SPECIAL REPORT

The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities

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JULY 2020

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

SIMON-SKJODT CENTER
FOR THE PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes the results of a one-year, multicountry exploration of the role that civilians play in preventing and mitigating the trajectory of mass atrocity episodes. It is the culmination of a unique collaboration between the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide and three partner organizations: Congo Research Group, the Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research, and the Sudd Institute. In consultation with the Simon-Skjodt Center, each country team conducted a subnational comparative study of civilian involvement in mass atrocity episodes. This paper brings together the findings from each country study to offer a general framework for understanding civilian agency and assesses how well existing theories of civilian action can account for the outcomes across cases. In addition, it addresses the conceptual and methodological challenges of studying civilian agency and the role of civil society cross-nationally. The study calls for a reconceptualization of civil society that moves away from traditional concepts in favor of foregrounding the political and economic contexts that civilians navigate during a conflict and its aftermath.

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Introduction

Mass atrocity episodes evoke notions of civilians confronted by forces beyond comprehension. Narratives of passive victimhood prevail. Men are "executed," "thrown into pits," and "mutilated," while women and children are "enslaved" and "raped," in the words of one news article on the horrific treatment of the Yazidi community by the Islamic State.[2] The overall picture is that of humans reduced to objects, shred of any spark of agency. Where these narratives ascribe some capacity to act to civilians, it is either the power to flee (or die trying) or the power to pick up arms themselves, in which case they may no longer be accurately described as civilians at all.

But do such minimalist conceptions of agency capture the actual behaviors of civilians and civil society actors confronting episodes of mass atrocities? To address this question, this paper conducts a multilevel analysis of mass atrocity episodes across multiple research sites. We synthesize the findings from three different case studies conducted by local researchers in countries that are currently undergoing conflicts or that have recently experienced violence that places local communities at risk.

Each country team was tasked to select specific political crises with the potential for mass atrocities that unfolded within their case and to determine what role, if any, civilians and civil society played and whether these actions had any impact on the trajectory of violence. Specifically, each country team attempted to answer two specific research questions: What are the different types of civilian-led actions undertaken to help prevent and mitigate mass atrocities within and across different types of contexts and phases? What factors explain variations in the effectiveness of civilian-led efforts to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities?

In each case, at least two different episodes of potential or ongoing violence were studied to understand the varying forms of civilian-led actions that can help prevent and mitigate mass atrocities. This paper synthesizes the findings from those case studies and puts forth a framework for understanding under what conditions civilians and civil society are likely to be able to intervene meaningfully and when their actions are likely to have no impact.

The paper proceeds in the following ways. We first provide an overview of the subject of civilian agency in war. While this paper focuses more specifically on mass atrocities, it is well known that such episodes almost always unfold within the context of a prolonged conflict or its aftermath. As such, we review the extant literature to understand under what conditions civilians might exercise agency in the face of violence orchestrated by the state or armed groups. The next section then zooms in on two specific concepts central to the overarching project: civil society and civilians. While the meaning of each may appear obvious, a review of the definitions provided by each country team reveals substantive differences

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[2] Cathy Otten, "Slaves of Isis: The Long Walk of the Yazidi Women" *Guardian*, July 25, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/25/slaves-of-isis-the-long-walk-of-the-yazidi-women.

among them in the understanding of civil society and civilians, as well as significant differences in how the terms are conceptualized, both in common parlance and in academic and policy literature.

We then turn to the larger comparative study. First, we describe the research methodology, in particular the decision to deploy a subnational comparative approach that allows us to explore the considerable variation both within and between cases. We then briefly describe the cases chosen by the research teams in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and Sri Lanka before outlining the specific propositions we derived from our review of the academic literature. Because of the nature of the case selection process, this paper does not attempt to test these in a scientific fashion. Rather, the final section conducts a comparative analysis with the intention of assessing their relevance to the cases and outlining ways forward. We conclude with a reflection on the research process and a discussion of the policy implications of the research.

Background

Mass atrocity episodes entail large-scale, systematic attacks on civilian populations by state or nonstate actors.[3] They almost always occur during conflicts or post-conflict situations and are the product of either the direct actions of belligerents or a consequence of the larger breakdown of society triggered by violence.[4] Our focus in this study is on intentional killings, but we recognize that mass atrocities may also include kidnappings, sexual violence, and torture that we do not discuss explicitly here. We also recognize that other forms of structural violence such as famine, disease, and poverty may similarly wreak devastation on civilian populations, though they are not explicitly addressed in this report.

While related to conflict, this project specifically focuses on mass atrocities for a number of reasons.[5] First and foremost, although most such episodes occur during conflicts, many occur immediately after active fighting between belligerents has ended or has entered into a ceasefire period. Most prominently, the Rwandan genocide occurred following the signing of the Arusha Peace accords, which commenced a period of relative peace between the belligerents, an interregnum during which Hutu nationalists began their killing spree in the country.[6] Rarely, mass atrocities can also occur without a prior violent conflict.

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[3] Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington, DC: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016).

[4] Jay Ulfelder and Benjamin Valentino, "Assessing Risks of State-Sponsored Mass Killing," Political Instability Task Force, 2008.

[5] It is the mandate of the Simon-Skjodt Center "to prevent and work to halt acts of genocide or related crimes against humanity, and advance justice and accountability." For more information, please visit https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/simon-skjodt-center.

[6] Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda.* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

Mass atrocities are also worthy of attention because they may be driven by a different logic than conflict generally. For example, belligerents may choose to attack civilians as part of their military strategy. Alternatively, facing diminishing returns on a battlefield, they may choose to turn their firepower on local civilian populations. Or they may choose to organize an attack on civilians for reasons completely disconnected from the larger political conflict. Put differently, there appears to be no consistent relationship between the intensity of a conflict and the existence of mass atrocity episodes.

In addition, analyses of conflict tend to focus most on combatants, with little attention paid to the actions of civilians. Similarly, international organizations, governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the media often emphasize the behavior of belligerents within episodes of mass violence. As a result, whether violence has been perpetrated by states or nonstate actors, civilians living within areas affected by conflict are commonly viewed as victims of forces beyond their control. The political logic of viewing civilians in this way is not hard to grasp. By portraying civilians as powerless, outside actors can find it easier to mobilize responses to the very real suffering they encounter. Yet, the decision to frame civilians as powerless has other consequences—namely, failing to recognize local communities' unique attributes that often empower them to prevent violence.

Importantly, recent scholarship has begun to challenge the perspective of civilians as lacking agency in war. These studies demonstrate that civilians use a diverse repertoire of strategies to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities, even in extreme cases such as the Holocaust[7] and the Rwandan genocide.[8] Civilians navigate the interstices of wartime governance;[9] mobilize rescue operations to ensure their own safety and the safety of other targeted groups;[10] and engage in acts of concerted resistance against violent authorities.[11] These studies show that, far from hapless victims, civilians are able to protect themselves and their communities despite the circumstantial, social, and institutional constraints of mass violence.[12] The puzzle for scholars of political violence is no longer whether civilians take actions to prevent and

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[7] Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival during the Holocaust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[8] Nicole Fox and Hollie Nyseth Brehm, "'I Decided to Save Them': Factors That Shaped Participation in Rescue Efforts during Genocide in Rwanda." *Social Forces* 96 no. 4 (2018): 1625–48.

[9] Ana Arjona, "Civilian Resistance to Rebel Governance," in *Rebel Governance in Civil War*, eds. Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 180–202; Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Nimmi Gowrinathan and Zachariah Mampilly, "Resistance and Repression under the Rule of Rebels: Women, Clergy, and Civilian Agency in LTTE Governed Sri Lanka," *Comparative Politics* 52, no. 1 (2019): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soy018.

[10] Fox and Nyseth Brehm, "'I Decided'"; Robert Braun, *Protectors of Pluralism: Religious Minorities and the Rescue of Jews in the Low Countries during the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[11] James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,1987); Arjona, "Civilian Resistance"; Oliver Kaplan, *Resisting War: How Communities Protect Themselves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[12] Betcy Jose and Peace A. Medie, "Understanding Why and How Civilians Resort to Self-Protection in Armed Conflict," *International Studies Review* 17, no. 4 (2015): 515–35, https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12254; Jana Krause, "Non-Violence and Civilian Agency in Communal War: Evidence from Jos, Nigeria," *African Affairs* 116, no. 463 (2017): 261–83, https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adw068; Juan Masullo, "Refusing to Cooperate with Armed Groups: Civilian Agency and Collective Action in the Colombian Civilian War" (unpublished manuscript, 2019).

mitigate violence, but under what conditions different types of actions emerge and how these actions affect the trajectory of violence.

