqqa, that came under rebel control in mid-2012 and early 2013 respectively. Initiatives aimed at addressing these issues were drawn into questions of coercive control over limited public resources, while at the same time building on the networks that had emerged around nonviolent activism. As result, activists were increasingly forced to balance between these two different networks.

Finally, I observe that two types of discursive strategies emerged as result of this balancing act. First, a strategy that emphasizes the nonpolitical nature of mobilization. In effect, by stating that

their activism is far removed from any political group or party, these activists *distance* their activism discursively from rebel networks. In contrast, there is a second strategy that centers on placing various forms of activism within one cohesive collective identity, activists thereby *bridge* discursively these mobilization networks. By arguing that a comprehensive 'Jihadist' nature of the uprising includes all types of mobilization—from collective violence, to governance and social activism—these activists discursively combine various networks into one cohesive entity.[4] These two strategies are not a structural characteristic of the Syrian uprising; nor are they a social mechanism that emerges within its collectivity. Rather, they are particular types of strategic choices made by individual activists, related to the networked context in which they are active.

The Emergence of Nonviolent Activism

Following the examples of Tunisia and Egypt, in March 2011 a popular uprising emerged in Syria (Droz-Vincent, 2014 and many more; Khalaf, Ramadan, & Stolleis, 2014; Leenders & Heydemann, 2012). Starting with localized protests in the southern city of Dara', within weeks they spread across the country. The repertoire of protests was mostly non-violent, but differed immensely all the same: from localized and brief protests in cities such as Aleppo and Damascus to attempts at establishing large and continuous sit ins in Homs and Hama. Protests erupted around the funerals of protesters killed, to night time flash protests in response escalating regime repression. Discourse and demands also differed immensely: from overtly secular to infused with ethnic and religious references; from protests songs, facebook and youtube pages, to the satirical posters that made the town of Kafranbel infamous. And although demands generally revolved around 'freedom' and an 'end to regime corruption', these were always linked to localized grievances that ranged from price of bread to release of prisoners (see for a detailed account della Porta, Donker, Hall, Poljarevic, & Ritter, 2017, Chapter 3).

The diversity of social action was mirrored in the diversity of networks on which mobilization built. As was true of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, the Syrian one emerged from numerous intersecting local networks rather than being inspired by a charismatic leader and building on a limited set of existing organizations. It meant that from the very beginning the boundary between everyday and activist networks was almost non-existent (Shadid, 2011; Zoepf, 2011). In regions where clan structures were important—for instance Dara'—they were at

the basis of protests (Leenders, 2012). Cities that had large universities—such as Aleppo—had their campuses as early centers of activism.[5] Protests built on family networks, social networks around schools, universities and mosques, and networks of human rights and civil society organizations. Despite the importance of social media, in practice any type of pre-existing social network proved crucial to the creation of mobilization networks.

Despite the uprising being leaderless, it soon began to institutionalize. As protests spread, coordination increased and organizations emerged. These organizations came to be known as the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs). Organized at the neighbourhood level, these committees met practical needs associated with collective mobilization: organizing protests, gathering, disseminating information and providing first aid. In time, the LCCs turned into the institutional backbone of peaceful protests throughout the country. This does not mean that they constituted a unified network. Nor were they the only type of organization active in the early uprising. Although LCCs were supposed to be nationalistic and nonsectarian—and thereby a unified network—soon divisions emerged. In some cities, for instance Aleppo, LCCs emerged around the university. In other cities, for instance Dara', they emerged around community leaders. In the Kurdish Northeast of the country, Kurdish LCCs emerged (KurdWatch 2011). But despite all their differences, activists recognized the need for national coordination and eventually a national coordination body of LCCs was founded.[6]

Summarized, we can state that the initial uprising was thoroughly networked. This network was both of an everyday character and an explicit intentional one; it was social and political; explicitly local and national; informal and formalized. The network boundaries between these different elements of the Syrian uprising were impossible to draw in practice. Arguably, the strength of the initial Syrian uprising was that it combined all these elements into one large network. And in those first few weeks and months—no one seemed to mind.

