

Advancing knowledge on the role of civilians in preventing and mitigating mass atrocities: Rapporteur's report

Daniel Solomon and Mollie Zapata
Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide
US Holocaust Memorial Museum
March 2018

On March 5, 2018, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum brought together academic scholars, civil society representatives, and current and former US government officials to discuss the state of research about the role of civilians in preventing and mitigating mass atrocities and to provide input to the Center as it charts a new research effort on these topics. This rapporteur's report summarizes major observations raised during the workshop.

Introduction

Research on mass atrocities and their prevention has overwhelmingly focused on the actions of states as the most common perpetrators of atrocities and most visible actors in attempts to prevent or respond to them. High-profile atrocities committed by non-state actors have recently spurred greater attention on non-state groups as potential perpetrators. Much less focused research has explored the roles of civilians—working through civil society organizations and/or less formal, local community mechanisms—in helping prevent mass atrocities and mitigate imminent threats. As a result, civilians are too often presumed to be passive victims or bystanders. Recent studies suggest that civilians in fact use a range of active strategies, yet many questions remain about these strategies, the conditions for their success, and external actors' roles in relation to them.

The Simon-Skjodt Center's new research project aims to address gaps in knowledge about the role of civilians in preventing and mitigating atrocities. Participants in this research workshop evaluated the conceptual and definitional issues involved in the study of civil society and civilian self-protection, the current state of knowledge about the role of civilians in atrocity prevention, policy efforts to work with these organizations and individuals, and opportunities for additional research on the topic.

Civil society and mass atrocity prevention

Participants discussed the state of empirical knowledge about the role of civil society in conflict and atrocity prevention. The discussion centered on three main questions:

- What is known about the range of strategies that civil society actors employ to help prevent mass atrocities?
- What is known about the effectiveness of different civil society strategies at reducing the risk of mass atrocities?

- What methods and specific research strategies are likely to be most fruitful in addressing high priority research questions?

As participants discussed the state of the knowledge on the role of civil society in atrocity prevention, the discussion coalesced into four grounding principles to set the stage for the conversation and project.

First, the discussion started with the explicit acknowledgement that there are some atrocities that civil society cannot prevent (illustrated by the example of the [Odi massacre in Nigeria](#)). Many participants acknowledged that there is no better way to prevent atrocities than to invest in good governance and create the basis for participation in democratic process.

Second, participants agreed that the term “civil society” should not be limited to formal organizations (i.e. registered NGOs) but should be thought about in its broadest possible terms. The project’s working definition of civil society is “that arena where manifold social movements...and civic organizations from all classes...attempt to constitute themselves in an ensemble of arrangements so that they can express themselves and advance their interests.”¹ One participant suggested that the project be specific about particular types of organizations it will focus on—i.e. the role of women’s associations, labor organizations, religious leaders—to build a systematic body of evidence. Another highlighted that informal behavior (i.e. sociocultural practices) is an important facet of civil society activities.

Third, many participants agreed that “civil society” should be used as a value neutral term, not equating civil society with constructive, peaceful, and rights-promoting actors and actions. Participants explained that one might think about civil society as participating in atrocities, providing norms of restraint as peacebuilders, and finally civil society operating in post-conflict contexts. One participant observed that research on militia formation suggests that the factors that make militias stronger are the same ones that facilitate effective non-violent mobilization. However, participants argued that when discussing “building civil society,” practitioners, academics, and policymakers should be explicit about the type of civil society the researcher or intervention is targeting. Researchers thinking about preventing violence should also think about ways that civil society actors can be coopted by government actors to facilitate violence.

Fourth, participants discussed how the formation, influence, and activities of civil society might differ depending on national and local context. In countries where governments restrict political space, governments have a lot of influence over what civil society actors can or cannot do. Knowing this, researchers should study this influence and how it might shape group formation and the activities that they might overtly and covertly pursue. A related point raised was the signaling aspect of social violence. One participant presented the example of violence in Gujarat where government officials allowed violence to be perpetrated to send a repressive signal to the Muslim population. The participant suggested questioning the function of signaling in democracies versus autocracies.

¹ Alfred Stepan, *Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

Building on the discussion around country context, the group went on to debate how context-specific versus generalizable outcomes might be. One participant noted the selection bias in research focused on armed actors and formalized civil society groups or NGOs that limits the number of groups that we pay attention to. At the same time, ad-hoc and reactive activity that occurs in response to different contexts makes it difficult to generalize findings. Another participant added that work on civil society should always be context-specific and went on to explain that the people affected in each individual context should be the ones driving decision-making and providing the basis for analysis that relies on local agency. Another participant took it further to argue that a country cannot be the unit of analysis for civil society, as its formation and influence varies significantly subnationally. The participant posited that variation should be found within cases rather than across them. On the other side of the debate, one participant posited that though cases are context-specific, certain factors are generalizable — for example, political and economic incentives.