Methodologically, recent social science literature on the varieties of civilian agency during war have centered on subnational variations in civilian mobilization. Studies during the past decade sought to explain variations in collective civilian behavior in cases including the Colombian civil war;[13] the Holocaust;[14] Sri Lanka;[15] and the Philippines.[16]

Although subnational studies provide valuable insight into the so-called microdynamics of mass violence episodes, whether their findings generalize to other, comparable cases is an open empirical question for scholars of political violence.[17] Only recently have studies of collective action by civilians facing mass violence incorporated cross-country comparisons. For example, some studies of peacebuilding offer analyses of the common and divergent practices for mobilizing community resistance [18] and self-protection[19] across multiple country contexts. But these studies stop short of identifying explanations for different outcomes from one case to the next. Krause's work on the relationship between community leadership and collective action in Nigeria and Indonesia is an important exception.[20]

To fill this lacuna, the Simon-Skjodt Center's research project focuses on the role of civilians and civil society in preventing and mitigating atrocities through a combination of cross-national, quantitative analysis,[21] comparative case studies, and interviews with policymakers and donors.[22] This paper draws on the subnational case studies conducted in partnership with local organizations or researchers. It seeks to

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[13] Arjona, "Civilian Resistance"; Kaplan, *Resisting War*; Masullo, "Refusing to Cooperate."

[14] Thomas V. Maher, "Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action: The Cases of Sobibór, Treblinka, and Auschwitz," *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 2 (2010): 252–72;. Rachel Einwohner and Thomas Maher, "Threat Assessment and Collective-Action Emergence: Death-Camp and Ghetto Resistance during the Holocaust," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2011): 127–46; Finkel, *Ordinary Jews;* Braun, *Protectors of Pluralism*.

[15] Gowrinathan and Mampilly, "Resistance and Repression," 1–20.

[16] Michael A. Rubin, "Rebel Territorial Control and Civilian Collective Action in Civil War: Evidence from the Communist Insurgency in the Philippines," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, nos. 2–3 (July 27, 2019): 459–89, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002719863844.

[17] Laia Balcells and Patricia Justino, "Bridging Micro and Macro Approaches on Civil Wars and Political Violence: Issues, Challenges, and the Way Forward," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 8 (2014): 1343–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002714547905.

[18] Mary B. Anderson and Marshall Wallace, *Opting Out of War: Strategies to Prevent Violent Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013); Landon E. Hancock and Christopher Roger Mitchell, *Zones of Peace*, (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2007).

[19] Jose and Medie, "Understanding Why."

[20] Jana Krause, *Resilient Communities: Non-Violence and Civilian Agency in Communal War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[21] Erica Chenoweth and Evan Perkoski, "A Source of Escalation or a Source of Restraint? Whether and How Civil Society Affects Mass Killings" (Report on The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, 2020).

[22] Riva Kantowitz and Kyra Fox, "[How] Do External Actors Support Civilian-Led Atrocity Prevention?" (Report on The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, 2020).

analyze variations in civilian-led actions both within countries (across time and region) and between countries that have faced serious threats of mass atrocities.

From its inception, the project was envisioned as a collaborative effort in which each of the partners would conduct its own country-specific subnational comparative study as well as contribute to this paper, which synthesizes the findings from the case studies. Three partner organizations were selected and provided resources to conduct the research: specifically, in the DRC, the Congo Research Group (CRG); in Sri Lanka, the Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research (Adayaalam); and in South Sudan, the Sudd Institute.

In the early stages of the project, a virtual workshop was held to devise a common research agenda and strategy. This was followed by an in-person workshop held in Washington, DC, in spring 2019, during which initial research plans were shared with an audience composed of both members representing each of the research teams and leading scholars and staff from the Simon-Skjodt Center. The teams then returned to their countries to conduct the case studies and regularly consulted with the central research team. Individual draft reports were shared during virtual workshops that allowed all participants in the larger research project the opportunity to provide feedback.

Key Concepts and Questions

The study seeks to provide the terms of debate for the study of civilian agency during episodes of mass atrocity. As a result, it is necessary to define the key terms and concepts deployed. The meanings of specific terms central to this study are known to vary across contexts. For example, some countries impose national service requirements on the population, which can blur the line between civilians and combatants. Or consider that civil society in different countries can include vastly different actors, many of whom do not adhere to the classic liberal definition of civil society derived from the experience of advanced capitalist democracies.

As such, the research team decided to deploy an exploratory approach that did not artificially limit the conceptual and theoretical terrain. Recognizing the tremendous variations in the meaning of different terms in distinct contexts, we encouraged researchers in each case to define key concepts according to how they are understood within their local context rather than start with a fixed definition. To facilitate this, we posed a number of questions to allow each team to define each term on its own accord. We provide the full descriptions shared with each team in the appendix to this paper.

As discussed, this paper is concerned with exploring the methodological and conceptual challenges of conducting studies on the role of civilians in mitigating mass atrocities from a cross-national perspective. Two concepts in particular, "civil society" and "civilians," require greater explication. Toward this end, each team included an exploration of the meanings of specific core concepts within the particular case

study sites. The case studies evidenced considerable differences in how these two terms were operationalized, warranting further discussion that follows.

Civil Society

The definition of "civil society" varied significantly between the cases and the classic definition, which we preliminarily defined as "an open and voluntary space for political action that is distinct from both the market (private sector) and the government (public sector)" (see the appendix). As a concept, civil society has its origins in 18th century western political philosophy, in which it marked a realm of social mutuality beyond the state. Relatively neglected for much of the next two centuries, civil society came roaring back during the last days of the Soviet Union as intellectuals sought to make sense of the role of private individuals and associations in the downfall of communist regimes. While definitions of the term vary widely, most agree that civil society encompasses "...independent forms of social life from below, free from state tutelage."[23]

Two central issues emerge when applying the concept to societies at risk of mass atrocities. First is the degree to which civil society is independent from government. The issue of its relationship to government is especially germane in such settings, because mass atrocities rarely, if ever, leave civil society unaffected. Instead, actors on all sides of a conflict seek to gain advantage by working with and within civil society to advance their agendas. As a result, civil society can play both positive and negative roles in mass atrocity episodes, as numerous scholars have documented.[24]

This suggests that rather than being autonomous, civil society actors can and do coordinate with belligerents in a conflict, raising questions about their independence. Governments and nonstate actors may view civil society's independence as a threat and seek to co-opt or otherwise strictly curtail civil society to ensure it operates in line with their political objectives. This is especially true in nondemocratic contexts, where governments may use legal frameworks to restrict civil society's independence, raising the question of whether civil society can exist at all under such conditions. Similarly, armed groups in control of territory often seek to control the actions of civil society within their territories.

Second is the question of which categories of actors should be included within civil society's remit. In the classic definition of the term, civil society generally includes nongovernmental organizations such as churches, unions, the media, and other formal or informal societal associations. The private sector, in contrast, is generally considered to be a separate realm. But the boundaries of civil society have long been contested, even within advanced capitalist democracies from where the term originated. For example, should political parties whose sole purpose is to capture governmental power through elections be

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[23] Charles Taylor, "Civil Society in the Western Tradition," in *The Notion of Tolerance and Human Rights,* eds. Ethel Groffier and Michael Paradis (Ontario: Carleton University Press, 1991), 118.

[24] Lee Ann Fujii, "Transforming the Moral Landscape: The Diffusion of a Genocidal Norm in Rwanda," *Journal of Genocide Research* 6, no. 1 (2004): 99–114; Chukwuemeka Eze, "The Role of CSOs in Promoting Human Rights Protection, Mass Atrocities Prevention, and Civilian Protection in Armed Conflicts," *Global Responsibility to Protect* 8 (2016): 249–269; Chenoweth and Perkoski, "A Source of Escalation or a Source of Restraint?"

included within the definition? Similarly, are businesses and related associations, focused as they are on the realm of the market, a part of civil society?

