

TECHNICAL BRIEF

ADVANCING EARLY WARNING OF MASS ATROCITIES AGAINST CIVILIANS

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Via its policies, activities in the field, and support for scholarly research, USAID has an important role to play in anticipating, preventing, and addressing mass atrocities. Understanding of this topic is growing rapidly, but considerable debate still persists around the definitions and typologies of atrocities, the enabling environments and causal factors, and the effectiveness of different measures before, while or after they take place. Averting the atrocities is far preferable to reacting to their onset or outcomes. Yet the rarity of mass atrocity events, along with the challenges of collecting the information necessary for rigorous analysis and successful monitoring, make accurate forecasting difficult. Settings of active conflict present a known vulnerability, but further work is required to achieve more comprehensive, fine-grained, and timely assessments of risks. Emerging data sources offer potential for improving research and tools of early warning, which is an area in which USAID should consider supporting through future funding.

I. Introduction

Mass atrocities continue to occur—the situation in Syria represents only the latest in a long line of examples. The persistent incidence of cases is observed despite widespread concern, prevailing norms, and related institutional mechanisms that have emerged within the international community since World War II. The serious harm that can be inflicted, and the hardships of responding after atrocities have already taken place, inspires efforts to anticipate where, when, and how they are likely to occur. Knowledge of this sort can serve as a basis of the monitoring of risks and detection of impending dangers, which become vital inputs in attempting to avoid atrocities. Of note, Presidential Study Directive 10, released on August 4, 2011, recognizes the urgent need for actionable information to enable the US Government to undertake effective prevention measures, as a core national security interest and moral responsibility.

Against that backdrop, USAID's Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation (CMM), within the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA), convened a workshop about "Early Warning of Mass Atrocities against Civilians" on July 11, 2013. Tetra Tech ARD and the Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland served as hosts. The workshop brought together distinguished academics, officials from several parts of the Executive Branch of the US government, staff from non-governmental organizations, and other policy experts for a full day of presentations and discussion.

The next two sections of this technical brief distill pertinent insights from the workshop, with respect to the state of knowledge from existing research, as well as implications for USAID—in particular, DCHA/CMM. The final section outlines a future research agenda, building on ideas offered by the workshop participants. A focus throughout the brief is analysis that illuminates the development of

better early warning of mass atrocities and responses by both the US and the international community, as well as within communities directly at risk.

II. State of Knowledge

What Constitutes Mass Atrocities Against Civilians?

According to standard definitions employed in scholarly research, atrocities against civilians are deliberate actions taken to inflict casualties and suffering. In the process, other significant harms that civilians experience are typically excluded. One is collateral damage from attacks against military targets. Another is mortality rates that are higher than expected, stemming from conditions created by sustained armed conflict and resulting in the severe deterioration of public health and welfare. The logic of these exclusions is that the specific intent to engage directly in atrocities against civilians is lacking.¹

The workshop participants acknowledged that no clear quantitative threshold exists for defining cases of mass atrocities. The figures that some propose as thresholds are ordinarily in the thousands or tens of thousands, motivated by the desire to distinguish atrocities on a mass scale. Yet an obvious bright line, with a compelling justification, is difficult to establish. In fact, a reasonable argument is that adopting an exact, fixed, universal quantitative threshold, for purposes of research or policymaking, has no fundamental basis.

¹ The exclusions are not universally accepted. Human rights NGOs and activists, among others, contend that any action involving violence with repercussions for the civilian population—especially if they are foreseeable or due to willful negligence—count as atrocities.

Analysts need to be transparent about their own approach to distinguishing cases of mass atrocities and recognize that others may utilize different approaches. In turn, comparisons of results across studies must be sensitive to these differences in how atrocities are assessed and categorized.

In practice, understandings of what does and does not qualify as mass atrocities can depend on many aspects, including the size and other characteristics of the affected population and the manner and speed of the actions. Most analyses eschew a threshold and instead view the victimization of civilians on a continuum—ranging from low to extreme levels—that recognizes numerical indicators of atrocities are not the only gauge of severity.

A related point is that mass atrocities against civilians can encompass a range of actions beyond attacks that result in deaths and injuries. These actions include torture, sexual assaults, forced displacement, and deliberate efforts to induce starvation. The traditional focus is attacks and associated casualties, especially deaths, which are viewed as more feasible to observe and measured regularly in a systematic fashion (see below). Meanwhile, most scholarly analyses tend to overlook the rest of the list, on which data collection efforts are comparatively limited. Yet defining mass atrocities on the basis of a single type of violence also does not have a persuasive rationale. Instead, accepting that multiple types of violence can add up to a case of mass atrocities is appropriate. In any event, analysts need to be explicit about what types of violence they consider and conscious about the extent of the picture of atrocities that this affords.

How Are Mass Atrocities Against Civilians Studied?

Conducting empirical analysis of mass atrocities hinges on access to relevant data. A challenge is that instances of high levels of violence are rare, complex events. Detailed information on these events is hard to collect and verify because of the scale and the surrounding circumstances. Consequently, the data that researchers have commonly assembled are approximate and aggregate—usually with reference to events. Even when estimates of civilian deaths during a conflict are available, more precise statistics on killings by actor, time, or location are usually lacking. Information on other types of violence is scarcer. These limitations have historically constrained the questions that can be investigated effectively in research studies.

