

SUDIKOFF ANNUAL INTERDISCIPLINARY SEMINAR ON GENOCIDE PREVENTION

Advancing Research on Mass Atrocities Perpetrated by Non-state Actors: Conceptual Issues

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Overview

This memo seeks to identify, if not resolve, a number of conceptual issues that complicate research on mass atrocities perpetrated by non-state actors. It is important to discuss the conceptual terrain to understand how extant research undertaken on similar but distinct topics applies to non-state perpetrated mass atrocities as well as to think through potential new lines of research on this subject.

Defining non-state perpetrated mass atrocities

Though the phenomenon of interest might seem plain to policymakers, the definition and scope of “non-state perpetrated mass atrocities” are not self-evident, mainly because the phenomenon combines two concepts--non-state actors and mass atrocities--that each have their own problems.

Non-state actors

There are two main difficulties with the concept of non-state actors in the context of pursuing research on mass atrocities:

- *First, working from a dichotomy of state vs. non-state actors risks ignoring important variation in the degree of state influence on a group's actions.*
 - The influence of state structures or government officials on “non-state” groups appears to vary widely across groups, even among groups that lack any formal link to the state. At one end of the spectrum are rebel groups actively fighting the state; at the other are pro-government militias often considered as de facto agents of the state (Carey, Colaresi & Mitchell, 2015; Ulfelder & Valentino, 2008). If there are important distinctions within this continuum--e.g., groups committing violence in absence of a state response vs. those acting in opposition to the state--the dichotomous set up would be problematic.
 - In addition, the degree of state influence on non-state groups almost certainly varies over time, across domains of action (e.g., political vs. military action), across different parts of a non-state group (e.g., by geography or organizational unit), and even across individual members of the group. Dichotomizing at the group level would obscure whether these within-case variations correlate with the use of deliberate violence against civilians by the group.
- *Second, the category of non-state actors includes groups that vary considerably on other important dimensions.*

- Defining groups into a single category because of what they are not--i.e., states--as opposed to what they are, could cover up significant differences. The breadth of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's definition of "non-state actor" is illustrative: "The smallest common denominators are that the non-state actor is an entity comprised of several individuals and that it has some form of organisational structure (be it formal, as in e.g. rebel groups or more traditional, as in e.g. ethnic groupings)." (UCDP Actor Dataset Codebook, p. 7)
- Scholars have studied more narrowly defined non-state actors that have committed atrocities against civilians, including rebel groups in contest with the state, transnational terrorist networks, pro-government militias, and community "self-defense" groups. These subtypes of non-state groups almost certainly vary in important ways in addition to variations in their relationship to the state, such as how they define their core interests and political aspirations, organizational structure and financing, and methods of recruitment and retention, all of which plausibly affect their use of deliberate violence against civilians.

Mass atrocities

"Mass atrocities" is a term that has gained prominence from its increasing use in policy circles, particularly in the United States. The Executive Order on "A Comprehensive Approach to Atrocity Prevention and Response," released in May 2016, defines "mass atrocities" as "large scale and deliberate attacks on civilians."

Challenges associated with a research agenda framed around "mass atrocities" include the following:

- "Mass atrocities" potentially includes a wide variety of specific violent acts--killing as well as non-lethal violence such as sexual and gender-based violence, forced displacement, enslavement and torture. Scholars debate whether these specific acts serve as substitutes for one another or reflect distinct strategies with different associated causes and dynamics.
- It is difficult to avoid an arbitrary judgment about what scale of atrocities qualifies as "mass."
- It can be difficult to distinguish non-state violence against civilians that is deliberate or intentional from that which is incidental.
- "Mass atrocities" can be understood at the level of individual incidents (e.g., one bombing) or episodes (e.g., a sustained campaign of attacks).

Based on his review of the conceptual issues related to alternative definitions of genocide, mass atrocity, and atrocity crimes, Straus (2016) proposes "'large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations' as the standard that captures the essence of genocide and mass atrocities" (31). One question to consider is whether the same operational standards for counting as "large-scale" and "systematic" ought to be applied to state and non-state perpetrated mass atrocities.

Closely related concepts

There are multiple streams of research and policy activity that relate closely to our focus on preventing mass atrocities by non-state groups. They include the following:

- *Civilian victimization*: This stream of scholarship focuses on various ways in which civilians suffer during war. The portion of this research that analyzes civilian victimization as a deliberate strategy by rebel groups, as distinct from indiscriminate violence, appears quite close to the concept of mass atrocities by non-state actors. However, studies on civilian victimization tend to be limited to belligerents in an armed conflict and include more cases at the low end of the severity scale (e.g., 25 deaths per year in the UCDP one-sided violence dataset) than are normally considered mass atrocities.
- *Violent extremism*: In one of the few explicit definitions, USAID defines violent extremism as “advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives.” The UN Secretary-General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism is more typical in stating its attempt to pursue “a practical approach to preventing violent extremism, without venturing to address questions of definition.” Without sharper definition, however, it is difficult to assess the extent of overlap between violent extremism and mass atrocities by non-state groups.
- *Terrorism*: There is no consensus definition of terrorism in policy or research circles. The widely used Global Terrorism Database defines a terrorist attack “as the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.” This definition does not require the targets of an attack to be civilians, as the concept of mass atrocities does, and it includes a requirement that the attack be instrumental of some other goal (however broadly defined), an element not necessary to be considered mass atrocities.
- *Communal or ethnic riots*: This concept is distinguished from other forms of collective violence principally by the civilian status of perpetrators of violence (sometimes called “ordinary people”) and the target of violence being other civilians identified by their group membership. The time duration is also generally taken to be relatively short--potentially less than a single day. The degree of overlap between communal violence and mass atrocities by non-state actors would seem to hinge on thresholds for being considered “large-scale” and “systematic” since many riots include relatively low levels of violence and are seemingly less planned than is typically associated with cases of mass atrocities.

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