As the term was extended to describe societies outside of the West, these questions became ever more germane.[25] Should actors who clearly constitute an essential component of associational life in the Global South but who are potentially neither voluntary nor open in their membership be included in the definition? What if these actors simultaneously pursue commercial concerns? For example, traditional authorities often play an essential role in advocating for communities in the midst of violent conflict. In South Sudan, for example, where politics is often ethnicized, it is precisely traditional leaders' position at the head of a closed political community that lends them both the moral stature and political power to intervene. Yet they often define their membership in ascriptive criteria that exclude nonmembers from their advocacy.

Similarly, religious institutions frequently straddle the lines between public and commercial concerns. For example, the Catholic Church in the DRC is a major landowner and runs numerous businesses, often blurring the lines between its humanitarian and economic interests. Contrary to the assumption that power in civil society is derived from the church's moral stature, material interests and the ability to navigate the political environment in the DRC are essential to understanding its significance. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, religious leaders had close connections to the state, often serving to reinforce and spread exclusionary ideological messages, even going as far as serving as appendages for political parties by openly campaigning for nationalist candidates.

Each case also made specific distinctions on what is included in civil society that reflects the unique political environment in which it operates. For example, CRG's definition emphasizes both the interconnectedness of societal actors and their explicitly partisan and self-interested nature. As such, and unlike the other cases, the DRC case study incorporates business leaders who played an important role in efforts to mitigate violence. The role of business leaders in the DRC and their centrality to civil society there differs from conventional definitions in the literature, which generally distinguishes associational life from market forces.

In South Sudan, despite the prevalence of nongovernmental organizations that seem to bolster the image of a robust civil society, the Sudd Institute noted that it is the government that defines the boundaries of who is included within civil society, even as this definition fails to comport with common understandings of who should be included. The Non-Governmental Organizations Act, which is based on the World Bank definition, specifies that only "a non-governmental and a non-profit organisation that has presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations" qualifies.[26] In practice, however, numerous "informal organizations" are not included within this definition and hence are not eligible for protection under the law. In addition, even formally recognized civil society groups are frequently forced to create informal

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[25] Célestin Monga, The Anthropology of Anger: Civil Society and Democracy in Africa (New York: Lynne Rienner, 1996).

[26] Non-Governmental Organization Act, Government of South Sudan, 2016, https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/South-Sudan_NGOBILL.pdf. The definition is on p. 2.

coalitions to circumvent the repressive environment despite the protections these groups are supposed to possess under the law.

Sri Lanka represents the most formally open political environment of the three cases with a long democratic history, a robust legal system, and a relatively free press.[27] However, NGOs operating in the north and east of the country face consistent government repression and often extrajudicial pressures, demonstrating the spatial variation that can shape the experiences of civil society actors, even where national laws protecting civil society are meant to apply. In addition to the spatial differences, the meaning of civil society has shifted over time between the conflict and post-conflict periods. According to Adayaalam, during the war, civil society in the north was seen "as an extension of the community." In the post-war context, when foreign funding flowed in and a more moderate government came to power, civil society is thought to have been "professionalized" and no longer "a part of the community it seeks to represent" as organizations shifted their focus from serving the local population to procuring funds from abroad and forging closer ties to the new regime.[28] As a result, the report suggests an expansive definition of civil society that includes non-traditional civil society actors, such as village chiefs, and recognizes the divergent experiences of civil society actors across time and space.

In all three cases, it is clear that the understandings of civil society that center on formal legal standards or that focus narrowly on conceptions of civil society imported from the West were inadequate for understanding the actual conditions of civil society in these contexts. All three cases suggest that nontraditional civil society actors can play essential roles in atrocity prevention and face conditions that are rarely reflected in the legal frameworks that each country devised to regulate the sector. This has important implications not only for the categories of actors that should be included within civil society but also the nature of their relationship to the government and the motivations driving their actions—actions that may not be normatively driven but rather shaped by more instrumental concerns.

Civilians

The case study authors' definitions of "civilians" also varied. The "Additional Protocol 1 of the Geneva Conventions" defines the category of civilians negatively, as an individual who does not belong to either the armed forces in a conflict or any aligned militias or volunteer corps.[29] It also prohibits membership in any organized group or unit with a hierarchical command structure, such as resistance movements or other small armed groups. Two categories of actors blur these lines within the case studies. The first are those individuals who join an armed group but then leave the formal command structure ostensibly to

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[27] Zachariah Mampilly, "The Nexus of Militarisation and Corruption in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka," in *Corruption and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Selling the Peace?,* eds. Christine Cheng and Dominik Zaum (London: Routledge, 2013).

[28] Anushani Alagarajah, Dharsha Jegatheeswaran, and Laxana Paskaran, "Preventing Atrocities in a State Unwilling to Address Its Past: The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Sri Lanka" (Report on The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, 2020), 8.

[29] "Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977," International Committee of the Red Cross, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/470.

return to civilian status. Second, those individuals who may pick up arms but do not join a formal organization.

In South Sudan, militia activities outside the formal confines of state forces or rebel groups complicate the clear distinction between civilians and combatants. Militias become part of the armed forces during active conflict and could revert back to being civilians during periods of nonmobilization.[30] Community protection groups, such as armed youth groups called Gelweng, also proliferate. Widespread militia activities and communal support for local protection groups muddle the distinction between civilian and combatant specified under international humanitarian law, according to the Sudd Institute.

In Sri Lanka, Adayaalam drew a starker line suggesting that all individuals who are not part of an organized group and who remain arms free should be considered civilians, in line with international legal standards. But even here, they point to the difficulty of drawing clear lines. Specifically, excombatants, while legally entitled to the protections of civilians, constitute a "grey zone," where they continue to be figures of suspicion to both the government and the local communities to which they are tied.[31]

Finally, in the DRC, CRG defined civilian in a way that is consistent with international humanitarian law, as "an individual who is not a member of a national army nor an armed group." However, while recognizing the value of a standard definition, the report notes that the line between civilian and combatant "often breaks down in reality."[32]

All three cases stress the importance of taking an expansive approach situated in on-the-ground realities when understanding the meaning of "civilians" in conflict and post-conflict situations. Existing definitions are perhaps too legalistic and reliant on clear categories of actors who rarely conform to the existing conditions in countries at risk for mass atrocities. In addition, existing definitions cannot account for the fluidity of individual experiences wherein a combatant may attempt to exit an armed group but continues to face discrimination or cases in which civilians pick up arms but do not join organized groups.

Although it is essential to recognize the diversity of meanings of different core concepts used in diverse contexts, doing so poses challenges for crafting a uniform approach at the global level. Standardized definitions provide international actors the opportunity to establish clear guidelines and norms on how to respond to different forms of mass violence. They also provide local actors the ability to affirm their civilian status and claim the protections to which they are entitled, even when these are not respected by belligerents. Reconciling the competing imperatives to recognize the diversity of meanings at the national level with the value of a standardized approach globally is a subject we return to in the conclusion.

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[30] Nyathon H. Mai, "Strategic Peacebuilding: The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities in South Sudan" (Report on The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, 2020).

[31] Alagarajah, Jegatheeswaran, and Paskaran, "Preventing Atrocities in a State Unwilling to Address Its Past."

[32] Congo Research Group, "Building Relationships, Building Peace: The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Report on The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, 2020), 2.

Research Method

As described, each country team was provided a broad outline of questions and directed to conduct a subnational comparative study in each of the cases. In consultation with the Simon-Skjodt Center, each team selected at least two recent instances of civilian actions during mass atrocity episodes (actual or potential) to explore the role that civilians played, if any, in mitigating the violence. Teams were encouraged to select cases along any dimension they considered significant, though regional and/or temporal variation was required. In addition, teams were encouraged to think broadly about what other types of variation matter in their specific context, such as ethnic or religious diversity, ideological factors, or gender variations of the actors involved. The case study selection process is detailed in the next section.