The Emergence of Rebel Activism

From the start of the uprising protesters debated the use of violence, with the general consensus that it would incite more regime violence—and that the regime would prove more powerful in the resulting show of force. That said, some protesters used live fire in response to regime repression from the very beginning of the uprising (Slackman and Stack 2011).[7] As months

passed and regime repression intensified, some activists founded small militias aimed at 'protecting the people' in various parts of the country.[8] This process accelerated around August 2011, following the successful attack on Tripoli by a coalition of Libyan rebel forces. In direct response to this example, the general consensus among activists began to shift away from nonviolent mobilization to a more violent armed uprising. Syrian militias became more numerous as result. Hundreds of rebel groups emerged in the years after. Initially, rebel groups were often not more than a few friends or relatives taking up their (often antique) rifles.[9] In the following year (August 2011 – July 2012) they enlarged, became more organized and increasingly well trained. The process culminated in the attack on Aleppo and Damascus in August 2012 by well armed and organized rebel groups.

From the outset these rebel groups differed organizationally from nonviolent activism: where the latter attempted to organize as publically and inclusively as possible, militias had to organize secretively and as insular entities. Initially, attempts to provide umbrella organizations for these emerging rebel groups (such as the formation of the Free Syrian Army in July 2011) were unsuccessful. Distrust between rebel groups was endemic. Additionally, activists attempted to keep the use of violence organizationally detached from the non-violent uprising. The creation of a Free Syrian Army (FSA) by a number of defected army lieutenants, for instance, was an attempt to emphasize the split between the use of violence and nonviolence in the uprising (Landis, 2011b; Macfarquhar & Saad, 2012). As time went by these groups coalesced into more organized rebel organizations; creating alliances and unions with other groups or falling out with each other into violent conflict. It resulted in a dense and ever shifting network of rebel groups that broadly split along a nonreligious segment, under the banner of the FSA, and a Jihadist one.[10]

Four of the most power rebel groups that emerged in the following years were the Zenki Movement, Ahrar al-Sham, the Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS).[11] The Zenki movement was a more secular rebel group active in North-West Syria. The group was one of the initial participants in a coalition created to attack Aleppo in the summer of 2012. It was also a founding member of the anti-ISIS Army of Mujahideen coalition in early 2014 but withdrew later that year.[12] Additionally, the group fought and published statements under an FSA banner.[13] Second, Ahrar al-Sham emerged as a union from multiple smaller rebel groups in

November 2011, and was one of the first effective self declared Salafi-Jihadist group in the Syrian uprising. In 2012 and 2013 it was a principal part of the Syrian Islamic Front; and from 2013 onward of the Islamic Front (The Islamic Front, 2013; The Syrian Islamic Front, 2013). AaS was allied at one time or another with both the FSA, via the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council, and the Nusra Front.[14] Third, the Nusra Front was founded in January 2012 as a Syrian representation of the global Islamic Jihad (al-Joulani, 2012). Although long suspected, only after the founding of ISIS in April 2013 did Abu Mohammad al-Joulani, the leader of the Nusra Front, declare its allegiance and trace its ancestry to al-Qaeda's Zawahiri (al-Joulani, 2013). On the Syrian battlefield they occasionally joined forces with AaS, for instance in the Jaysh al-Fatah organization. ISIS, finally, grew out of a branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq (the Islamic State in Iraq, or ISI) and became increasingly powerful and self assured under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It led to the declaration in April 2013 that they would extent their organization to Syria with the aim to create an Islamic State (al-Baghdadi, 2013).[15] In short, these four rebel groups constantly shifted alliances and organizational structure throughout the duration of the Syrian uprising.

When we look at the above, we can see that the turn to violence resulted in the emergence of a new type of network—what can be called rebel networks—that differed in organizational structures and was separated from the network of the nonviolent uprising. Regarding the first, they started out as much more fragmented and isolated than their nonviolent counterparts, but soon coalesced into larger hierarchical and opaque organizations. In other words, whereas nonviolent network structures were horizontal and public in nature, rebel organizations were hierarchical and closed. Second, as was the case with nonviolent activism, network boundaries *within* the rebel uprising were hard to draw. The ever shifting alliances, coalitions, splits and fights make that internal network structures were never stable. Also, many of these groups explicitly state they are both social and political; rebel group and service provider. Importantly, boundaries between rebel and nonviolent networks *were* initially relatively easy to draw. As violent activism emerged, it was intentionally kept separated from nonviolent activism. In short, we can observe during the first year of the Syrian uprising the emergence of a first—nonviolent—and second—violent rebel—network that were both separate and independent from each other.

