Civilian Cooperation and Non-Cooperation with Non-State Armed Groups: The Centrality of Obedience and Resistance

Ana Arjona

Department of Political Science, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

ABSTRACT
Terms like ‘support’ and ‘collaboration’ are often used interchangeably to denote a loose set of acts or attitudes that benefit non-state armed groups (NSAGs). However, these terms are seldom defined, and the alternatives available to civilians are rarely identified. Moreover, existing approaches overlook that the interaction between civilians and NSAGs is often one between ruler and ruled, which makes obedience and resistance central. This paper proposes to conceptualize the choices available to civilians as forms of cooperation and non-cooperation, offers a typology, and discusses the implications for theory building on civilian and NSAG behavior, and on the functioning of armed social orders.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 20 March 2017; Accepted 5 April 2017

KEYWORDS
Non-state armed groups; rebel governance; criminal governance; civilian support; civil war; organized crime; local order; civilian collaboration; violence; legitimacy; authority

Civilian support has long been considered a central determinant of civil war outcomes. From rebel leaders to military historians to political scientists, experts have argued that civilians are crucial for rebel success because they provide recruits, food, shelter, information, and safe hiding places. Several studies have also argued that civilian collaboration determines not only the outcome of war but also its conduct. The quantity and quality of collaboration can, for example, influence the intensity of violence against noncombatants, the internal organization of rebel groups, and the emergence and demise of rebel governance.

In a similar vein, counterinsurgency doctrine has long stressed the importance of civilian support for the state to win, and recent research on the topic focuses on how specific strategies – from indiscriminate violence to the construction of infrastructure projects – shape civilian support and, in turn, rebels’ and counterinsurgents’ strength.
The literature on organized crime has paid less attention to the behavior of regular citizens. This is perhaps explained by the fact that some criminal groups do not need civilian support or at least are much less dependent on it than insurgent groups are. Yet, research on certain types of criminal groups has shown that these organizations also need civilian support to function: in fact, they make deliberate efforts to obtain it. Similarly, authorities aiming to combat criminal groups have also recognized that civilian cooperation is essential to their success, and have therefore devised policies to promote it. So-called ‘community approaches’ to policing, for example, have combined the provision of security and basic services with the aim of deterring young people from joining criminal groups and motivating the community at large to cooperate with the police.

Despite the central role that civilian support plays in shaping the dynamics and outcomes of insurgency and organized crime, we lack a clear understanding of what it entails. Scholars and policy-makers often use the terms ‘support,’ ‘collaboration,’ and ‘participation,’ but they seldom define them. In some accounts, these terms seem to refer to positive attitudes and beliefs about armed actors; in others, to a vague list of acts that favor such groups. Moreover, the alternatives available to civilians are seldom identified, assuming that the only alternative to collaborating is either not doing so or collaborating with the rival side. In reality, however, civilians are seldom confronted by these simple dichotomies. Insofar as people make choices considering the alternatives available to them, identifying the range of those options is an essential step toward theory building. Yet for the most part, the literatures on civil war and organized crime are mute about this.

A few scholars, discussed below, have proposed clear definitions and nuanced typologies that have helped to clarify the conceptual landscape. However, a close examination of the contexts in which civilians make choices suggests that current conceptualizations need to be further refined. In particular, they must come to terms with the fact that the relation between non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and local populations is often that between ruler and ruled.

NSAGs often transform the daily lives of those living in areas where they operate. Their coercion, violence, and disruption of formal and informal institutions can give rise to disorder, where locals experience high levels of uncertainty. However, these groups also bring about new forms of social order, where civilians and combatants tend to follow clear rules of conduct, allowing for stable patterns of behavior and interaction to emerge. Although the role that NSAGs play in these new forms of social order can vary greatly across time and space, these organizations usually establish at least some rules of conduct for civilians – sometimes only on a few behaviors, sometimes on many aspects of their lives. The growing literatures on rebel governance and criminal and urban governance provide abundant evidence of rebels, paramilitaries, and criminal organizations establishing rules to maintain public order, adjudicate disputes,
collect taxes, or regulate the social, political, and economic behavior of those living in areas under their control.

The existence of these new forms of order in which civilians and NSAGs interact has three important implications. First, obedience is a central form of collaboration. Even though NSAGs need the support of at least some civilians who voluntarily offer help, the local orders that these groups create and from which they benefit rest on *massive obedience*. Such obedience is not limited to rules that aim to preserve the security of armed actors, but often extends to many other rules that structure individual and collective behavior in the locality. Second, civilian resistance to NSAG rule is likely to emerge in some form, as with any type of rule.\(^{17}\) Thus, the alternatives to collaboration are not only defection to the other side or nonparticipation: resistance is also an option. And finally, neutrality is not always possible: whenever a NSAG demands obedience, civilians have no choice but to obey, disobey, or leave.

In this paper, I argue that the centrality of obedience and resistance needs to be incorporated in our conceptualization of civilian support and in our theories of rebel and criminal behavior, civilian agency, and the emergence, functioning, and demise of armed social orders.