A subnational approach was chosen because it allows researchers to hold constant a variety of factors such as political institutions and societal conditions that may vary significantly in cross-national approaches.[33] Comparing mass atrocity episodes across national contexts is challenging because there may be context-specific factors that shape the trajectory of any particular outbreak of violence. In contrast, subnational comparisons allow for "more reliable, more precise bases for comparative analysis than traditional comparative methods based on countries as units."[34]

In addition, a subnational approach makes sense because mass atrocity episodes rarely unravel at a national scale. Although there are certain cases, such as the Rwandan genocide, that may involve a majority of the national population, these events remain a distinct minority. Instead, most episodes are spatially and temporally bound, affecting only a portion of the total population. As such, characterizing the massacre of a specific ethnic community in a particular village or town as being driven by common factors at the national level makes little analytical sense, especially when villages with similar characteristics may witness dramatically different outcomes. Instead, foregrounding microlevel local factors can provide researchers with a more nuanced understanding of the causes and actors that shape mass atrocities.

At the same time, mass atrocity episodes remain extremely rare, even within cases of protracted political violence. And within these, cases where civilians actually did impact the trajectory of violence are likely to be even more rare, as the evidence from the case studies preliminarily demonstrates. As such, this paper seeks to provide a comparative analysis in which subnational cases from different national contexts are aggregated in order to discern general patterns. This method is particularly useful for "generating and validating hypotheses or for synthesizing findings from a line of primary research," even as "it is less conducive to quantitative hypothesis testing or scrutiny of national effects."[35]

Each team was encouraged to devise and explain its own research choices. This included both the types of research that would be conducted and the different data sources the team relied on. The ensuing reports

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[33] Agustina Giraudy, Eduardo Moncada, and Richard Snyder, *Inside Countries: Subnational Research in Comparative Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[34] Jeffery Sellers, "From Within to Between Nations: Subnational Comparison across Borders," *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 1 (March 2019): 85.

[35] Sellers, "From Within," 94.

relied on a variety of methods ranging from structured interviews to ethnography and archival research. Teams were also encouraged to draw on data sources that generally fall outside more traditional social science approaches, such as folklore, religious sermons, poetry, and music. Such sources of data may provide insights that are both more organic and more relevant to civilian populations in the particular countries. For example, in South Sudan the team examined the role of rumors, political cartoons in local newspapers, traditional folk music, and dramatic plays in spreading messages about violent outbreaks and antiviolence initiatives. In the DRC, the role of musicians and other artists in combating violence is examined.

Case Selection and Description

The cases were not selected randomly but rather through an extensive process of consultation based on a variety of factors. We began by putting together the universe of possible cases using six criteria.[36] We then narrowed these further according to a number of additional concerns. First and foremost was the viability of conducting research within countries directly affected by political violence. Specifically, this meant that numerous cases of interest—such as the ongoing conflict in Syria or attacks on the Rohingya community in Myanmar—were excluded because of the risks to researchers. Yet we also preferred to focus on recent conflicts where memories of civilian actions are still fresh. Rather than rely on accounts from individuals who may have fled the violence into neighboring countries, we chose to select cases where the research teams would have direct access to affected civilian populations. We also wanted to ensure that local researchers would not encounter excessive risks to their safety or put any informants at risk in the course of their research.[37]

Even still, the local research teams encountered numerous challenges in conducting their studies. One initial partner organization dropped out early in the process for reasons that remain opaque but were inevitably connected to the difficult and evolving political situation in the country. In Sri Lanka, research ground to a halt following the April 2019 Easter Sunday bombings and again during the run-up to the election later that year, when the right-wing strongman Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected and many Tamil activists and scholars fled the northern part of the country. Similarly, in South Sudan research team

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[36] (1) Mass atrocities occurred or plausibly could have occurred in the country in some period since 2001; (2) within-case variation in civilian-led actions and outcomes, allowing for comparison across multiple crisis periods and/or regions within a country; (3) policy salience for US audiences, assessed through informal consultations with US interlocutors; (4) feasibility of in-country research; (5) availability of in-country research organizations; and (6) variations across cases in the types of mass violence against civilians and the degree of repression of civil society.

[37] In addition to the individual assessments made by each team on the local situation, the Simon-Skjodt Center made its own assessment informed by consultation with experts and discussions with the research teams regarding how they assessed the risks. In general, we deferred to research teams' judgment on what was acceptable and what was too risky.

members faced difficulty directly related to the devolving security situation. We reflect on some of these challenges in the concluding section.

Part of the challenge for any comparative analysis is the variability of different mass atrocity episodes. Mass atrocities take place in a variety of contexts, from protracted conflicts between two or more parties to one-sided episodes in which there is no sustained resistance to violence by government security forces or nonstate, armed groups. Cases can vary along major dimensions, such as the populations involved, the type of conflict, the level of economic development, the nature of the political regime, the duration of fighting, the role of external actors, and so on, leading to substantive questions about whether different national contexts can be usefully compared with each other.

In the three mass atrocity episodes that we address in this project, variations in conflict and perpetrator types were especially influential in shaping the range of civilian actions and their effects. In the DRC, participants in the conflict included the state and its related militias; nonstate, armed groups including local defense forces and a United Nations Peacekeeping force; and the national armies of neighboring countries. In South Sudan, atrocities occurred as a result of conflict between elites at the national level as well as local-level disputes between armed actors. In Sri Lanka, state forces engaged in anti-Tamil attacks during the Sri Lankan counterinsurgency against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), while nonstate actors targeted Muslim civilians during the post-conflict, Easter Sunday bombings in April 2019. In addition, the selected episodes occurred both during and after conflicts. Ultimately, while we do not claim to have covered the universe of different factors, the cases reflect significant variation along a number of important dimensions.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

As it has been for much of the past two decades, the DRC remains one of the highest-risk cases for mass atrocity episodes. The origins of the ongoing unrest can be traced back to 1996, when the regime of Mobutu Sese Seko was overthrown by forces supported by Rwanda and Uganda. Sporadic violence ranging from full-scale military invasions to localized communal clashes have characterized the country ever since, despite the presence of the largest peacekeeping mission in United Nations history.

CRG selected two cases of protracted violence to examine the role of civilian and civil society action. The first was a series of episodic clashes that afflicted the Beni-Butembo region of Grand Nord between 2000 and 2006, and the second was the recurring violence in Ituri between 2003 and 2009.

The study explores factors that appeared to contribute to successful civilian-led efforts to reduce violence against civilians in Grand Nord (Beni-Butembo) and Ituri. In the first case, the towns of Beni and Butembo witnessed periods of prolonged stability, only for the situation to deteriorate rapidly in 2006. In contrast, in Ituri, the site of numerous episodes of mass violence prior to 2007, violence decreased rapidly even as it increased in the surrounding areas.

Using this spatial and temporal variation in violence, the study finds that the effect of civilian interventions to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities in Beni-Butembo and Ituri was greatest when civilians "influenc[ed] the broader social dynamics that drive the conflict," rather than steering "technical

and military" efforts to "protect people from imminent danger."[38] Put simply, it was only when civil society, which in the DRC included private businesses, engaged in explicitly political and self-interested actions that they were able to affect the trajectory of violence. Rather than an apolitical, neutral force engaged in technical peacebuilding exercises, civil society actors were most effective when they were able to leverage their proximity to belligerents in order to pressure them toward a shared interest in stability. These same dynamics also explain the more negative roles such actors can play, including direct support for belligerents, when the broader conflict context or their specific interests shift.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's three-decade-long secessionist war between Tamil insurgents and the Sinhalese-dominated government came to an end with the total victory of government forces in 2009. Although civilians were targeted throughout the war, attacks on civilians escalated following the election of the right-wing government led by Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2005. The end of the war did not bring peace, however, and the country has had to contend with increased political repression and terrorist attacks.

Adayaalam focused on two episodes of civilian action to alter the trajectory of political violence—the first during the Sri Lankan civil war and the second after the war concluded. The first case study focuses on the role of Tamil civilians in the northern province to prevent widespread disappearances and killings orchestrated by the government following the breakdown of the tenuous cease fire. The second examines anti-Muslim violence in the country from 2015 to 2020, a period selected to include the aftermath of the Easter Sunday bombings of 2019, when Muslims in the Eastern Province in particular were targeted for their presumed connection to the bombers.

