Research Workshop on the Role of Civilians in Preventing and Mitigating Mass Atrocities

Rapporteur's Report

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On June 13-14, 2019, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum convened a workshop with case study research partners and other scholars to discuss the Center's ongoing project on the role of civilians in preventing and mitigating mass atrocities. This rapporteur's report summarizes major observations raised on the first day of the workshop, during which all participants made contributions.

Project Description

The Simon-Skjodt Center's research project aims to address gaps in knowledge about the role of civilians in preventing and mitigating atrocities through a combination of cross-national quantitative analysis; comparative case studies on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and Sri Lanka; and interviews with policymakers and donors. The case studies, which are being conducted in partnership with local organizations and researchers, seek to analyze variations in civilian-led actions within (across time and region) and between countries that have faced serious threats of mass atrocities.

The project's main research questions are:

- How prevalent are different types of civilian-led actions to help prevent and mitigate mass atrocities within and across different types of contexts and phases of a mass atrocity episode?
- What factors explain variation in the effectiveness of civilian-led efforts to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities?
- How can international donors and humanitarian organizations most effectively support civilian-led efforts to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities?

To begin the workshop, the project team described the project concept and methodology. The project's comparative case study approach: 1) enables concept development, through cataloging types of civilian actions and their effects, 2) relies on process tracing, to identify causal mechanisms within cases, 3) captures diverse outcomes, beyond the success-failure dichotomy, 4) considers an expansive sense of historical time, meaning the temporal scope of within-case

analysis is determined by the specifics of the case, and 5) illuminates policy implications, based on the generalizability of comparisons within cases.

Scholars asked for clarification about case study selection and the study's emphasis on engaging conflict-affected communities in the research process. Country case studies were chosen for their potential to provide deep insights into civilian action in preventing and mitigating mass atrocities, not necessarily for their external validity. Specifically, cases were selected for the occurrence of mass atrocities in the post-2001 timeframe, the existence of subnational variation (spatially or temporally) within each case, policy relevance, and the Center's ability to identify capable case study research partners in the field. Within-country cases were selected by the partners themselves, in collaboration with the project team, based on factors that partners determined would yield the most compelling findings and within-country comparisons.

Regarding the project design, the project team emphasized their intention to pilot a collaborative model by partnering with local research institutes. The project aims to move beyond liberal conceptions of "civil society," recognizing that manifestations of civil society within conflict settings often do not meet the standard for open and voluntary spaces separated from the public and private sectors. Case study research partners were tasked with shaping context-specific definitions in the research design—e.g., what do "civilian" and "civil society" mean in their respective cases? In the spirit of partnership, research partners will retain ownership of their original research produced for this project. Scholars noted that this model in itself provides valuable insights to the field about conducting participatory research in conflict settings.

The State of Research on Civilian-led Action and Mass Atrocity Prevention

The Simon-Skjodt Center invited five other scholars studying civilian action during mass atrocities and other instances of violent conflict to provide an overview of the current state of research on these topics. Each scholar briefly presented their current research inquiries and proposed future directions for study. The scholars emphasized three key themes in current research about the actions of civilians or civil society organizations (CSOs):

The preconditions and effects of nonviolent civilian mobilization

Several scholars presented research focusing on nonviolent mobilization as a form of civilian action in conflict settings. One scholar observed that localized war dynamics shape civilians' preferences for non-cooperative strategies vis-a-vis armed groups and is exploring how subnational differences in social structure, history, or other community-based factors influence civilian engagement in non-cooperative action. Another scholar focused on understanding the effect of nonviolent mass mobilization on mass killing, finding an association between the

autonomy of CSOs and the occurrence of shorter, more lethal mass killings. These findings suggest the importance of context to defining civilian agency and indicate CSOs may be more helpful at atrocity prevention rather than mitigation.

The impact of violent actors on civilian agency

Other scholars shifted the lens of inquiry from civilians themselves to violent actors (including armed groups or states) who actively shape civilian agency. One scholar noted that the self-protection literature so far focuses primarily on civilians as the subject. This is now being complemented by looking to former combatants and asking how the attitudes or behaviors of armed groups influence civilian action. Another scholar analyzed the effect of state violence on counterinsurgent collective action in civil war, finding that state violence both triggers and sustains the armed mobilization of civilians, who seek to signal non-allegiance to rebel groups and rely on militarized forms of local governance. These studies understand civilian action directly in relation to the behaviors of other actors.