Regarding conceptualization, insofar as voluntary support and obedience follow from distinct causal paths and have different consequences, our concepts must differentiate between the two. Otherwise, our theories would be incapable of identifying the causes and effects of different types of support. Likewise, if the possibility of resisting enters somehow in civilians’ decision-making process, it has to be identified as an alternative to collaboration – this is how it can play a causal role in our theories. As Guering argues, ‘concepts are the building blocks of all inferences,’\(^{18}\) and our theories inherit the limitations of our concepts.

In order to incorporate these elements into our conceptualization of civilian support, I propose to use the terms cooperation and non-cooperation,\(^{19}\) and offer a typology. I identify three forms of cooperation (obedience, spontaneous support, and enlistment), and three forms of non-cooperation (disobedience, resistance, and defection), and discuss the possibility of neutrality. I also discuss additional ways in which these types can be further disaggregated.

Turning to theory building, I argue that theorizing the mechanisms that underlie distinct types of civilian cooperation and non-cooperation is essential to improving the quality of our theories of rebel and criminal behavior, armed social orders, and civilian agency. In order to illustrate how distinguishing between these choices can illuminate our approach to these questions, I discuss some of the ways in which NSAGs’ use of violence and governance may affect civilian choice.

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, it broadens our study of civilian behavior toward NSAGs by highlighting the importance of obedience and resistance. Second, it proposes a typology of civilian cooperation and
non-cooperation that distinguishes between distinct types of acts that favor and harm NSAGs. This typology can contribute to the construction of theories of civilian behavior as well as of rebel and criminal strategies. It can also inform the analysis of empirical evidence by providing more refined analytical categories. And third, the paper identifies several mechanisms by which the behavior of NSAGs can impact civilian choice. It discusses how identifying such mechanisms can illuminate our understanding of different aspects of rebel and criminal behavior as well as its consequences on local order and civilians.

I proceed as follows. I start with a brief discussion of current conceptualizations of civilian support. In section II, I explain why obedience is such an important form of cooperation for NSAGs, and why resistance to these organizations should be expected. Section III presents the typology of cooperation and non-cooperation. Section IV discusses the mechanisms by which NSAGs’ use of violence and governance can affect civilians’ decision to obey and resist. Section V concludes.

Before proceeding, a few definitions are in order. I use the terms civilians and locals to denote all persons who live in a given local territory, do not participate in hostilities, and are not full-time members of any state or non-state armed organization. Civilians include, therefore, both regular civilians and public officials who work at government or state agencies in the local territory. I use the terms locality and community to refer to the people who inhabit a given local territory and ‘interact directly, frequently, and in multi-faceted ways.’ The community is therefore a small unit, usually a village, small town, or neighborhood. I use the term Non-state armed groups (NSAG) to denote all armed organizations that are not under the command of the state. Given the focus on local order, the discussion only refers to NSAGs that, for any reason, control populated territory. This includes most insurgents, paramilitaries, and militias fighting in a civil war and several types of organized criminal groups.

**Current conceptualizations of civilian support**

The terms ‘support,’ ‘collaboration,’ and ‘participation’ are often used interchangeably to denote a loose list of favorable attitudes toward armed groups or acts that help them. Insofar as specific acts and mental states carry with them diverse consequences for civilians or for NSAGs, we need to distinguish between them. Otherwise, our theories can neither identify the causal path that leads to each form of support nor assess their consequences.

An additional problem with these vague terms is that the alternatives to support are rarely identified. If civilians do not support insurgents, what do they do? Is the opposite of support simply not doing anything? Is remaining neutral a possibility? Insofar as people make choices considering the alternatives available to them, identifying those alternatives is an essential step toward theory building.
A few scholars of civil war have developed more nuanced conceptualizations. Authors like Wickham-Crowley, Petersen, and Wood differentiate between neutrality and nonparticipation as well as different levels of support for the armed group or its enemy. Kalyvas differentiates between collaboration and defection, and disaggregates the latter into three types: noncompliance, informing, and switching sides. Barter identifies three options available to civilians: flight, support, and voice (with ‘voice’ including defiance, everyday resistance, and engagement), and identifies a variety of acts of support, from minimal assistance to enlistment. Masullo builds on the conceptualization of cooperation and non-cooperation presented in this paper, but identifies different types of non-cooperation depending on the level of opposition, ranging from oblique to armed. Others focus on specific acts of collaboration, such as joining armed actors and joining clandestine networks of support.

These studies have improved previous conceptualizations in two ways. First, they define support in terms of specific choices, better delineating the ontology of the phenomenon. Second, some of them provide a more nuanced typology that differentiates between different forms of opposition, neutrality, support, and enlistment. Yet, despite these improvements, we need to further refine our conceptualization of civilian support and its alternatives. To see why, we need to delve deeper into the context in which civilians make those choices – contexts of order and disorder in which NSAGs do not only use violence and material incentives but also often rule or aspire to do so.