In the first case study, Adayaalam focuses on three types of civil society-led action: "(1) dialogues and negotiations, (2) informal working groups and protests, and (3) initiatives aimed at protecting individuals deemed at risk."[39] The study finds that most such efforts failed to meaningfully alter the trajectory of violence. Yet, despite its inability to successfully intervene, civil society action was not meaningless, especially in the north. Numerous individuals who had been targeted by the regime were able to avoid government repression with the support of informal networks that provided safe havens or opportunities to flee the country. Additionally, in both cases, civil society was at the forefront of communication and documentation efforts that helped local communities ensure that their suffering would not be forgotten even as it failed to trigger international action.

The study finds that civil society was ill prepared to deal with the challenges of government repression as individuals feared for their own safety and security. In addition, civil society had focused more resources on humanitarian and developmental challenges rather than on responding to violence. It also finds, consistent with existing research, that certain civil society actors such as religious officials can play a role in promoting mass violence either through direct alignment with belligerents or, more commonly, through prejudicial attitudes, either implicit or explicit, among individuals.

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[38] Congo Research Group, "Building Relationships, Building Peace," 1.
[39] Alagarajah, Jegatheeswaran, and Paskaran, "Preventing Atrocities in a State Unwilling to Address Its Past," 15.

South Sudan

South Sudan's long secessionist war against the regime in Khartoum ended with the country gaining independence in 2011. Only two years later, however, a split in the leadership of the former rebels turned ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, returned the country to war. Although all sides agreed to a peace agreement and unity government in February 2020, the conflict that raged between 2013 and 2016 led to close to 400,000 dead and millions displaced. Even after peace negotiations recommenced in 2016, the following years witnessed a number of localized skirmishes that affected civilian communities directly.

The Sudd Institute examined three incidents directly related to the country's protracted post-independence conflicts. The first was connected to the initial split between President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, and his former Vice President, Riek Machar, a Nuer, in 2013. The civil war that ensued led to the deaths of thousands of civilians and the displacement of millions who fled the violence for neighboring countries. The second crisis was a direct offshoot of the first during the protracted peace process that failed numerous times. In 2017, a military standoff occurred between President Kiir and the former Sudan People's Liberation Army general and Chief of the Army, Paul Malong, also a Dinka. The crisis led to the deaths of numerous soldiers on both sides but never escalated to a full-on war, partially because of the intervention of civil society leaders. The final case shifts the focus from the national to the local level. In the early 2010s, members of the Fertit community began protesting a number of government policies that they perceived as discriminatory. In response to government crackdowns, a local militia was formed that engaged in clashes with government soldiers throughout 2016–2017 in Wau.

Civilians were involved with a number of efforts to de-escalate all three crises including (1) early warning and conflict monitoring through public media reporting; (2) conflict monitoring through private groups; (3) public coalition activities across multiple civil society sectors; and (4) civilian-led mediation by groups such as the South Sudan Council of Churches, the Concerned Citizen Committee for Peace, and the High Committee for Peace and Reconciliation in Wau.

Civilian efforts to alter the trajectory of violence largely failed during the 2013 Dinka/Nuer conflict and during the 2016–2017 Wau crisis. But in 2017, mediation by the Concerned Citizen Committee for Peace succeeded in preventing conflict between Salva Kiir's and Paul Malong's forces from escalating into outright conflict. The Sudd Institute suggests that this was because of (1) civil society's prior experience in prevention activities and (2) preexisting relationships between civil society leaders and parties to the conflict, such as common ethnic identities, that allowed the parties to perceive them as legitimate and impartial conflict brokers.

Comparing Civilian Efforts to Prevent or Respond to Mass Atrocities

In this section, we revisit the existing literature on civilian responses to episodes of mass violence to derive several propositions regarding under what conditions civil society action is likely to have an impact on the trajectory of violence. The three approaches emphasize different dynamics, including the existence of preexisting institutions and behaviors, the nature of the relationship between the governing authority and the civilian population, and the involvement or lack thereof of the international community.

To be clear, with only three national cases and seven subnational cases, we are not attempting a rigorous, controlled test of any of the propositions. Instead, we offer a comparative analysis of the three propositions to uncover the specific mechanisms and assess their relevance for each of the cases.

Proposition 1: Existence of strong and inclusive civil society institutions is associated with more effective violence prevention actions.

A key observation by several authors is that where civil society is robust and inclusive, it is better able to mobilize effectively when violence breaks out.[40] Ana Arjona has suggested that civilian leaders are best able to influence the behavior of belligerents in a conflict when there are preexisting institutions that are held in high regard by local communities.[41] In these cases, drawing on the opportunities for collective action that such institutions provide, civilians are able to organize and create avenues for conflict resolution to alter the trajectory of violence.

In such cases, we would expect to see clear evidence that existing civil society institutions are able to affect the trajectory of violence using their credibility among the local population and their capacity to use this to pressure the belligerents into avoiding targeted attacks on civilians.[42]

Evidence from Case Studies: Proposition 1

Democratic Republic of the Congo: Yes

Civil society in the DRC was most effective in affecting the trajectory of violence where institutions, including the private sector and traditional authorities, were well established and able to negotiate with belligerents directly. The Beni-Butembo case study demonstrates that existing institutions played a central role in the reconstitution of a more peaceful local order by engaging with the belligerents and pressuring them toward shared goals, especially stability. The tightly knit business community initially supported the armed group, but over time, it came to play a constraining role as its economic interests moved away from

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[40] Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

[41] Arjona, "Civilian Resistance"; Arjona, *Rebelocracy.*

[42] Krause, "Non-Violence."

supporting violence to ensuring stability. In Ituri, civil society actors were less involved in pressuring the belligerents to the negotiating table but played an important role in the consolidation of peace and the reconciliation efforts that followed. A robust media also placed pressure on the belligerents by highlighting their transgressions and denouncing armed groups that engaged in violent attacks on the civilian population, thereby reinforcing the moral authority of local civil society.

South Sudan: Mixed

The evidence from South Sudan about the role of preexisting institutions is mixed. Faced with a closed political space, civilian elites frequently banded together in informal coalitions that sought to "maneuver within this limited civic space."[43] While the Sudd Institute found that clergy and traditional leaders in South Sudan who came together under various councils were able to stave off a national crisis that threatened to turn violent between President Kiir and General Malong in 2017, they were less effective during the two other crises, one national and one local. During the conflict between Kiir and Riek Machar, a team drawn from religious and traditional leaders was unable to affect the outcome despite the members' clear standing within society. Similarly, in Wau, despite the creation of a High Committee for Peace and Reconciliation that brought together religious and traditional leaders with prominent representatives from other elements of civil society, such as academia and women's and youth groups, the intervention failed. The report argues that beyond the existence of well-established civil society institutions, preexisting experience specifically in conflict resolution was necessary for the civil society intervention to have an impact.

Sri Lanka: No

In Sri Lanka, civil society had little impact on the trajectory of violence in both subnational cases. While there was some limited success in helping individuals flee the crackdown, there were few discernible community-wide benefits from civil society's involvement. In the north, well-established civil society organizations that came together to negotiate with the government were unable to stave off the mass killings of civilians that accompanied the end of the war. Adayaalam suggests that despite a longstanding presence in the north and the faith placed in it by the local community, civil society could do little in the face of government determination to end the conflict, regardless of the costs to civilian life. In the east, despite civil society's active and timely efforts to address growing anti-Muslim sentiment following the Easter Sunday bombings (efforts that had began prior to the bombings), there was little discernible impact from initiatives to facilitate interethnic harmony.

Proposition 2: Strong ties to the ruling political authority are associated with greater capacity to influence the trajectory of violence.

Scholars of violence have discussed how the ability to shape the behavior of parties in a conflict is not randomly distributed among civilians. Instead, governments and nonstate groups regularly identify a constituency based on shared ethnic, religious, or ideological grounds that is the target of their appeals and with whom they establish a more interactive relationship than with nonconstituents. Gowrinathan and

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[43] Mai, "Strategic Peacebuilding," 7.

