



Mass Atrocities beyond Mass Killing

A New Voices in National Security Roundtable

Rapporteur's Report

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Overview

On May 3, 2024, Bridging the Gap and the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide convened academic scholars and policy professionals at the Duke University in DC Center for a roundtable discussion on preventing different types of mass atrocities.

Before a group discussion, three scholars briefly presented memos related to three core questions:

- What is known about how and why perpetrators use different violent tactics to systematically target civilian populations/groups? Do perpetrators view different types of atrocities as “substitutes” or “complements”?
- Which tactics of large-scale violence other than mass killing warrant additional consideration and attention from US policy makers?
- What is known about the effectiveness of different strategies or tools for preventing different types of mass atrocities? How should strategies and tools to help prevent mass atrocities be tailored to types of atrocities? How can efforts to help prevent different types of mass atrocities reinforce each other?

This rapporteur's report summarizes the roundtable's key themes, reflecting the Chatham House rule of non-attribution.

Discerning different types of mass atrocities

One scholar described how perpetrators, as rational actors in the sense of linking means to ends, may strategically choose from a variety of atrocities—such as extra-judicial killing, forced displacement, or sexual violence—to achieve their goals.

The scholar suggested that researchers can monitor atrocity contexts for visible patterns to distinguish whether perpetrators employ different tactics as complements (i.e., tactics used together) or as substitutes (as one tactic increases, another decreases). For example, data show that when perpetrators face “naming and shaming” from international actors for political imprisonment, they tend to reduce political imprisonment while increasing extra-judicial killing as an alternative tactic. The scholar also noted that some perpetrators may not commit atrocities at scale if they have the political and economic resources to accommodate what civilians want while still achieving their strategic goals. Another scholar summarized research that indicates that the most repressive governments tend to use a variety of tactics against civilians, suggesting that different violent tactics complement each other.

Questions identified for further research on different types of atrocities:

- Do perpetrators perceive a hierarchy among atrocity tactics, either because they perceive some tactics as being more strategically integral than others, or because they expect international actors to respond more forcefully to certain tactics than others?
- How should policy makers tailor responses to different types of atrocities?

Differentiating between types of mass atrocities in policy responses

Participants asserted that developing effective policy responses required understanding the unique environments where atrocities occur and why and how perpetrators choose specific tactics.

One scholar discussed how conflict-related sexual violence varies significantly across and within mass atrocity episodes. Since this type of violence can take many different forms, such as sexual slavery, rape, or forced pregnancy, the scholar cautioned policy makers against using the term “rape” as a shorthand for all forms of sexual violence during violent conflict. More specifically, they noted that the common advocacy phrase “rape as a weapon of war” can restrict criminal accountability efforts, access to health services, and eligibility for reparations. For example, in the current Sudan conflict, while perpetrators are using rape alongside other violent tactics, other types of sexual violence perpetrated across the country are receiving inadequate policy attention.

Advancing data collection on different types of mass atrocities

Participants agreed that more research is required to understand and forecast different types of atrocities. They encouraged policy makers to identify which tactics of large-scale violence other than mass killing they find of greatest policy interest and to help scholars access or develop data to address these issues.

One participant noted that the country-year structure of data about mass atrocities and closely-related forms of violence limits research about whether perpetrators use different tactics as complements or substitutes. They explained that different abuses would show up in one year, not disaggregated across time or sub-nationally, and that perpetrators hide tactics or develop new tactics that may not be visible in the historical or current data.

Another participant suggested that researchers should produce more data to forecast different types of violent events at the sub-national level. One scholar noted that there are some sub-national data sources, such as data about weather and night-light, that could feed into forecasting models as proxies for different

economic and social variables. They suggested that surveys may help address gaps. In addition to identifying variation in potential explanatory factors, these surveys may include asking perpetrators about why and how they chose particular tactics.