The Context of Civilian Agency: NSAGs, local order, and the centrality of obedience and resistance

How we conceptualize a specific choice depends greatly on the assumptions we make about the locus of that choice – that is, the relevant context for making that particular decision. The locus of a given choice can be of many kinds: for instance, the firm, the senate, the family, or the classroom. When it comes to the interaction between civilians and NSAGs, the locality is often the locus of choice. As scholars of civil wars and criminal groups have noted, when armed actors control territory, they fragment space: localities become ‘closed’ as rival groups control neighboring territories or compete for controlling them; the mobility of civilians or citizens is constrained; and the security of civilians is highly dependent on the territory where they happen to reside. This is true not only of villages and hamlets in rural areas but also of neighborhoods in cities and large metropolis.

While NSAGs can certainly disrupt the localities where they operate and bring about disorder, new forms of social order are often consolidated when one NSAG controls a territory. Such new orders are built on the basis of different types of institutions – understood as formal and informal rules of conduct – that NSAGs, state actors, civilians, or a combination of them bring about and enforce. In these new forms of local order, NSAGs often establish rules to control the use of
violence, eliminate crime, and prevent cooperation with rival groups. In some cases, these organizations also regulate different aspects of the social, political, and economic behavior of local residents. The growing literatures on rebel, criminal, and urban governance provide many examples of the roles that NSAGs come to play in these local orders, from the guerrilla movements of the 1970s in Latin America, to contemporary conflicts in Africa and Asia, to drug trafficking organizations in Mexico, to local criminal groups in Brazil and Jamaica. The evidence overwhelmingly shows that the relation between NSAGs and local residents in these localities is often one between ruler and ruled.

NSAGs strive to create order and rule local communities because creating clear rules of conduct facilitates monitoring and punishing defection, and facilitates civilian collaboration. In addition, by ruling, NSAGs can regulate economic, political, and social behavior in ways that render valuable benefits, such as obtaining resources, accessing political and social networks, putting into practice their ideology, and gaining the recognition and reciprocity of local residents.

Yet, for all these benefits to materialize, civilians have to obey. To be sure, scholars of civil war are right in that NSAGs need active, voluntary support: first, some of the forms of cooperation they need cannot be coerced, especially intelligence; second, like all other rulers, NSAGs cannot maintain power without at least some backing from the ruled. Yet, what tends to be missed is that the forms of local order they bring about and from which they benefit require massive obedience as well. Such obedience is needed not only to maintain the security of the group: civilians must also obey many other regulations for the form of local order that NSAGs aim to build to be consolidated and endure.

I argue, therefore, that NSAGs maintain local order on the basis of massive obedience and modest support, and that understanding their behavior, as well as that of civilians, requires that we distinguish between the two. Even if it is obvious that obeying a rule entails quite a different choice than offering help, we cannot provide distinct explanations for these phenomena unless we differentiate them conceptually. Likewise, we cannot trace the distinct effects of obedience and support on, say, the functioning of local order, unless we distinguish between the two.

Approaching the relationship between NSAGs and civilians as one between ruler and ruled also reveals another important fact: some form of civilian resistance to NSAGs is not only possible but should be expected. Even if a NSAG has full control over a local territory and has the manpower to closely monitor locals, it can never fully control their behavior. No matter how repressive a regime is, it always has fissures through which subjects can express their grievances and disagreements. Moreover, NSAGs are likely to learn that allowing for some expression of dissent can help them to maintain control over the territory and the population, as a regime that is based solely on coercion is likely to be short-lived, as also discussed in the introduction to this issue.
But resistance to NSAGs does not have to be symbolic, hidden, or modest. The study of political order in other contexts indicates that subordinates can organize to oppose those in power in many ways, questioning their behaviors, decisions, and rule. In rebel and criminal orders, too, civilians can oppose NSAGs in a myriad of ways. Several studies have documented a variety of forms of resistance to rebel and paramilitary groups41 and to a lesser extent to criminal groups.42

Understanding civilian behavior vis-à-vis NSAGs requires taking the possibility of resisting seriously. Furthermore, when our theories rely on assumptions about what civilians may do in response to an event – a counterinsurgent attack, an attempt by rebels to regulate social life – resistance should be considered. Yet, resistance is unlikely to become part of our theories if it is not incorporated in our conceptualizations of civilian choice.

Finally, a more careful assessment of the local context in which civilians and NSAGs interact raises questions about the conditions under which neutrality is possible. Insofar as NSAGs demand obedience, neutrality is akin to disobedience and thus is a form of opposition.43 In this context, the only possibility to avoid both cooperating and non-cooperating is to flee.

To summarize, considering that the relationship between NSAGs and civilians is often one between ruler and ruled carries important implications for our conceptualization of civilian choice in contexts where such groups operate. The purpose of the next section is to propose a new conceptualization of civilian support that better reflects the local realities in which NSAGs operate and in which civilians live and make up their minds.