The role of external actors in civilian self-protection

Finally, scholars addressed how the study of civilian agency—and self-protection in particular—is relevant in formulating external responses to support civil society efforts. One scholar argued that a more encompassing definition of self-protection, which incorporates the full range of threats civilians face and not solely those inflicted by armed groups, can help international actors and civilians cooperate. Another scholar asked what the optimal tools or mechanisms are for international donors to support civil society. This scholar's findings lend support to a model of radically-flexible grant-making, which has been employed by private donors. Further, one scholar sought to assess the institutional risks and dilemmas external actors face in their relationships with CSOs. It was observed that the local or community-based nature of certain CSOs does not necessarily mean the strategies they employ will be desirable or effective. Future research can shape more effective or suitable designs of external support.

Discussion on the State of Research

After each presentation by scholars, subsequent Q&A sessions enabled the project team, case study research partners, and other scholars to explore observations across studies and brainstorm relevant frames for proceeding with the present project. Five key themes emerged:

1) The role of histories of mass violence in shaping civilian action — Scholars expressed the necessity of considering how past histories of violence impact civilian mobilization patterns. Participants noted that civilians adapt their actions and strategies over time to accommodate

changing conflict dynamics. As one scholar observed, previous experience of collective action in a community—even if unrelated to conflict or peacebuilding—can better equip civilians to take action in situations of future violence.

2) The practical and definitional implications of the armed mobilization of civilians — Participants debated whether armed mobilization by civilians should be considered a strategy of civilian-led atrocity prevention or response. Several participants observed that civilians are incentivized to arm when targeted on the basis of identity or when faced with immediate threat. Scholars generally agreed that it remained relevant to consider cases of armed mobilization as civilian action, since civilian agency is exercised during the decision-making process on whether or not to arm.

3) The future of civilian action in light of changing norms and technologies — Participants questioned the role of mechanisms of justice and accountability (such as the International Criminal Court) to prevent and mitigate atrocities, due to the erosion of post-war normative frameworks. Further, participants observed the potential for online communication technologies like social media to connect diaspora communities in civilian-led atrocity prevention and response activities, while simultaneously increasing the visibility—and therefore vulnerability—of civil society actors.

4) The challenges facing external actors seeking to support CSOs in atrocity prevention and mitigation activities — Participants generally agreed that the challenges and risks faced by external actors depend on their specific mandates and authorities. It was noted that the arming of civilians creates an almost universal challenge to external donors, as might exclusionary ideologies. Participants determined that relationships with external actors can provide protection for civil society activists in at-risk countries and that funding earmarked for atrocity prevention could play significant signalling role, however, both strategies were considered solely insufficient.

5) The duality of CSOs, as both protective and harmful for civilians during mass atrocities — Participants observed that civil society mobilization can inadvertently increase risks for civilian populations in some cases. Explanations for this effect included support from foreign state actors (which may make CSOs appear more threatening to state actors) and increased visibility in a dense civil society sector (which might assist state actors in targeting opposition members). Participants emphasized the importance of balancing the consequences—positive and negative—of external support for civil society.

Case Studies on the Role of Civilians in Preventing and Mitigating Mass Atrocities

For the latter half of the workshop, research partner teams were invited to present their case studies, including information on their case's background and their research progress to date. Each presentation was followed by a brief Q&A session, during which the research team and other scholars were able to provide case-specific feedback.

What follows are descriptions of the case studies as presented at the workshop. It should be noted that at the time of the workshop, the research partner teams were each at different stages in data collection and analysis. The preliminary findings presented here are highly provisional and will be further refined through the course of the project.

1. *The Democratic Republic of the Congo*

The partner research team is studying two cases in the DRC where actions led by civilians seem to have helped reduce violence. The first, Beni-Butembo (2001-2006), was a haven of stability when the rest of the Kivus and Ituri were undergoing an escalation of violence. The second, Ituri (2006-2007), which was once the scene of some of the most gruesome violence in the country, saw a dramatic decline in violence since the end of the transitional government in 2007.

The team noted that atrocity prevention is an inherently political topic in DRC and shared their contextually-derived definitions for this study. "Civilians" were defined as any unarmed group — including those with ties to armed groups, as well as businesses and political parties. "Atrocity Prevention" was considered to be any dynamic resulting in the reduction of civilian casualties or displacement, independent of intentionality. The team has conducted 80 interviews thus far, in addition to archival research.

With regards to the Beni-Butembo case, preliminary analysis indicates that atrocity prevention was achieved through the formation of a political settlement, assisted by the Catholic Church. For the Ituri case, the team has so far found evidence suggesting that grassroots efforts by businesses, customary chiefs, and CSOs contributed to peace, noting that private sector interest was critical to preventing armed violence. These findings will be further detailed in the final case report.