Intersecting Networks and Public Service Provision

As rebels took control over various regions in Syria invariably problems emerged regarding the delivery of public services—although these problems emerged at different times and around various issues.[16] In this context, people began to organize, distribute and maintain public resources. Although specifics differed, in all these cases it meant that previously separated networks around rebel and nonviolent mobilization increasingly intersected. Two different cases will be used here to explore these intersections in the period between 2012 and 2014: rebel controlled Aleppo and Raqqa. Both cities fell under rebel control relatively early on, faced explicit problems regarding public service provision relatively quickly (due to high population density) and would remain under rebel control for multiple years. At the same time they provide two distinct institutional contexts, thereby going some way to showing a generalizability of observed dynamics.

Public Service Provision in Aleppo

In July 2012 rebel groups staged an attack on Aleppo and within days took control over a number of neighborhoods, for instance Haidariya and Sheikh Najjar in the north; Sakhour and Hanano in the west and Salahuddin and Sukkari in the south. Critically, though, rebels were not able to gain control over the entire city, splitting it between a rebel and regime controlled area. As result, following the attack, a number of pressing practical issues emerged: the principal among which were an acute lack of fuel and flour for bakeries (due to supply routes being cut off) and the sudden collapse of trash removal (al-Halabi, 2014).

First of all, these issues were the source of countless neighborhood and street level initiatives to clean roads and manage garbage collection.[17] In addition, numerous informal, often family based, networks emerged that were used to trade flour and propellants between Turkey (or other accessible Syrian cities) and Aleppo.[18] Also more organized associations were founded. One of the more effective organizations at the time was the Muslim Youth Council,[19] which was involved in the trade of flour and other aid initiatives.[20] Another large organization was the Ahali Halab Initiative.[21] The level of organization and commercialization differed between these initiatives, but together they constituted a vast informal network that emerged from the uprising and preexisting social networks. Some of these associations likened themselves to NGOs in a

nascent Syrian civil society, other described themselves as committees coordinating emergency relief.

More institutionalized initiatives emerged to govern the city, when it became clear that the regime of Bashar al-Assad would not collapse any time soon and a better developed structure became necessary to ensure the delivery of electricity, water, security and food. At the beginning of 2013, two opposing institutions were founded: on the one side the Local Council of Aleppo City[22] and on the other side the Islamic Board in Aleppo.[23] Local activists created the Council as a unifying structure for neighborhood councils that had appeared across the city and was based in the northern neighborhood of Sheikh Najjar (Baczko, Dorronsoro, & Quesnay, 2013; Local Council of Aleppo City, 2015). The Local Council was formally related to the secular opposition led Syrian Interim Government that was founded around the same time. In contrast, the Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, and the al-Tawhid Brigade (which incorporated the Zenki movement at the time) created the Islamic Board. Both these organizations aimed to organize public service provision in the city, such as distributing bread, water and providing electricity, security, and waste disposal (Hadath Media Center, 2013; Odaba sham, 2015).

Thus the initial activist networks and rebel ones began to intersect around the topic of service delivery. The Muslim Youth council gave up part of its network to the Islamic Board, the Local Council began to coordinate with civil society in providing services and, more generally, the Local Council and Islamic Board attempted to implement a governance system that would provide oversight over service provision in the city─thereby placing themselves in direct intersection with other activist initiatives. But a stable *status quo* never materialized. After the emergence and expulsion of ISIS in Aleppo in the summer of 2014, a coalition of rebel groups reformed the Islamic Board. The Nusra Front, excluded from this coalition, created a rival public service organization. It meant that conflicts within the rebel uprising were transposed to service delivery on the ground, polarizing social activism in the process (General Management of Services in Aleppo, 2016; Local Council of Aleppo City, 2016). With increasing Russian bombardments, and as rebel lines around Aleppo disintegrated in November 2016, this enduring conflict stopped in its tracks: any form of normality─which was already heavily degraded through the constant use of barrel bombs on the city─collapsed during the final assault on rebel held neighborhoods in the city.