A typology of civilian cooperation and non-cooperation with NSAGs

There are many ways in which the issues I have raised so far could be addressed. In this section, I propose a simple way to conceptualize the acts that civilians can perform to either benefit or hurt NSAGs (Figure 1).44

To avoid confusion with the terms collaboration, participation, mobilization, and support, I propose to use the term cooperation. ‘Support’ and ‘participation’ can be misleading because they are often used to denote positive attitudes or initiatives, and civilians may help NSAGs reluctantly. ‘Collaboration’ can be seemingly confusing, and also may be considered pejorative because it is reminiscent of civilian involvement with the Nazis and the Axis powers during World War

Figure 1. A typology of cooperation and non-cooperation with NSAGs.
II. I define cooperation as an act performed by a civilian that directly benefits the armed group.

Acts of cooperation can be of three types. *Obedience* entails any action by a civilian after an armed group has ordered her to do so, either directly or by establishing a general rule. Examples include providing shelter to a group of combatants upon their request or obeying a curfew. Obedience could be further disaggregated in order to facilitate the study of what drives people to obey different types of rules. We could differentiate, for example, between obedience of proscriptive and prescriptive rules, between rules that regulate different realms of people’s lives, or between rules that are more and less instrumental to the interests of NSAGs.

*Spontaneous support* entails volunteering to do specific tasks that favor the armed group short of joining, without the latter having given the civilian, either explicitly or implicitly, the order to do so. There are many acts that would count as forms of spontaneous support, such as expressing endorsement for the armed group, offering information, and volunteering to be a lookout. Acts of spontaneous support could be disaggregated in many different ways. The conceptualizations mentioned in section II, for example, propose to focus on the level of risk, type of organization, or level of support. Barter instead identifies specific acts, such as attending rallies, offering food, or providing intelligence. Forms of spontaneous support could also be classified depending on whether support is provided by individuals or collectivities or on the type of benefit NSAGs derive from it. Each of these approaches could be more or less useful depending on the task at hand.

*Enlistment* entails joining the armed organization as a full-time member without having received the order to do so. We could further distinguish between forms of enlistment when NSAGs have different levels or types of membership.

The opposite of cooperation is non-cooperation, meaning an act that directly harms the armed group. I identify three forms of non-cooperation. *Disobedience* entails failing to follow an order given by the group or a rule established by it. Refusing to hide a member of the armed group when rival groups arrive or gossiping when a rule forbids civilians to do so constitute acts of disobedience. As with obedience, disobedience can be further disaggregated in many ways, depending on the type of rule that is not being followed.

*Resistance* consists of opposing or attacking the group. As several authors suggest, civilians can oppose NSAGs in a myriad of ways. Acts of resistance could be classified along multiple dimensions, such as how confrontational they are, whether they are directed at specific behaviors of the NSAG or at its presence or rule altogether, whether it is individual or collective, and whether it is peaceful or armed. Once again, which dimension demands more attention depends on the task at hand.

*Defection* entails aiding the enemy, either by offering it spontaneous support or enlisting as a full-time member. Just as there are many kinds of spontaneous
support for a NSAG, so are there multiple ways to aid a rival group. Forms of defection could therefore be classified depending on their level or intensity, the risks involved, and whether they involve individual or collective action. We could also identify specific acts of defection that are particularly salient, like enlisting in a rival group.

Finally, civilians can also decide to migrate within the country or abroad. Often, this is the only way for them to remain neutral. Indeed, neutrality as an alternative to all acts of cooperation and non-cooperation is impossible when a NSAG demands obedience of any kind: civilians either obey, disobey, or flee. However, in contexts where NSAGs do not establish rules nor give orders, civilians can remain neutral by avoiding acts of spontaneous support, enlistment, resistance, and defection. This situation is more likely to happen in the early stages of conquest of a NSAG over a locality, or in situations in which the NSAG is neither interested in controlling the territory nor requires civilian cooperation to achieve its goals. Since the focus of this paper is on NSAGs that control territory, I do not include neutrality in the typology.

It is important to note that most of these options are not mutually exclusive: civilians can combine different acts of cooperation and non-cooperation. Which options are available depends on the context, and civilians may not consider them all every time they decide whether or not to engage in a particular form of cooperation or non-cooperation. Theorizing civilian choice requires a careful assessment of which options are available and which are not.