Mampilly argue that civilians may possess the capacity to shape the behavior of belligerents using their relationship to the ruling political authority.[44] Constituents—civilians who are claimed as members of the core constituency and who accept the dominion of the political authority—can negotiate in direct and indirect ways that are likely to shape the behavior of the belligerents.[45]

In these cases, civilians, whether organized or unorganized, have the capacity to influence the behavior of parties in an armed conflict using both their acceptance of the belligerent's claim to authority and the desire of the belligerent to claim that segment of the civilian population as part of its core constituency. In such cases, we would expect to see clear evidence that civilians leverage their unique positionality to make claims on the belligerent that shape the trajectory of violence. In contrast, where civilians are not claimed by the belligerent (i.e., nonconstituents), we would expect their actions to have little to no impact.

Evidence from Case Studies: Proposition 2

Democratic Republic of the Congo: Yes

Shared ethnic or religious identity played an important role in civil society's intervention in the DRC, lending support to proposition 2. Importantly, it was not only a shared identity but also civil society's willingness to accept the legitimacy of the belligerents and to leverage this position to advocate on behalf of the civilian population that made the difference. CRG's report emphasizes the congruence of ethnicity in Beni-Butembo between the local community, civil society, and the armed groups—the majority of whom came from the Nande community—that facilitated negotiation and dialogue. Similarly, the Catholic Church was viewed as a sympathetic actor by local armed groups. By leveraging its influence in society and its "intimacy with armed groups," the church was able to pressure the groups into peace by bringing them together and "brokering trust" through "moral suasion."[46]

South Sudan: Yes

In South Sudan, efforts by civil society leaders to affect the trajectory of the conflict were only effective when they targeted coethnics. This is consistent with the argument that suggests that such efforts are more likely to be impactful when they are conducted by individuals identified as part of the leadership's primary constituency and, importantly, do not challenge their overall political standing.[47] In both the Wau crisis and the Dinka-Nuer conflict, multiethnic teams drawn from civil society were unable to pressure the

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[44] Gowrinathan and Mampilly, "Resistance and Repression."

[45] The paper suggests that belligerents separate civilians into four categories—constituents, enemies, traitors, and victims—on the basis of their relationship to the ruling political authority.

[46] Congo Research Group, "Building Relationships, Building Peace," 10.

[47] To be clear, Gowrinathan and Mampilly do not view ethnic identity as the sole identity for establishing a constituency. Rather, constituencies can be defined along multiple dimensions, including religion, ideology, class, and so on. What matters is how an actor defines the constituency and whether civilians accept the actor's dominion. In South Sudan specifically, politics has been ethnicized in ways that align ethnic identity with the constituent/nonconstituent divide, as the case study makes clear.

belligerents into peaceful outcomes. In contrast, in the only positive case, it was the ability of the solely Dinka civil society team to frame the issue as concerning the welfare of the Dinka community to the Dinka belligerents by drawing on traditional Dinka values that helps explain their success.

Sri Lanka: Mixed

Civil society in northern Sri Lanka attempted to appeal to the government to alleviate the violence against civilians. Mothers of the disappeared attempted to negotiate with the army both formally and informally, but these appeals largely fell on deaf ears. Adayaalam suggests that this result was due to the government's not viewing Tamils as part of its core constituency. Instead the community was treated as "second class, dangerous, and loyal to the LTTE,"[48] and hence outside the constituency for government action, rendering some support for the proposition that suggests that efforts by nonconstituents are likely to be ignored. In the east, Muslim and Tamil leaders did attempt to mitigate anti-Muslim sentiment, but they were unable to have much of an impact, reflecting a similar dynamic to that evident in the north. Efforts by Sinhalese civil society leaders, who could accurately be described as part of the regime's core constituency, however, also seemed to fail despite what the proposition would predict.

Proposition 3: Increased external support for civil society is associated with decreased influence on the trajectory of violence.

A large body of literature demonstrates that external actors can affect the trajectory of conflicts in both positive and negative ways. Civil society in the developing world is especially prone to the influence of external actors because it relies heavily on funding from the outside to function.[49] While the current literature about the effects of external support makes clear that international involvement has *some* effect, there are conflicting expectations about the *direction* of that influence. Chenoweth and Stephan's analysis of nonviolence campaigns, for example, suggests that direct support from external actors creates two obstacles to the types of successful civil society mobilization that civilian-led prevention and mitigation efforts require: (1) foreign governments have political incentives that differ from and often conflict with the motives of the groups they support and (2) external support creates a "free-rider problem," in which individuals have fewer incentives to participate in risky collective action.[50] Autesserre, by contrast, suggests that external support may improve civilian agency when it is long term and takes its lead from local actors rather than dictating the terms of engagement.[51] Expectations about the positive effects of third-party support to civil society organizations are also common among policy practitioners in donor states.[52]

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[48] Alagarajah, Jegatheeswaran, and Paskaran, "Preventing Atrocities in a State Unwilling to Address Its Past," 22.
[49] This does not include many civil society actors within the Global South who do not fit the traditional definition, including private businesses or traditional leaders, as discussed previously.
[50] Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
[51] Séverine Autesserre, *On the Frontlines of Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
[52] Kantowitz and Fox, "[How] Do External Actors Support Civilian-Led Atrocity Prevention?"

If these findings are correct, then we would expect to see evidence that external support alters the behavior of civil society, in ways that either render them ineffectual in shaping the trajectory of violence or increase their capacity for effective mobilization against the risk or onset of mass atrocities. For the "positive effects" proposition to be true, we would need to see evidence of specific programmatic initiatives by external interveners that respect these two principles and lead to improved capacity for local civil society actors.

Evidence from Case Studies: Proposition 3

Democratic Republic of the Congo: No

In the DRC, external efforts to engage with civil society were concentrated in Ituri but almost completely absent in Beni-Butembo. In contrast to proposition 3, CRG found that international involvement enhanced civil society's capacity to play a productive role in reducing violence against civilians. The threat of prosecution by the International Criminal Court and military intervention shifted the political calculus of local civil society actors, especially private business and traditional leaders, who feared the consequences of continuing to support local armed groups. But this positive role for the business community emerged only in response to the actions attributed to other players, specifically the United Nations Peacekeeping Force, which, as a result of its military and political power, played the largest role in peacemaking efforts. Overall, the specific mechanisms are not clear, but shifting internal and external incentives seem to have encouraged civil society leaders to move from fanning conflict to playing at least a marginal role in consolidating peace. Other civil society leaders, such as NGOs and religious institutions, played a similarly additive role to military operations and diplomatic efforts that deserved the bulk of credit. If there is a lesson here, it is that civil society can play a positive role when provided an opportunity to do so within a larger peacemaking initiative.

South Sudan: Unclear

In South Sudan, civil society leaders regularly made appeals to the international community to alert them to outbreaks of violence. Beyond providing information, civil society called on the international community to enforce arms embargoes in order to stave off outright war. In Wau, for example, rumors of impending attacks were collected by civilian leaders and reported to networks of international NGOs. The Sudd Institute suggests that these appeals were mostly ignored, though the report does not attempt to delineate the specific involvement of international actors in the various crises. In general, the report acknowledges that civil society in South Sudan is deeply shaped by external actors who provide funds and shape the nature of its actions. But there is no direct evidence presented as to whether this support has positive or negative impacts on the ability of civil society actors to intervene in acts of violence.

Sri Lanka: Yes

During the war, civil society in northern Sri Lanka was largely independent from the influence of external donors as both the government and rebels restricted the flow of external resources within the territories under their control. This changed during the post-conflict period, during which civil society pivoted toward humanitarian relief and reconciliation issues, a fact that Adayaalam suggests left it unprepared to deal with threats or actual outbreaks of violence. The report suggests that the power imbalance between

external donors and local civil society meant that, "civil society initiatives in this period directly reflected donor priorities" that "incentivized reconciliation-based activities."[53] This led to a dynamic in which "some donors have micromanaged and prevented civil society from engaging in work that may jeopardize their own diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka."[54] As a result, while civil society in eastern Sri Lanka was able to provide spaces for affected communities to gather together and share their fears, they failed to transform the overall hostility emanating from the majority community.

Additional Findings

In this section, we examine several additional findings from the case studies that are not captured in the three propositions. These include the need to reconceptualize civil society, the diverse repertoire of actions taken by civilians and civil society facing mass atrocity episodes, and the role of social media in fueling or mitigating mass violence.