Questions identified for data collection efforts related to different types of mass atrocities:

- What data sources do scholars produce that policy makers should be using to a greater extent? What data sources might policy institutions or foundations fund to assist prevention efforts for different types of mass atrocities?
- What are the different purposes of data on types of mass atrocities (e.g., for accountability or forecasting), and how do policy makers decide where to allocate resources to make data more useful for atrocity prevention?

Formulating policy responses for different types of perpetrators

Participants discussed which level of perpetrators should be the focus of policy, as well as the distinction between preventing ongoing atrocities and offering off-ramps to foreclose future atrocities. One scholar suggested that policy makers should target low- or mid-level perpetrators, who carry out the violence on the ground, if their goal is to reduce mass atrocities, but that they should focus on affecting leaders' decision-making calculus if the goal is to stop atrocities altogether. Participants also discussed the role of regional actors and the importance of whether they facilitate, condone, or attempt to limit mass atrocities.

For example, one scholar suggested that to reduce the currently widespread conflict-related sexual violence in Sudan, policy makers should focus on "buying off" or "side-lining" low-level perpetrators who are carrying out the violence. However, participants also suggested that the conflict could be assessed as elite-driven and that efforts to stop atrocities should also include halting international money flows and thwarting spoilers from the top down.

One scholar also discussed instances of "traveling cultures of violence," referring to perpetrators transmitting tactics, including their physical involvement, across atrocity contexts.

Questions and ideas for further research about types of mass atrocity perpetrators:

- To what extent do international actors need to demonstrate that atrocities are ineffective for achieving perpetrators' strategic goals to influence perpetrators' cost-benefit analysis?
- How should policy makers weigh which perpetrators or enabling actors to focus on (e.g., individual, ground-level perpetrators, elites, or international spoilers) if faced with limited capacity to respond?
- How does the repertoire of mass atrocity tactics emerge and evolve over time and across place? How do perpetrators transfer mass atrocity tactics across conflicts and state boundaries?

Supporting national human rights institutions to prevent atrocities

One scholar encouraged the US government to support or safeguard national human rights institutions (NHRIs) to help prevent mass atrocities. They suggested that NHRIs can help prevent atrocities by

collecting and disseminating information on abuses, educating local populations, and punishing abusers. They said that NHRIs can work quasi-judicially to circulate information to stakeholders in ways that can increase penalties and, therefore, affect perpetrators' cost-benefit analysis for committing mass atrocities.

Multiple participants raised concerns about host governments targeting or co-opting NHRIs and using them for adverse purposes. The scholar described potential ways to prevent the manipulation of NHRIs, such as working with the Sub-Committee on Accreditation of the Global Alliance of NHRIs to improve the quality and impact of international NHRI ratings. The scholar noted that there is limited research on the role and potential of NHRIs during conflicts or in peace processes, while most case studies focus on their roles in the wake of peace processes.

Conclusion

Participants referenced tensions between policy makers and researchers considering particular cases and generalizable patterns across cases. Since policy makers confront cases that vary in specific ways, one participant suggested that researchers: (1) identify which aspects of the mass atrocity situation are likely to be most consequential when weighing which policy tools to apply; and (2) identify contextual and design factors that are associated with greater effectiveness of policy options in ways that can identify general patterns while also taking account of case-specific factors. Participants agreed that scholarship on mass atrocities should be leveraged to be more practical and helpful for practitioners.

Participants also discussed broader issues affecting the structure and practice of US foreign policy on preventing different types of atrocities. One participant asked whether the specialization in the US government and the existence of related but separate executive strategies (such as the [Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security](#) and the [Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities](#)) are hindering or helping efforts at preventing different types of mass atrocities. They suggested the group consider what the optimal government structures, including intra-department and inter-agency processes, would look like given that perpetrators use different tactics to target civilians, but these are sometimes based on common motives. Another participant suggested that US government policy responses should better anticipate and plan for how perpetrators may decide to use different types of atrocities in response to new policies.