A participant raised two definitional questions for researchers to consider. The first was whether the definition of “mass atrocities” includes non-lethal attacks. For example, participants asked, would large-scale extrajudicial arrests qualify as a mass atrocity? The second question centered on how researchers define and measure the success and failure of civil society efforts to prevent mass atrocities. Participants debated the definition of a “negative case” of mass atrocities, in which large-scale, systematic violence against civilians does *not* occur. They asked, does the occurrence of “low-level” violence, without escalation into mass violence against civilians, constitute a negative case of mass atrocity prevention, or is that category confined to circumstances in which systematic violence does not occur at all? In this context, one participant suggested that researchers use variation in observable atrocity risk factors—like exclusionary governance—as the main metric for the success and failure of civilian-led efforts.

Another participant added that though lethal violence tends to be the central focus, it is important to include a broader definition of violence that accounts for other activities like torture, sexual violence, mass detention, etc. The project, as it is currently defined, will focus on looking at systematic violence that overlaps with crimes against humanity definition.

Finally, three potential logics were discussed: (1) the existence of strong civil society might have a general dampening effect on the risk of atrocities; (2) activities of strong civil society focused on domains with little or no direct connection to conflict or human rights might reduce risks of mass atrocities; (3) specific peacebuilding activities might mitigate risks through direct restraints on specific outcomes. Researchers must decide whether to study only civil society groups explicitly focused on peacebuilding/atrocity prevention or broader activities and social dynamics.

The latter half of the discussion focused on identifying key research questions and methods to explore. The speaker focused on the responsibility of researchers to ensure that research meets moral and ethical obligations to the subjects and the discussion kicked off around the importance of using participatory research methods.

A participant noted that the challenge for atrocity prevention is that by the time governments begin to focus on a country, it is often so far down the track towards violence that there is little

anyone might do to through civil society to promote positive outcomes. The question of country case study selection led to an animated discussion of the pros and cons of case selection methods, with arguments for and against the utility of a small number of case studies, whether those selected should hold certain factors constant, and whether it is necessary to use an identical framework across cases. This was followed by a debate about the timeframe for policy relevance with some asserting post-9/11 or even more recent while others argued that any case with good data could be policy relevant.

Other advice, relevant to both participatory research design and policy relevance was to bring local actors to brief embassies in countries of focus as a learning experience for both sides. It was also suggested the project use local engagement at country embassies alongside policy outreach in DC to ensure that policymakers are hearing the same thing from multiple angles.

Civilian self-protection during ongoing mass atrocities

Participants debated the nascent concept of “civilian self-protection,” as well as the state of empirical knowledge about civilian behavior during ongoing mass atrocity situations. The discussion centered on three main questions:

1. What is known about the range of civilian self-protection strategies that are employed in ongoing mass atrocity situations?
2. What is known about the effectiveness of different civilian self-protection strategies at mitigating the consequences of mass atrocities?
3. What is known about the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of these different strategies?

Participants debated Jose and Medie’s definition of “civilian self-protection”: “(i) actions taken to protect against immediate, direct threats to physical integrity imposed by belligerents or traditional protection actors; (ii) primarily selected and employed by civilians; and (iii) employed during an armed conflict.”² Participants identified three outstanding conceptual dilemmas surrounding Jose and Medie’s definition. First, Jose and Medie’s definition limits the harm from which civilians protect themselves to physical threats, excluding the damaging psychosocial effects of mass violence. Second, the concept includes actions that blur the international legal distinction between combatants—those who take up arms in the context of an armed conflict—and noncombatants. These include the mobilization of self-defense militias or intelligence sharing with government or rebel forces. In this context, participants observed that civilians sometimes take measures to ensure continuous access to food, water, healthcare, and other life-sustaining services while increasing short-term physical threats against themselves. Lastly, some participants observed that Jose and Medie’s definition should also include self-protection efforts during cases of genocide or mass atrocities that occur outside the context of armed conflict, such as Kenya’s post-electoral violence in 2007 - 8 or the North Korean government’s ongoing mass abuses.

² Jose, Betsy and Peace A. Medie. “Understanding Why and How Civilians Resort to Self-Protection in Armed Conflict,” *International Studies Review*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2015), 524.

Participants disagreed about the measures that researchers and policymakers should use to evaluate the relative success or failure of a civilian self-protection strategy. Some participants argued that civilian communities themselves should define the terms of successful protection, rather than expecting a global definition to apply to all cases. Participants also noted that the degree to which successful actions in one context apply to other contexts is a function of various conflict or atrocity dynamics. For example, one participant observed that civilian collaboration with an armed group might protect that civilian community in contexts where only one rebel group is active, but backfire in contexts where the presence of more than one rebel group generates inter-group competition for intelligence and civilian support. The heterogeneity of context and civilian efforts also complicates efforts to estimate the prevalence of specific strategies across multiple atrocity situations.

Some participants referenced a gap in comparative knowledge about the role of civilian or community self-defense militias, such as the so-called “Civilian Joint Task Force” (CJTF) groups active in the fight against Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria. In this vein, others observed that armed resistance has proven to be effective as a means of civilian self-protection in cases where governments have deliberately targeted civilians during a sustained campaign of genocidal violence. These meso-level forms of resistance, however, can have macro-level, secondary effects, such as extending the length of the conflict during which they occur. But they can also carry symbolic importance for civilians involved in unarmed resistance and survival. Additionally, participants observed that armed resistance can leave surviving civilian communities better organized and better equipped to protect themselves from future instances of mass atrocities, based on historical examples of armed civilian mobilization during the Holocaust and after the 1947 partition of India.