**Obedience and resistance: a focus on mechanisms**

Recognizing the centrality of obedience and the ubiquity of resistance opens up new questions about the complex ways in which NSAGs and civilians interact. In particular, it brings to the fore the multiplicity of mechanisms by which the practices of NSAGs can impact civilian behavior. I argue that theorizing these mechanisms is essential to advancing our understanding of civil war and organized crime for three reasons. First, identifying the mechanisms that underlie civilian choice improves the quality of our theories – as Elster (1998, 49) suggests, ‘mechanisms are good because their finer grain enables us to provide better explanations.’ As this section shows, considering such mechanisms allows us to develop new hypotheses about the causes and consequences of the practices that NSAGs display toward civilians. Second, whether the story we tell is one of mere changes in payoffs and straightforward calculations, or one where NSAGs manage to transform beliefs and practices that take root in communities, is consequential for our understanding of other phenomena as well. The identification of different mechanisms can illuminate questions about how local orders function and evolve, why they survive, and why they fall; the legacies of civil war and criminality for individuals and communities; and how non-state armed organizations evolve as a consequence of their interaction with civilians. And
finally, different mechanisms often carry with them different policy implications. How can recruitment of youths by NSAGs be prevented? How can governments in weak states help communities to avoid being ruled by a NSAG? What are the effects of counterinsurgency operations and NGO projects? These questions may find different answers depending on the mechanisms that underlie civilian choice in war zones.

In this section, I illustrate the importance of theorizing the mechanisms that underlie civilian behavior in places where NSAGs operate by discussing how some of the latter’s practices impact different forms of cooperation and non-cooperation. Armed groups combine different strategies to penetrate local communities, take over control over their territory, and establish different forms of rule. The use of violence, political mobilization, selective incentives, and governance – by which I mean the creation of new institutions and the provision of public goods – is essential in these quests. In what follows, I discuss how two of these strategies – violence and governance – can trigger mechanisms that affect civilians’ choices.

The behavioral effects of violence

Violence may spur obedience by affecting the payoffs associated with particular actions, by affecting civilians’ preferences or motivations, and by influencing their beliefs about different states of affairs. At the same time, violence can trigger disobedience, different forms of resistance, and defection.

The theory of the deterrent effect of punishment suggests that individuals form expectations about the costs of disobeying based on the severity and likelihood of punishment. This is the most commonly recognized effect of violence on civilian behavior: when violence is selective and therefore increases civilians’ expected cost of disobedience, they are more likely to obey. It is important to note, however, that NSAGs use selective violence not only to prevent defection and preserve their safety – that is, to prevent civilians from aiding the enemy or compromising their organizations’ security in some way – but also to secure obedience to the many rules they establish. Selective violence is, therefore, not only essential for security reasons but also to bring about and maintain the forms of local order that NSAGs create.

Yet, the deterrent effect of violence may have a ceiling: very high levels of violence can have an ‘awakening’ effect. The mechanism may entail belief formation or emotions. I will consider the former here, and come back to the latter when I discuss the effects of violence on emotions. When violence is indiscriminate and very intense, people may perceive collective resistance against the armed actor to be just as costly – or even less so – than obeying. If civilians believe there is a chance of winning, joining a resistance movement can have higher expected benefits in the long run than standing by while the armed actor continues to
victimize more and more locals. Joining others in any initiative to improve security may thus become a more rational option than obeying.

Several accounts suggest that high levels of violence can trigger non-cooperation. Wood shows that state repression led to sustained collective action among some peasants in contested areas in El Salvador. Several authors have found that indigenous and peasant resistance in Colombia has followed periods of intensified violence. Other case studies suggest that communities that have endured violence for a long time without uniting to resist engage in collective resistance after violence intensifies. Researching this mechanism can illuminate our understanding of resistance, violence, and collective action.

Yet, violence does not only affect civilian behavior by changing civilians’ expectations of costs and benefits. It can also affect it through emotions in complex ways. First, violence may lead to emotions that are ‘so strong as to crowd out all thoughts about consequences.’ The most common of these emotions is fear, which can trigger any of three responses: fight, flight, or freeze. The literature has paid attention to civilians’ decision to leave their hometowns and, more recently, to take up arms and defend themselves. Yet freezing, which refers to a range of other possible reactions linked to passivity, has been largely overlooked. According to LeDoux, fear can lead to ‘withdrawal, immobility [and] submission.’ Psychologists and social scientists researching violence and repression under dictatorship and war have found that civilians often become unable to react and even to assess what is happening around them. Yet, the conditions under which this happens, the implications for the agency and well-being of civilians, and the consequences on the dynamics of armed social orders have been largely overlooked.

The effect of violence on freezing may help explain why armed groups rely on symbolic violence, such as exhibiting the dead bodies of their victims in public places or gathering communities to witness the killing of locals: it might help to make civilians obey not only because they learn that disobedience carries serious consequences, but also because fear makes them psychologically incapable of reacting in any way but complying. As Hollister points out, “through dramatizing punishments, an aura of imagined pain may be built around the painful experiences which can actually be inflicted. This magnified pain is great partly because its extent is not foreseen, but even more because we cannot calculate our capacity to endure it.” This mechanism may also help explain why armed actors can sometimes secure obedience in a community – at least in the short run – by deploying only a few men.