Public Service Provision in Raqqa

From the beginning of rebel control in the city, the context and development of governance in Raqqa would be distinctly different from that in Aleppo. First of all, the ways in which the city came under rebel control differed markedly. Raqqa was taken over swiftly, completely, and with minimal damage to its infrastructure. Also, although public servants in the water and health sectors were relatively quickly cut off from their regime paid salaries, those working in communication, education and electricity sectors continued to receive their paychecks (alAttar, 2013). As such, Raqqa showed how opposition control could develop in a context where all these institutions still functioned and where activists had time to prepare for the imminent collapse of regime control.

As the takeover of the city became increasingly likely, around September 2012, activists began to create small (and underground) networks to create civil society organizations after the fall of the city.[24] As result, within a month there were 41 civil organizations in the city itself and at least eighteen Local Councils across the Raqqa province (alAttar, 2013)─including one in the city itself.[25] It meant that informal grassroot networks institutionalized into formal organizations much faster than had been the case in other Syrian cities.

Rebel groups, from their side, found a city with plenty of resources. The first thing these groups did after gaining control was to take over specific state buildings.[26] Ahrar al-Sham, for instance, took over a public hospital and the central bank─taking all the money inside in an effort to 'secure it for the people' and setting up its headquarters in it. The Nusra Front took over the governorate building, which would later be used by ISIS. The Ahfad Rusul Brigade, a smaller Jihadist group, set up their headquarters at the old train station (alAttar, 2013). Additionally, these groups occupied schools and other public buildings across the city to use them as local bases. These takeovers took place rather haphazardly and had the distinct feel of a scramble for the spoils of victory. On top of this many families, according to a member of the former Local Council of Raqqa, flocked to the various rebel groups in search of security─which meant that their size and power increased rapidly.[27]

As they controlled most state buildings, service provision in the city fragmented along the various rebel groups. The fragmentation severely deteriorated the overall quality of public services provided. Activists in the Local Council of Raqqa tried to address this problem, except that they had little power or money to be active effectively: The Council faced an acute lack of experience and was severely underfunded.[28] The need for resources and protection forced local activists—and above all those from the Local Council—to seek aid from rebel groups. Ahrar al-Sham reacted positively to these proposals (as long as they would be able to sell it as their own activities) and soon even the Nusra Front took action. As a member of the former council recalled:

> We received an invitation from the leader of the Nusra Front: to come and pay a visit. There was no way that we could refuse this invitation. So we decided to go—all of us. We went fearing for our lives. The strange thing was: he said he supported us, thought that we did great work and that—if needed—we could always call on the Nusra Front for protection. No one expected this. Not from them.[29]

Summarized, we can see that the institutional development of public service provision was different in Aleppo and Raqqa. In Aleppo only certain neighborhoods were conquered, which meant that the rebel groups could not overpower non-rebel initiatives. In Raqqa the opposite happened. But despite these differences, in both instances the necessity of providing public services in regions outside direct control of the state meant that two different networks—one emerging around nonviolent, the other around violent activism—were forced to interact. As was the case in Aleppo, in Raqqa this specific situation would not last. Conflicts between rebel groups soon escalated. Non-jihadist groups were overpowered by Jihadist ones—specifically Ahrar al-Sham and the Nusra Front. The latter would relocate to the nearby town of Tabqa as ISIS depleted its ranks. The Ahfad Rusul brigade, the smaller Jihadist group mentioned above, would be wiped out around the same time. It meant that in mid-2013 Ahrar al-Sham and ISIS remained, with the Nusra Front closeby. At the beginning of 2014, ISIS would outgun the other two and take full control over the city. Soon any type of independent civil initiative was rendered impossible.[30]

Political and Social Activism as Discursive Strategy

As we have seen above, the initial networks of the Syrian nonviolent uprising were both of an everyday character and an explicit intentional one. They were social *and* political; explicitly local and national; informal and formalized—all combined. The second generation of networks that emerged—stemming from the rebel uprising—often combined their violent repertoire of action with humanitarian initiatives. But the internal structure of these networks differed (being more insular and hierarchical) and emerged as independent from this first generation activist network. It was shown above that these two activist networks eventually increasingly intersected around the provision of public services in rebel controlled areas.