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from the study is the need to reconceptualize the role of civil society during mass atrocity episodes, both in terms of how it is able to exercise power and who should be considered as part of civil society. Existing approaches, shaped by the western liberal tradition, have tended to treat civil society actors as wielding influence through their moral position as the authentic representative of civilian preferences. While civil society may retain its moral force in the midst of violence, it has a limited ability to translate this into actual influence. Conflict transforms the moral space, diminishing the power of actors who rely on their moral stature during nonconflict periods. Instead, it is only when civil society actors wield their moral position in combination with old-fashioned power politics that they are likely to have influence over the broader dynamics.

Equally important is the need to extend the conceptualization of civil society to include actors not traditionally included within its ambit, including actors whose power is not derived from their moral stature. This includes traditional leaders and especially the business community, who may come to represent the interests of the civilian population even as they are driven by more instrumental concerns such as economic profits or merely survival. Perhaps surprisingly, the studies devote much of their focus on the role of such nontraditional civil society actors. In contrast to many other studies, locally based researchers did not focus on formal nongovernmental organizations or labor unions, nor did they center the media in their analyses. Rather, business entities, traditional leaders, and religious groups take center stage, despite or perhaps because of their uneasy fit into more traditional conceptions of what civil society is and how it functions.

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[53] Alagarajah, Jegatheeswaran, and Paskaran, "Preventing Atrocities in a State Unwilling to Address Its Past," 29, 33.
[54] Alagarajah, Jegatheeswaran, and Paskaran, "Preventing Atrocities in a State Unwilling to Address Its Past," 34.

A more expansive conception of civil society, as advocated in the case studies, also reveals the larger repertoire of actions available to civilians and civil society during moments of political crisis. Most studies that center on traditional civil society actors tend to assume that their primary modes of political action are limited to their role in raising political awareness, lobbying, conducting research, and providing a space for reconciliation processes.[55] In other words, such civil society actors rely on their perceived moral stature in order to advocate for more peaceful outcomes. In contrast, nontraditional civil society actors rely on their partisan identities and interests to advance their political objectives, often operating within legal or ethical gray zones in which traditional civil society actors may rarely venture. For example, business elites were effective in curtailing violence by nonstate, armed groups because of their long-standing and morally questionable relationships with armed actors. Similarly, ethnic leaders were most successful when embracing their partisan attachments to their ethnic kin in combination with their moral stature.

Recognizing civil society actors as political rather than simply moral actors raises several concerns. First and foremost is the tradeoff between moral and political action that such an approach implies. Do civil society actors who pursue their own interests sacrifice their moral standing? Does this reduce civil society's moral standing in ways that undercut its ability to effectively serve as a bulwark against violence by other political actors in the future? Undoubtedly, civil society benefits from its perceived position as a uniquely moral space in contrast to the politically and/or economically motivated actions of the government or private sectors. Yet, as the case studies make clear, such moral standing is often diminished during periods of crisis, which upend the existing moral order, rendering such appeals less capable of affecting the trajectory of violence.

An additional area for future research highlighted by the case studies is the role of social media in fueling or mitigating incidents of mass violence. Although social media was initially heralded for providing civil society actors and civilians unfiltered access to both local and global media audiences, it has devolved within conflict-affected societies to serve primarily as a medium for the spread of disinformation and xenophobic messaging. As Adayaalam notes in its report, "the use of social media exacerbated anti-Muslim sentiments, resulting in viral, mostly visual, disinformation content reaching a broader audience. There was a clear correlation between hate speech on social media and the incitement of violence against Muslims on the island." Adayaalam is clear that social media did not cause Islamophobia in Sri Lanka. Rather, it served as "a tool to fan the flames."[56] This dynamic is intensified in highly authoritarian contexts where the government (or armed groups) restricts traditional media in the name of national security or where the media self-censor. As the Sudd Institute notes, "propaganda took over on social media, where some individuals displayed images of massacred bodies that took place in other countries and others posted hateful comments, which might have exacerbated the atrocities."[57]

As with any tool, social media can serve both productive and destructive purposes. Currently, it too often serves the latter. Because most major social media apps are produced in Western countries, the discussion around their influence has primarily focused on their impact in these societies. Yet it is likely that social media's most pernicious effects have been concentrated in the Global South, where the rise of cheap

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[55] Eze, "The Role of CSOs."

[56] Alagarajah, Jegatheeswaran, and Paskaran, "Preventing Atrocities in a State Unwilling to Address Its Past." 27.

[57] Mai, "Strategic Peacebuilding," 7.

smartphones and the lack of professional and impartial media sources have inflated their impact. Civilians in the midst of a political crisis lack access to reliable information, hence increasing their reliance on such platforms. Considering that even Western countries have been unable to stem the flow of fake information through social media platforms, it is unlikely that pressure from the Global South will trigger a transformation of behavior on them. Hence, the need arises for increased support to traditional media sources and other civil society initiatives to combat the spread of misinformation during a crisis.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

The overall picture presented in this study about the role of civilians and civil society in mitigating and preventing mass atrocity episodes is decidedly mixed. While it is true that civil society has an impact, it is also clear that it can play both positive and negative roles and that its actions may have little effect on the overall trajectory of violence. The question remains how the international community should view the role of civilians in mass atrocities and what role, if any, it should play.

In this conclusion, we examine the key takeaways/lessons learned from the study. We then offer a number of policy recommendations derived from the specific dynamics we uncovered. Although the role of civil society in conflicts is often ambiguous, it is also clear that rather than a powerless actor, civil society is integral to the broader conflict environment. Even where civil society is unable to affect the overall conflict trajectory, it can and does play an important role in providing respite and refuge to civilians most directly affected by political violence. As such, further research on the precise roles civilians and civil society can play during mass atrocity episodes is warranted.

A starting point would be to reconcile the distinct definitions of civilians and civil society that prevail at the national and global levels. As discussed earlier in this report, the value of uniform definitions is diminished when they are unable to reflect the usage of these terms within diverse local contexts. Yet, this tension is not irresolvable. Current international definitions should be loosened and expanded to incorporate local knowledge rather than relying on static, Western-oriented conceptualizations that have little utility in capturing on-the-ground dynamics. The meanings of both "civilians" and "civil society" as concepts should be adjusted to recognize this reality. Recognizing both as the product of political contestation rather than universally accepted technocratic terms that apply equally across cases would be a first step. Scholars and policy makers in particular need to pay closer attention to such on-the-ground dynamics and adjust their analyses and interventions accordingly.

For "civilians," recognizing the politicized context of the term's meaning would help with two situations that arose in the case studies. Currently, international law defines "combatants" as "members of armed

groups with a continuous fighting function."[58] This definition leaves out those who have left an organized rebellion as well as those who pick up arms informally without joining an armed group. Yet both are often treated as de facto combatants, as the case studies demonstrate. Governments frequently manipulate this dynamic, denying due process and protections that should be accorded to individuals who occupy any of these ambiguous categories. At the least, recognizing the lack of precision around the term would help policy makers more accurately engage with conflict-affected societies.

Although there is no internationally accepted legal definition of civil society, in practice civil society is often treated by international actors as a depoliticized and neutral space in ways that intentionally ignore the actual conditions in which it operates. Instead understanding civil society as a politicized space in which actors pursue instrumental objectives departs from traditional conceptions but provides a more accurate picture of how civil society actors actually function in conflict and post-conflict situations. It also provides opportunities to leverage civil society more effectively by addressing the political environment and shaping incentives to take seriously the political and other concerns of civil society actors. As CRG points out in its report, this would mark a departure from prevailing approaches by the United Nations and other international actors that favor depoliticized technical solutions that ignore the "political and economic drivers of the conflict."[59]

Echoing this need to address the political logics of violence, Adayaalam suggests that civil society initiatives will only be successful when they "address the root causes of intercommunal violence" rather than focusing on more "superficial," depoliticized initiatives designed to avoid upsetting host governments.[60] Even in South Sudan, civil society initiatives were only effective when they married their moral stature to a nuanced analysis of the internal dynamics that drive mass violence.

For the international community, this rethinking entails a radical re-shift in how the prevention and mitigation of atrocities is usually operationalized. Currently, the approach favored by the United Nations and related actors prioritizes the protection of civilians in imminent danger. Yet, while undoubtedly essential, this approach leaves little role for civil society and civilian agency. Instead, civil society is often relegated to an additive position in order to shore up donor-initiated peacebuilding and reconciliation processes.