The paralyzing effect of violence can also illuminate why NSAGs often target local leaders. As I have argued elsewhere, NSAGs learn to anticipate which communities with effective and legitimate local institutions are more likely to be willing and able to resist collectively against the intervention of a NSAG that aspires to rule them. In an effort to prevent such capacity for collective action, armed actors often target local leaders. This violence may pursue the dual goal...
of testing the strength of collective action – that is, using violence as a way to measure locals’ capacity to resist – and trying to eliminate it. Such attempts sometimes backfire, as violence ignites the desire for resistance. However, sometimes civilians seem to freeze: they are unable to respond, their collective action is weakened, and the NSAG can more easily penetrate into society and build its rule.

Violence can trigger other emotions that lead civilians to disobey, resist, and even defect. For example, it can awaken indignation and the desire for revenge. Outraged after being victimized, individuals may choose to aid the enemy of the perpetrator. Evidence of this abounds, from El Salvador, to Colombia, to Eastern Europe. However, our understanding of the conditions under which such emotions cause civilians to engage in non-cooperation despite the consequences of disobedience is very limited.

In addition, the ‘awakening’ effect of violence I mentioned before – where high levels of violence lead civilians to resist – can also be triggered by emotions: people may feel the need to react, to partake in their own defense, and to look for support in others in order to endure hardship. Uniting may not only provide actual protection but also the sense of responding to injustice; it may help to build a sense of self-ownership, of belonging, and of self-worth. Hence, what Wood calls the pleasure of agency can not only spur acts of spontaneous support for a NSAG but also collective action against it.

Finally, violence may also affect civilians’ choices by changing their beliefs about the perpetrator. On the one hand, NSAGs that have built a reputation of being violent may face greater disobedience and resistance than they would otherwise in situations when they can not monitor civilians. At the same time, those beliefs may make obedience more likely when monitoring is anticipated, as civilians have higher expectations of punishment.

On the other hand, beliefs toward a violent group may well depend on who is being targeted: if a person’s loved ones have been affected by an armed group, it is likely that both her beliefs about the group and her emotions play against cooperating with that organization. However, victimization can also lead to positive beliefs about the perpetrator. In a community where insecurity is widespread, locals have a demand for protection. Using violence to end this insecurity, NSAGs can shape locals’ beliefs about the group in positive ways. For example, ‘social cleansing’ or ‘moralizing campaigns’ – i.e. waves of violence directed toward thieves, rapists, and other delinquents that disrupt local life – often foster sympathies toward NSAGs. Examples of civilian approval of NSAGs’ purges and control of crime abound. Once locals recognize positive effects of the group’s rule, they might come to believe that cooperating with it is beneficial. Both obedience and spontaneous support may follow.

To be sure, the effect of violence on behavior is far from homogeneous across local territories. For example, in a community where problems of delinquency
are well managed by local authorities (or where such problems do not exist at all), civilians do not need the type of protection that a NSAG offers. Moreover, its attempt at policing the population can be met with distrust. In these circumstances, this type of violence could be counterproductive. Likewise, some of the other mechanisms identified above are likely to be triggered in certain contexts but not others.

To summarize, the behavioral effects of violence are complex and far from homogeneous: violence can trigger obedience, resistance, or defection. The form and intensity of the violence, the target, and the context matter. Recognizing this complexity not only illuminates questions of civilian choice, but also sheds light onto the central question about when and why NSAGs victimize civilians.

The behavioral effects of governance

As discussed in the first sections of the paper, NSAGs often take on different roles of governance. What are the plausible mechanisms by which these practices affect civilian cooperation and non-cooperation? Although the term ‘governance’ can entail several components, I focus on two: the creation of formal or informal institutions – understood as rules to regulate the conduct of civilians – and the provision of basic services.

In communities where central governance functions are lacking or are poorly executed, NSAGs can fill a vacuum and cultivate all forms of cooperation. By creating new institutions and providing basic services, the armed group gains the opportunity to shape beliefs in ways that render both obedience and spontaneous support. Since these mechanisms are rather simple, I discuss them briefly.

First, simply by giving the community what it lacks, the group gives locals a reason to form positive beliefs about its involvement in local affairs. Locals are more likely to cooperate with a group that they believe works for their common good by both obeying and offering voluntary support. Second, by ruling over both public and private life, the armed group becomes a very powerful local actor. Because of its capacity to decide on many local affairs and bring about change, locals may want to be on good terms with the group. Those willing to have access to power, for example, are more likely to cooperate. And finally, as the armed group gains more sympathizers in the locality, others have incentives to cooperate in order to obtain the approval and recognition of their fellow residents.

There is a third mechanism by which governance can affect civilian obedience, and it is much more complex: by fostering the recognition of the group as an authority. The underlying mechanisms are not easy to lay out: still, by separating obedience to authority from other competing mechanisms, I intend to capture a key element in the interaction between civilians and combatants.
According to Arendt, obedience to an authority ‘precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed’; in addition, authority is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance (…) If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments.

Here the very recognition of someone as an authority is presented as the cause of obedience: neither fear nor the expectation of benefits are doing the work. Hence, in order to understand this path to obedience, we need to explore both what leads a civilian to recognize an armed group as an authority and the mechanisms through which such recognition translates into obedience.