Participants highlighted three major dilemmas of conducting new research about global patterns of civilian self-protection. First, several participants underscored the importance of a participatory research design that places civilians and their communities at the center of inquiry, research ethics, and post-publication outreach. Others observed that the context-specific outcomes of this research approach might create obstacles to more generalizable findings. Second, participants also disagreed on the merits of studying historical cases with more comprehensive data, versus more contemporary cases with less complete or accurate data on civilian behavior. Others encouraged the Simon-Skjoldt Center to consider supporting creation of new databases about more contemporary conflicts. Lastly, one participant noted the challenge of evaluating the effectiveness of civilian behavior in mitigating the consequences of atrocities independently of the decisions of armed groups. The participant suggested that the use of ex-combatant accounts would yield stronger assessments of the relationship between civilian and armed-group behavior.

External assistance to civilian-led efforts to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities

Participants discussed potential avenues for external assistance to civilian-led efforts to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities. The discussion centered on three main questions:

1. What kind of support do external actors provide to civil society and civilian self-protection actions in situations of high risk or ongoing mass atrocities?
2. What challenges do external actors face in supporting civilian-led prevention and protection efforts to greatest effect?
3. What methods and specific research strategies are likely to be most fruitful in addressing high priority research questions?

Participants noted that the category “external actors” describes a wide range of organizations and institutions that interact with civilians in different ways and with differing objectives. These include donor governments, international humanitarian organizations and agencies, non-governmental advocacy groups, and researchers who seek to demonstrate and understand civilian behavior. Participants noted that small-scale interventions to aid civilian-led prevention and protection efforts must also contend with the broad, strategic challenges of preventing genocide and mass atrocities.

Some participants argued that gaps in external support for civilian-led prevention and protection efforts result more from a limited understanding of opportunities for external action, than from a lack of will or interest. They attempted to explain why external support to civilian-led prevention activities is more robust than external support for civilian self-protection. One participant noted that some critics of external action might perceive civilian self-protection as a form of abandonment. Another participant suggested that providing external actors with a “menu” of potential avenues for external support—including financial resources, technical knowledge, convening power, information, or telecommunication technology—might make that support easier to facilitate. A third participant recommended that advocates do more to identify and coordinate with potential allies of civilian-led prevention and protection working within donor governments, international organizations, and non-governmental groups. The participant also noted, however, that external actors should avoid imposing their own priorities on civilian-led efforts they hope to support. Some participants raised the need to examine the potential negative consequences of external actor support, questioning the assumption that it is always positive. They suggested that research aim to identify which characteristics of external engagement are most likely to have an effect, either positive or negative.

Some participants suggested a greater role for private foundations in providing more flexible support to civilian-led prevention and protection efforts. One participant observed, however, that private foundations are sometimes as risk-averse as donor governments and international organizations. Private funding can come with important benefits, including the possibility of multi-year funding for civilian-led efforts, the possibility of providing grants for small-scale efforts, and the absence of the external “branding” that a US Agency for International Development program, for example, might require. Additionally, some participants observed that more cautious donor governments like the United States can provide indirect support to civilian-led efforts through bilateral partners willing to provide assistance in riskier environments, such as Norway or Sweden.

Participants debated whether existing policy frameworks, such as “resilience” or “countering violent extremism” (CVE), might also apply to external support for civilian-led prevention and

protection. One participant observed that concepts like civilian self-protection provide more room for civilian agency in response to atrocity risks, whereas resilience implies that whole societies simply “bounce back” from external threats. Some participants observed that many civilian organizations are wary of CVE-directed funds because of their association with international counterterrorism efforts.

Participants underscored that research on this topic should be actionable and accessible to policymakers or it would not be viewed as directly relevant to their work. Researchers should identify “translators” within donor governments, international organizations, and non-governmental groups who can integrate new research into policy plans and programs. One participant suggested that researchers look for ways to integrate findings about external support to civilian-led prevention and protection into governmental trainings about atrocity prevention. Another participant cautioned that research findings about the effectiveness of specific self-protection strategies do not necessarily imply that external support for those same strategies will also be effective.

Conclusions

Although the discussion was wide-ranging and not directed toward consensus, several points of agreement emerged by the end of the workshop:

1. The role of civilians in preventing and mitigating mass atrocities is an important topic for researchers, civil society actors, donors, and policymakers;
2. Many gaps in knowledge exist on the role of civil society and civilian self-protection, which hinder effective action to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities;
3. The core concepts of civil society and self-protection are fuzzy and contestable, posing challenges to any new research effort, especially those aspiring to generalizable findings;
4. Given the many knowledge gaps, no single substantive focus or method of research is clearly most compelling. The Center will need to choose among multiple potentially fruitful ways forward;
5. Participatory methods are especially salient to research on civilian actions in countries at high risk of or already experiencing mass atrocities;
6. Deliberate strategies are necessary to increase the likelihood that research knowledge on this topic will affect policy and donor behavior.