In contrast, each of the country partners emphasizes the need for more holistic efforts that facilitate civil society's involvement in addressing the root political and economic causes of conflict. Civil society's greatest strength lies in its ability to serve as a trusted interlocutor in deeply divided societies. In contrast to the government or external actors, civil society is rooted within local communities and can devise interventions that do not rely solely on moral stature or military force. Rather, successful interventions by civil society capitalize on the shared interests and local relationships between civil society actors and belligerents. Thus, external actors should work to shore up civil society's capacity to engage in creative, preemptive, and substantive responses that strengthen civil society's organic and bottom-up approach to

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[58] International Committee of the Red Cross, "Civilians," International Humanitarian Law online casebook glossary, https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/civilians. Specifically, "In non-international armed conflicts, there is no combatant status. Members of armed groups with a continuous fighting function may, according to doctrine, be targeted like combatants. All other persons must not be directly targeted."

[59] Congo Research Group, "Building Relationships, Building Peace," 3.

[60] Alagarajah, Jegatheeswaran, and Paskaran, "Preventing Atrocities in a State Unwilling to Address Its Past," 5.

outbreaks of political violence, rather than pressuring them to adopt depoliticized programs designed by outsiders with little grasp of nuanced local political dynamics.

A crucial step in this direction would be to provide additional, untethered resources to enhance civil society's capacity to respond to potential or actual episodes of mass violence.[61] According to Adayaalam, state repression combined with the lack of resources available to civil society actors in Sri Lanka led them to be "driven underground and prevented from conducting coordinated and public-facing initiatives."[62]

What resources were provided to local civil society actors often required them to initiate programming directed toward reconciliation and other activities determined by the international donor, often with little input from the local partner, a dynamic the country reports directly criticize. The lesson for the international community is to recognize local civil society actors as uniquely situated to develop and implement projects with the greatest likelihood of success and to direct resources accordingly rather than dictating terms from abroad.

In addition to financial resources, mechanisms to enhance coordination between local civil society actors and the international community should be adopted. All three case studies highlight the essential communicative role that civil society can play in the midst of violence. While such efforts are often inadequate in triggering a substantive response to an outbreak of violence, civil society actors and civilians generally are the most knowledgeable about local conditions, especially in more remote areas that are often the site of mass atrocity episodes. Developing mechanisms to enhance the dissemination of information from civil society to the international community will strengthen the stature of local civil society while ensuring that the international community can craft more efficient responses to political crises.

One final lesson from this study is the value of partnering with local researchers in order to properly comprehend the nuances of civilian and civil society involvement in mass atrocity episodes specifically and in political violence generally. As this report makes clear, the lack of a universal definition of civil society requires a more grounded approach to understanding the specific contextual factors that shape its role in diverse societies. By centering the contributions of local researchers, the project is able to partially address the asymmetric power relationships that often define research on the Global South and violence-afflicted countries in particular.[63]

Local researchers possess several distinct advantages that improved the analysis substantively. First, they were better able to respond to unexpected changes in the political environment, such as an increase in violence or an unexpected electoral outcome. Second, local researchers were able to draw on their existing networks, an advantage that became especially clear when the political environment became increasingly restrictive in limiting access to the affected populations. Third, local researchers were attuned to a wider array of data in terms of both the type of information they were able to consider and the diversity of informants they consulted. Finally, as both scholars and members of civil society in their

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[61] Kantowitz and Fox, "[How] Do External Actors Support Civilian-Led Atrocity Prevention?"

[62] Alagarajah, Jegatheeswaran, and Paskaran, "Preventing Atrocities in a State Unwilling to Address Its Past," 4.

[63] Syed Farid Alatas, "Academic Dependency and the Global Division of Labour in the Social Sciences," *Current Sociology* 51, no. 6 (2003): 599–613.

respective contexts, they occupy a unique position as both researchers and subjects of the same dynamics they are examining.

What emerges is a more complex sketch of the political terrain in which civil society operates. While it is true that this leads to a more convoluted picture that may limit the ability to generalize the findings, it is also true that the findings more closely reflect on-the-ground realities rather than externally imposed understandings of complex political dynamics. In addition, deploying a multisited and multilevel analysis over a longer time period allowed for a more holistic picture that would have been difficult to achieve had we relied on external researchers traveling to each country for short visits.

Relying on local research also posed a number of challenges. As active participants in their own local and national politics, the research teams ran into numerous challenges that reflected their embedded positions within their own societies. At a general level, each team struggled with poor internet connectivity and other communication and resource-related challenges throughout the project. Though difficult, these challenges were mitigated by providing additional resources or finding ways to adapt to poor connectivity. The larger challenges were related to the broader political environments and the teams' own position as both research-oriented institutes and often highly visible, prominent members of civil society. All three teams had to navigate a repressive or insecure political environment that directly impaired their ability to conduct research. As a result, cases were swapped out, specific research plans were delayed or reconfigured, and contingency plans were put into place in case any of the researchers faced direct targeting due to their involvement with the project. While all three research teams were able to complete the research, the regular challenges involved with the project were an important reminder of the difficulties involved with conducting research in an ethical and collaborative fashion.

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Appendix: Definitions of Core Concepts Provided to Research Teams

1. Mass atrocities
Mass atrocities entail large-scale, systematic attacks on civilian populations by state or nonstate actors. While we recognize that varying forms of structural violence related to conflict may cause greater harm to civilian populations (such as famine, disease, poverty, or other factors shaped by protracted conflict), our focus in this project is those acts of intentional violence perpetrated by either state or nonstate groups. We also recognize that many forms of atrocities do not involve intentional killings (kidnappings, sexual violence, torture, etc.). We encourage analyses that seek to disaggregate varying forms of violence that fall short of intentional killings, especially where the logic of these types of violence depart from the logic of killing.

Questions to consider: Who committed the atrocities in your specific context and for what purpose? What was the repertoire of violence wielded against civilians? Who was the target of mass atrocities and why? How does the nature of political violence vary across regional and temporal dimensions?

2. Civilians
Recognizing that the term "civilian" can mean different things in different contexts, we seek a disaggregated understanding of the term that centers everyday understandings of civilian as it is used in local contexts. Civilian is not a singular or unitary identity for individuals lacking agency. Rather, it should be understood as a dynamic and fluid category with multiple political and social meanings. In practical terms, this means situating the category of civilian within specific and often overlapping social and historical contexts. For example, a civilian may also have professional associations (clergy member, teacher, artist, etc.) or other identity characteristics (gender, ethnicity, religion, social class, etc.) that are integral to understanding their role within a particular episode of mass violence.

Questions to consider: Who does the category of civilian include in your specific context? In what ways are civilians involved in political and social life? How do existing political and social structures give space for or restrict civilian action? What forms of voice (media and others) are available to civilians?

3. Civil society
The classic definition of civil society views it as an open and voluntary space for political action that is distinct from both the market (private sector) and the government (public sector). In most conflict-affected countries (and non-Western, nonliberal contexts, generally), the line between civil society and the public or private realms may not be so clear. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) may have close associations to the government. Private actors may assume public functions that align them more closely with classic understandings of civil society. Traditional or religious organizations that exclude some groups from membership may function in similar ways. Thus, our intention is not to decide what constitutes civil society. Rather, we assume you will start with the classic definition, but in the course of the case studies, you will develop an organic understanding of civil society that reflects the local social and historical dynamics.

Questions to consider: What constitutes civil society in your particular context? Who are the specific actors and what is their history? What organizational forms, informal and formal, do they take? How do they participate in political and social life? How autonomous are they from the private and public sectors?

4. Data

We envision a holistic research process that brings in multiple data sources in your analysis. While we expect that you will draw on academic, government and NGO reports alongside interviews, we are equally interested in novel forms of data gathering that can help illuminate civilian agency. For example, we encourage you to think creatively about what constitutes data in these contexts. The role of religious sermons; life histories and personal testimonials; music, poetry, folktales, and other oral traditions; rumors, text, or WhatsApp messages all deserve attention in your analyses.

Questions to consider: What forms of data can best illuminate the phenomenon of mass atrocities? Of civil society? What are the limitations and advantages of any specific data source?

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