In the final section of this paper I demonstrate how these forced interactions triggered two specific discursive strategies. First, many Syrian activists—including from the two cities explored above—began to argue for the explicit non-political nature of their activism, thereby creating a discursive distance between the two types of networks. Second, other activists discursively united various forms of activism under a common (in this case religious) collective identity, thereby bridging the two networks around a shared project of strengthening political power of a collectivity. Both these strategies indicated that the question of what is political turned into a strategic issue as individuals found themselves navigating intersecting mobilization networks. In other words, the Syrian case shows that when exploring the relationship between social networks and individual mobilization, what should be explored is not how different types of networks intersect, but how the intersection between networks shapes discursive classifications of activism by individual activists.

Nonpolitical activism

Following the first strategy, activists explicitly labeled their activism as 'nonpolitical'. In essence, they described their activism as an antonym to political mobilization: either as humanitarian, civic, social or any other categorization. Activists thereby distanced themselves from what they described as the political project of a variety of groups, which they saw to be either corrupted, sectarian, at a stalemate or more generally ineffective. Crucially, there was no consensus between activists on where the boundary between 'political' and 'nonpolitical' was located: Local Councils were described as non-political, or political; opposition organizations that provided public services were described alternatively as an inherent component to rebel

political projects or crucial non-political humanitarian organizations. The self-description of being non-political is used to *discursively distance* activism from other activist organizations. Where before activist networks were clearly differentiated in practice, their increasing intersections necessitated a *discursive strategy* of differentiation—a 'political' versus 'non-political' distinction served this purpose.

This strategy could be observed among numerous activists and organizations in the Syrian uprising. Islamic organizations, for instance the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC)—founded by influential Syrian Islamic scholars such as the Rifai' brothers as a counterweight against 'foreign' Salafist influences in the Syrian uprising—explicitly argued that they were a nonpolitical, 'purely religious', organizations. Taking their *raison d'etre* into account, it is striking that the SIC made such a statement. It is even more striking as the SIC was directly related to many opposition organizations in Syria itself. As a spokesperson stated in an interview with the author: 'We are a religious umbrella organization, representing and advising religious authorities in Syrian opposition organizations. We don't have anything to do with politics or anything of that sort. We are purely religious.'[31] The same strategy could be observed among activists who combined an aversion for institutionalization with a nonpolitical self description, thereby supporting the Syrian population without interacting with 'corrupting' political forces or even media outlets. One activist stated that she became active in an Aleppo aid organization during the uprising as her brothers went to fight for the FSA. She continued to be active in the years since, but increasingly came to realize the importance of staying away from politics and media: 'It corrupts and destroys everything it touches.'[32]

These were two examples of a more widely used discursive strategy. Many Syrian activists would increasingly emphasize the nonpolitical nature of their activism from late 2012 onward. The same applies to Syrian aid organizations that are active abroad, for instance in Lebanon—as discussed by Laura Ruiz de Elvira in her article *From Local Revolutionary Action to Exiled Humanitarian Work* (forthcoming). The strict articulation of a boundary between 'political' and 'nonpolitical' activism emerged in a context that was much more diffuse in reality. In the end, it was *because* networks intersected, and many actors shifted between them, that explicit articulation of political positionality emerged as a discursive strategy among Syrian activists.