2. *Sri Lanka*

The partner research team is examining two regional cases in which civilians took action to prevent or mitigate mass atrocities in Sri Lanka. The first, Jaffna (2005-2007), examines the actions taken by civilians in response to atrocities during the breakdown of the ceasefire between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government. The second, Ampara, examines the actions taken by civil society over the past few years to alleviate ethnic

and religious tensions in the region, assessing the effectiveness of these actions as Sri Lanka confronts an increasing possibility of anti-Muslim violence in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks on April 21, 2019.

The team has faced several logistical and substantive challenges in conducting field work, which has impeded project implementation. For example, fundamental concepts to the study such as "civil society" do not have equivalents in the local language. Despite these obstacles, the team is preparing to resume semi-structured field interviews, in addition to reviewing archival and digital materials.

While data collection is ongoing, the team's initial interviews on the Jaffna case suggest that informal, secret networks were successful at protecting civilians on a small scale. This included organic civilian-led initiatives to prevent disappearances and killings, in addition to low-level support from international NGOs and diplomats. Regarding the Ampara case, preliminary research indicates that international funding for reconciliation and transitional justice opened some space for civil society, but has largely failed to address the root causes of religious and ethnic tensions within the community. Further, the team has found some evidence implying that clergy, women, activists, and local governments have assisted in alleviating tensions, although pervasive social distrust remains high.

3. *South Sudan*

The partner research team is examining two political events in South Sudan, around which civil society groups tried to prevent and mitigate mass atrocities. The first, the Kiir-Machar disagreement (2013), followed the President's firing of his cabinet and disbanding of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement's (SPLM) leadership structures, which ultimately led to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The second, the Kiir-Malong standoff (2017), followed the President's sacking of his chief of staff and resulted in more effective reconciliation efforts by key elders.

The partner research team has conducted 28 key informant interviews with civilian leaders in Wau and Juba, including journalists, academics, and church elders. This data will be supplemented by desk research, including examination of UN and NGO observer reports. For the purposes of the South Sudan case, the team defined "civilians" as people who are not formally trained in arms, and limited the scope of "mass atrocity" to groups of civilians targeted based on their ethnicity.

Regarding the Kiir-Machar case, the team's research suggests that the South Sudan Council of Churches attempted to intervene but ultimately failed to prevent mass atrocities, due to their lack

of a clear strategy. Conversely, in the Kiir-Malong case, a group of elders called the Concerned Citizens for Peace were successful at engaging with the President and convincing him to repeal an executive order that put the country at risk of increased violence. The team proposed several reasons for success, including: clarity of objectives, targeting of the root cause of conflict, leveraging ethnic group values, and utilizing the media to propagate peaceful messages. Drawing conclusions from both cases, the team's preliminary findings indicate that civil society-facilitated dialogue could be successful at atrocity prevention and mitigation.

Case Study Feedback and Workshop Discussion

To conclude the workshop, the research team, other scholars, and case study research partners discussed emerging themes across the case studies and connections between this project and the larger research agenda. Conversation centered around (1) determining a suitable analytical approach for producing the final research product and (2) connecting the present study to the wider policy and activist communities.

First, participants debated the generalizability of the project, aware that bringing together a diverse set of case studies and relying on process tracing poses difficulties to this end. Several scholars noted that the ability of the case studies to illuminate different contexts and approaches to addressing civilian protection strategies is a significant contribution, irrespective of any cross-case comparison. Scholars suggested some possible themes that might be investigated in a cross-national analysis, including the roles of international aid, gender, urban/rural dynamics, and diaspora communities in civilian action. The project team echoed the importance of continuing to reflect on the most appropriate form of synthesis report to produce as the individual case studies progress and incorporating lessons-learned from conducting the research project itself into the finished product.

Second, participants discussed how the research could be beneficial to both policy and civil society actors. With regards to communicating the project's findings to policy communities, participants expressed the importance of presenting the varied contextual factors between cases and the case-specific definitions of "civilians" and "civil society." In particular, external donors might benefit from case-specific knowledge on how to best support civil society actors. Participants also brainstormed ways of transmitting findings to communities experiencing conflict, where the information might be most useful in shaping civilian action. Case study research partners affirmed the willingness of parties on the ground to form transnational networks on these issues, especially outside of the West. This topic was expanded upon during the workshop's second day, which was only for case study research partners to discuss project-specifics with the project team.