What can make a civilian recognize a NSAG as an authority? Ball argues that the recognition of authority is based on beliefs and emotions, also suggested in the introductory discussion to this volume. Beliefs about the capacity of an authority to deal with a particular task are usually formed on the basis of experience. A NSAG’s intervention in the locality to reduce crime, provide basic services, and regulate behaviors that many dislike can bring about beneficial consequences for local residents. By adjudicating disputes, the armed actor facilitates social interaction and reduces conflict. Observing these changes, civilians can form beliefs about the armed group that lead them to recognize it as an authority. As Weldon argues, believing that a ruler is able and well-intentioned can make obedience to him appear reasonable.

In order to prevent the dissemination of negative opinions about them and to suppress the space for deliberation, NSAGs may attempt to regulate the ways in which dissent is expressed. The existence or absence of spaces for individuals to exchange views about the entity that claims authority can affect processes of belief formation and decision-making related to obedience. In her analysis of the obedience experiments, for example, Saltzman argues that when there are no alternative definitions of the situation, obedience to an authority is more likely to follow. NSAGs’ attempt to control public and private conversations about their rule can therefore be an important strategy in their quest for authority – just as it is for dictators.

NSAGs may attempt to shape civilians’ beliefs about them by actively disseminating their ideology, goals, and claims to rightfulness. This is evidently more common in the case of insurgent or counterinsurgent groups that have a political agenda. However, even organized criminal groups have put up banners to inform locals about their organization’s deeds.

Finally, beliefs about the capacity of a group to make the right decisions can also come from obedience itself. In localities that have lived for a long time under the rule of a NSAG, civilians can correct their beliefs in order to reduce dissonance: that is, the internal inconsistency between her behavior and her beliefs. In this way, obedience can reinforce the status of the armed actor as an authority.
Turning to emotions, feelings like love and admiration can also play a key role in recognizing an actor as an authority. Such mechanism was found by Arendt79 in her analysis of totalitarianism. By becoming powerful and bringing radical change to locals’ lives, NSAGs can trigger strong feelings of deference, admiration, respect, and even gratitude, toward combatants. NSAGs’ use of symbols and rituals can also contribute to the arousal of these emotions, and the subsequent recognition of these organizations as an authority.80

Several authors have argued that the recognition of someone as an authority is likely to lead to obedience,81 although the mechanisms that underlie this causal effect are less understood. We can identify three of such mechanisms. First, belief-formation: following Milgram82, when an authority gives an order, ‘although the subject performs the action, he allows the authority to define its meaning,’ and ‘it is this ideological abrogation to the authority that constitutes the principal cognitive basis of obedience.’ Thus, when a civilian recognizes an armed group as an authority, she may form her beliefs on the basis of the group’s beliefs – which, of course, favor obedience.

A second mechanism is what Weldon83 calls habit and Hollister84 calls convention: individuals obey the NSAG because they are used to doing so. Once civilians get used to obeying a NSAG, most acts of obedience entail nothing more than a habit. The mechanism involved might be the pathological formation of preferences which, as Elster85 has argued, may be triggered in contexts where the status quo limits a person’s capabilities to even contemplate a different situation. Milgram also pointed out the importance of the ‘socialization of obedience’ as a factor in explaining why individuals are so likely to follow orders given by others.86

Finally, there may be an emotional component. Perhaps the most important is the feeling of admiration toward an armed group or a leader, which can either motivate obedience directly or by triggering processes of belief formation.87

To summarize, NSAGs that take on governance functions in the localities where they operate can penetrate different aspects of local life and, by so doing, shape civilians’ beliefs, emotions, and alternative choices through different mechanisms. Such mechanisms can make the armed actor become a recognized authority and, in consequence, obtain obedience in a way that pure coercion is unlikely to bring about. Due to the ways in which the group transforms local dynamics – and how it situates itself within them – obedience becomes a key means to achieve private ends; a righteous conduct, on the basis of both beliefs and emotions; and an instance of obedience to a recognized authority.

Yet, NSAG governance does not always favor obedience: it can trigger resistance as well. While the provision of public goods may be welcomed by most populations, the creation of new rules is a different story. As mentioned before, individuals in communities with high-quality institutions may have strong preferences for the status quo.88 An armed group that tries to establish their own institutions in this context is likely to trigger the desire to resist.
Conclusion

Civilians often interact with NSAGs in a context in which the latter operate as rulers. Taking this fact into account impacts the questions we ask, the concepts we use, and the theories we build about civil war and organized crime. As is the case with any type of ruler, securing massive obedience is essential to NSAGs’ rule; by the same token, civilians are – like any other type of subject – likely to resist their ruler in some way. However, both obedience and resistance tend to be overlooked in current approaches to civil war and organized crime.