Politicizing Collective Identities

This discursive strategy was premised on the argument that all types of activism were in support of one specific collectivity—in our example Sunni Muslims—and thereby constituted a cohesive network. It resulted in the polarization of social cleavages and facilitated a process of sectarianization in the Syrian conflict. Divisions between religious and secular; Kurdish against Arab; Allawi, Sunni, Shia and/or Christian identities were used to discursively *divide* the Syrian nation, and *unify* any type of (rebel, civic, nonviolent, etc) activism that took place within these groups. All types of activism thereby became part of an effort to strengthen the collective and thereby served the political aim of dominance in the Syrian conflict. In Raqqa and Aleppo, during the period under investigation here, this strategy was most obviously used in relation to Islamic (Sunni) activism and the concept of Jihad.

Ahrar al-Sham, for instance, described itself as 'comprehensive Islamic reform movement [... and as] a military, political, social, comprehensive Islamic entity with the aim to topple the Assad regime' (Ahrar al-Sham, 2015). The group thereby placed a range of activities within an Islamic social reform project. Respondents from Raqqa complained about the extent that Ahrar al-Sham enforced moral norms in public life when they first conquered the city. An effort that was facilitated by the numerous Dawah centers the group founded across the country (Ahrar al-Sham, 2013a, 2013b) and in the Raqqa province itself.[34] It seemed that Ahrar al-Sham truly attempted, through any means necessary, to give an image that they were active not only as rebel group but 'a comprehensive Islamic reform movement' (Ahrar al-Sham, 2015) that also provided services, security and education.

A similar point was made regarding the Islamic Board of Aleppo, specifically in relation to the concept of Jihad.[35] An Aleppo based activist stated that he initially supported the Islamic Board because of its experience in governance (gained from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) and its vision of building proper governing structures in the city:[36]

> Most importantly, [the Islamic Board] was the institutional representation of the
> Jihad. A large majority of fighters in Syria calls themselves Jihadist. The uprising
> itself was not Islamic, but an Islamic identity was clearly present within it. The
> Islamic Board in Aleppo appropriated this identity.[37]

Appropriating this Jihadist identity also meant that the Board could appropriate existing Islamic social initiatives in the city—as they were framed to be belong to a larger Jihadist effort. The previously mentioned Muslim Youth Council, for instance, was asked to hand over its network of food distribution to the Islamic Board. They seemingly complied without much resistance, fully supporting the Islamic Board's claim to Islamic legitimacy and Jihadist representation.[38] Either positively or negatively, many living in Aleppo during these days corroborated the image of a powerful Islamic Board that appropriated a wide range of initiatives in the city (al-Halabi, 2014).[39] This was only possible with the support of rebel groups and its appropriation of a Jihadist identity. The most extreme expression of such a project would eventually be, of course, ISIS.

In other words: Jihad was used as concept to bind together all types of activism in a discursive framework that explicitly places (Sunni) Muslims against other religious and ethnic groups. It bridges the political and everyday, by rendering all parts of social activity a cohesive socio-political project. As such, the statement that Jihad constituted a comprehensive project to strengthen the Sunni community through a combination of violent, nonviolent, social, bureaucratic, educational and political action became much more pervasive as rebels took control over Syrian cities. In reality, this project was by far not as cohesive as many jihadist would have wanted. But it was the intersection between previously differentiated networks that made their unification possible, a unification facilitated by a discursive strategy of *bridging* various types of social activism within one comprehensive (but exclusivist) collective identity.

Conclusion

In the preceding I showed, building on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, the emergence of two distinct types of mobilization networks in the Syrian uprising: one around nonviolent activism and another around an armed uprising. I subsequently explored how these networks intersected around issues of public service delivery in rebel controlled Aleppo and Raqqa. Finally, then, I observed that as mobilization networks increasingly intersected, explicit discursive classifications of activism became increasingly important. On the one side, there was a strategy to emphasize the nonpolitical nature of mobilization, thereby *distancing* activism discursively from intersecting networks. On the other side, there was a strategy of unifying

diverse forms of activism as supporting a single collectivity, thereby *bridging* discursively various mobilization networks.

What insights can be drawn from the above cases? First of all, that classifications of social networks (as either political or social, intentional or everyday, local or national) are often subject to strategic considerations by individual activists. Second, it shows that discursive classifications of activism on the one side and network boundaries on the other do not have to (and often do not) correspond. Finally, it shows that the influence of social networks on individual mobilization can stem from the intersection between networks as such, and does not directly have to relate to any specific characteristics of these networks themselves.

These three insights directly relate to debates on the relation between social networks and individual mobilization. There is an increased recognition that individuals participate in multiple social networks. What is rather problematic, though, is the related recurring conflation of typologies of social action (for instance everyday and unintentional opposed to political and intentional) with social networks' structure and boundaries. Network boundaries and internal network structure do not have to correspond directly to types of social action—they are much more historically contingent. A nominal division between networks on their initial political or everyday function is hard to defend. The boundary between the everyday and politics is a discursive one and is subject to continuous change. The central contention that I thereby made is, simply, the following: increasing intersections between mobilization networks facilitates explicit discursive designations of types of activism.

Endnotes

1. Work address: 17 Mill Lane, Cambridge, UK. Email: td402@cam.ac.uk

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

3. It should be noted that Gould's (1991) concluding discussion (on formal approaches to comparing network structures) seems to imply he was himself aware of this issue.

4. Note that this strategy relates to the mechanism of generality shifting as described by Ann Mische (2003).

5. Interview with student activist from Aleppo. 21 October 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

6. See the website of the LCCs: www.lccsyria.org/.

7. Interview with group of Syrian opposition youngsters, 29 August 2011, Istanbul. Turkey.

8. An early example of this process was the attack of armed activists on the Syrian army in Jisr al-Shughur, Idlib Governorate (Landis, 2011a).

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

10. Jihadism as used in this article refers solely to the self-description by Syrian rebel groups: Jihadists are those Syrian rebel groups that describe themselves as taking part in a Jihad.

11. The full and arabic version of their names are as follows: Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki (حركة نور الدين الزنكي, Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement or the Zenki movement); Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (حركة أحرار الشام الإسلامية, The Islamic Movement of Free Men of the Levant, or AaS); the Nusra Front (جبهة النصرة, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Support Front, or JaN); and Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham (الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام, The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS—later IS). These groups often rebranded themselves. In July 2016, for instance, in an apparent attempt to seem more moderate, JaN rebranded itself as Jaysh Fateh al-Sham (The Army of Conquest of Sham, or JFS). In January 2017 they created a new coalition called Haya' Tahrir al-Sham (The Organization for the Liberation of the Levant, or HTS). Their previous name is still widely used both inside and outside Syria. Regarding ISIS, before the foundation of the Islamic State in April 2014 IS was ISIS, and it is also called Daesh in Arabic and Western press. I opted for consistency and follow the mainstream labeling in Western academia as ISIS.

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

13. See their twitter feed at https://twitter.com/NDZankiMotion. They also worked closely together with the opposition led Syrian Interim Government (SIG); Interview with the president of the Syrian Interim Government, 31 October 2016, Gaziantep, Turkey.

14. For in-depth studies on Ahrar al-Sham and the (Syrian) Islamic Front see Lund (2013, 2014), Abazeed (2015) and Pierret (2017).

15. For an excellent study on the emergence of ISIS, see Bunzel (2015).

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

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

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

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

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

21. See their facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/Ahali.Initiative/.

22. Their full name is al-Majlas al-Mahali li-Madinat Halab (المجلس المحلي لمدينة حلب). See their Facebook at www.facebook.com/TheLocalCouncilOfAleppoCity.

23. Their full name is al-Haya'a al-Shara'iya bi Halab (الهيئة الشرعية بحلب).

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

25. Ibid.

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

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

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

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

30. Apart from the more infamous Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently organization (see their website at: http://www.raqqa-sl.com/), there were numerous initiatives to support families in the city, but all were secretive, small and explicitly informal. Interview with a member of the former Local Council of Raqqa. 14 November 2014, Gaziantep, Turkey.

31. Interview with spokesperson of the Syrian Islamic Council, 6 November 2015, Istanbul.

32. Interview with female activist from Aleppo, 28 October 2016, Gaziantep.

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

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

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

36. See also the reply to criticisms from the Islamic Board in the form of a detailed documentary (Hadath Media Center, 2013).

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

38. Ibid.

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

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