This omission has important implications. Conceptually, the literature tends to miss the distinct forms of support that civilians provide to NSAGs and fail to identify resistance as an alternative. Theoretically, common explanations of rebel and criminal behavior tend to overlook NSAGs’ need for massive civilian obedience as well as their incentives to prevent and address resistance. These limitations also impact the evaluation of policies aiming to change the behavior of NSAGs, civilians, or both.

This paper makes two contributions. First, it proposes a typology of civilian cooperation and non-cooperation that incorporates both obedience and resistance. Second, it shows how a careful theorization of the mechanisms that can underlie civilians’ decisions to obey and resist can give place to new explanations of the behavior of NSAGs, civilians’ responses, and the dynamics of armed social orders.

It is important to recognize, however, that theorizing the microfoundations of obedience and resistance implies facing several challenges. First, while one of the goals of this paper was to highlight the similarities between different types of NSAGs that bring about new forms of order, there are many differences between rebels, pro-state militias, and criminal groups. Theorizing their behavior requires identifying how they differ and how such differences matter for the phenomena we aim to understand.

Second, several of the mechanisms that I discussed are likely to be triggered in certain contexts but not others. Recognizing that NSAGs do not attempt to control and rule civilians in a vacuum, and theorizing how the attributes of local communities impact those interactions is essential to understanding rebel and criminal behavior. It is also crucial for understanding the civilian responses they encounter. Likewise, understanding how distinct forms of local order emerge, function, and fall requires taking into account how civilians and NSAGs influence each other.

Finally, the centrality of obedience and the prevalence of resistance remind us that when NSAGs create new forms of order, their relationship with local populations becomes political in ways that are surprisingly familiar: in their quest for obedience, NSAGs struggle to build authority and gain legitimacy; in their desire to remain in power, they decide whether and how to quell opposition without igniting a massive rebellion. Yet, most of the concepts and theories at our
disposal have been developed to study politics within the state. Understanding the relationship between NSAGs and civilians – its origins, evolution, and consequences – requires rethinking these fundamental questions about politics in armed social orders that are simultaneously inside and outside the state.

A research agenda on the behavior of NSAGs and the responses of civilians requires therefore both substantial theoretical innovation and the collection of fine-grained evidence that allows for a careful assessment of assumptions and causal mechanisms. Such a research agenda is likely to illuminate important questions about the inner workings of civil war and organized crime as well as about their legacies both during and after conflict.

Notes
1. Mao, On Guerrilla Warfare; and Guevara, Loveman, and Davies, Guerrilla Warfare.
2. Trinquier, Modern Warfare.
6. Arjona, Rebelocracy; Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly, Rebel Governance; and Mampilly, Rebel Rulers.
7. Galula, Counterinsurgency Warfare; Packwood, “Popular Support”; Petraeus et al., The US Army; and Trinquier, Modern Warfare.
12. For a discussion of attitudinal vs. behavioral approaches to support, see Kalyvas, The Logic of Violence.
14. For a typology of order and disorder in conflict zones, see Arjona, “Wartime Institutions.”
17. Arjona, “Civilian Resistance.”
20. Differentiating civilians and combatants in contexts of civil war is plagued with problems, some of which may apply to localities controlled by organized criminal groups. For a lengthy discussion, see Kinsella, *The Image Before*.


23. To my knowledge, there are no conceptualizations of civilian support for criminal groups. Hence, this section focuses on civilian support for armed actors in contexts of civil war.


27. Masullo, “Civilian Noncooperation.”


31. De Souza, “Metropolitan Deconcentration.”


34. Arjona, “Wartime Institutions.”


40. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.


42. Osorio, Schubiger, and Weintraub, “Vigilante Mobilization”; and Moncada, “Resisting Protection.”


44. This typology builds on Arjona, “Social Order.”


46. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion*. 
47. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution*.
50. Masullo, “Civilian Noncooperation.”
52. Ibid.; and Masullo, “Civilian Noncooperation.”
53. Masullo, “Civilian Noncooperation.”
54. See also Barter, *Civilian Strategy in Civil War*.
64. For a discussion of symbolic violence, see Duran-Martinez, “To Kill and Tell.”
69. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion*.
73. Ball, “Authority and Conceptual Change.”
74. Weldon, *The Vocabulary of Politics*.
75. Saltzman, “The Role of the Obedience Experiments.”
76. On NSAGs’ regulation of free speech see Arjona, *Rebelocracy*; and Arjona, “Wartime Institutions.”
77. Grillo, *El Narco*.
78. Festinger, *Extending Psychological Frontiers*.
80. Mampilly, “Performing the Nation-state.”
82. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 145.
83. Weldon, *The Vocabulary of Politics*.
84. Hollister, *Government and the Arts*.
85. Elster, *Sour Grapes*.
86. Miller, The Obedience Experiments, 223.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Bibliography


Masullo, Juan. “Civilian Noncooperation in Armed Conflicts: Refusing to Cooperate with Armed Groups as a Self-Protection Strategy.” Paper presented at the Seminar on Order, Conflict and Violence at Yale University, January 24, 2017.