The situation is improving, with increased emphasis on compiling more diverse and disaggregated data. For example, since 2005 the Uppsala Conflict Data Program has released comprehensive datasets on one-sided violence that summarize—at the actor-year level—deaths from intentional attacks on civilians by governments and organized armed groups (Eck & Hultman 2007). A recent update reports the individual attacks, which are also geocoded to allow spatial analysis and greater precision in studying causal stories (Sundberg & Melander 2013). Other new resources are proving useful in fine-grained investigation and real-time tracking of violence. These resources include ones in which workshop participants are involved, like GDELT, a “big” dataset of political and military events worldwide, and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative’s Satellite Sentinel Project, which follows atrocities in Sudan. A broader set of innovations rely on crowd-sourced information to generate conflict and crisis maps, dating back to the Ushahidi project that began

during the violence that sparked after the 2007 election in Kenya and extending through the current civil war in Syria.

The trend toward richer data opens up opportunities for studying mass atrocities in a more meticulous fashion that can pinpoint mechanisms and local dynamics. Scholars are better situated than ever to test propositions about the causes of variation in violence and the usefulness of approaches to prevention and intervention. While good progress is being made, the research remains under development, with numerous important questions to be answered.

What Explains Mass Atrocities Against Civilians?

According to the scholars participating in the workshop, a robust finding is that mass atrocities against civilians over the past century are highly correlated with armed conflict between or within states (Valentino, et al. 2004, 2006; Downes 2008). In this line of research, studies originally focused on mass atrocities committed by opposing government forces during interstate wars. As the frequency of that type of conflict waned, significant attention has now been redirected toward understanding when and why civilians are victimized during civil wars. Research shows that many of the cases of mass atrocities in the post-WWII era arose amid internal conflicts, during which embattled governments, rebel groups and/or other non-state actors like militias target civilians (Krain 1997; Valentino 2004).

Most civil wars, however, do not lead to large-scale atrocities against civilians. As mentioned above, such violence is actually rare. A critical question for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, therefore, is which internal armed conflicts are at the greatest risk of exhibiting attacks against civilians.

Studies to date indicate that no single cause explains when atrocities against civilians are observed during armed conflicts. Instead, attacks are associated with several key factors:

- The government may employ a military strategy that seeks to weaken a powerful insurgency indirectly by targeting its civilian base of support (Valentino, et al. 2004). By “draining the sea” in this manner, the government’s aim is to undermine the ability of insurgents to sustain a rebellion and be effective. Similarly, rebel forces may target civilian populations who are deemed likely to support the government (Fjelde & Hultman, forthcoming). Either of these types of attacks will be most common in those areas where combatants suspect that civilian populations sympathize with their adversary, but do not have good intelligence on exactly who is providing material support (Kalyvas 2006; Balcells 2011; Bhavnani, et al. 2011).
- Combatant forces may resort to widespread violence against civilians in an attempt to remove populations perceived to be hostile from territory that the combatant forces seek to take control of or annex (Downes 2008).
- Combatants may target civilians as a bargaining tool to put pressure on their adversary to make concessions and end an ongoing armed conflict (Valentino, et al. 2006; Wood & Kathman forthcoming). This strategy is most likely when a government is engaged in a lengthy, costly war of attrition

from which it wishes to escape, while also trying to secure policy aims.

- Rebel forces are more likely to resort to attacks on civilians when traditional guerrilla tactics of attacks on military targets have proven ineffective (Wood 2010; Wood, et al. 2012). Thus, the shift in strategy—to targeting civilians—reflects a recognition among rebels of their military weakness.
- Leaders of democratic states are less likely, relative to their authoritarian counterparts, to resort to mass atrocities during wartime. One reason is that democratic leaders are more disposed to comply with international agreements that obligate them to avoid attacks on civilians (Valentino, et al. 2004; Morrow 2007; Prorok & Appel, forthcoming). Yet they are not immune to such attacks, which may be undertaken when facing substantial losses and struggling to achieve success on the battlefield via conventional military strategies.

To complement this work, and account for what happens outside of conflicts involving governments, additional studies of atrocities by non-state actors and within non-civil war contexts are needed.

Can Interventions Prevent Mass Atrocities?

Evolving international norms, especially those related to humanitarian assistance and the responsibility to protect, have prompted significant advocacy and implementation of measures to protect civilians against violence. While the expectation is that they are better off as a result, demonstrating when the onset of atrocities has been deterred is hard. As with any non-event, where the counterfactual cannot be known with certainty and other alternative explanations and confounding factors may be present, the ability to conclusively trace the avoidance of mass atrocities to a specific intervention is limited.

Nonetheless, an accumulation of careful analysis by scholars has revealed select evidence of when interventions to succeed and fail—or make no apparent difference—in restricting atrocities, reducing their severity, and bringing them to an end. The consensus among the workshop participants is that these outcomes are conditional on the context and nature of the intervention, as research has revealed. For example, whether a humanitarian military intervention succeeds is determined by the objectives and the strategy employed by the intervening states (Seybolt 2007). Interventions that directly confront perpetrators of atrocities or assist those targeted can improve the chances of slowing or stopping the scale of abuses, generally without a downside potential of making the situation worse, whereas impartial interventions are ineffective at reducing severity (Krain 2005). Substantial gaps do remain in the exploration and understanding of the relationship between interventions and their effects on the onset, duration, scale, and types of atrocities.

How Is Early Warning of Mass Atrocities Performed?

Even when clear warnings are available, responses to short-term threats of atrocities are often too slow to prevent negative outcomes, a shortcoming that deserves attention. The logical consideration is whether the developing knowledge of the context,

causes, and dynamics of mass atrocities can be properly incorporated into devising reliable tools for forecasting these events and then devising appropriate, timely, and effective responses. The approaches to early warning can be divided into four sets:

- One set involves medium- to long-term assessments that seek to identify countries vulnerable to mass atrocities within the upcoming several years. Such analyses use statistical models largely comprised of the stable, structural features of societies (e.g., wealth, ethnic divisions, regime type) that are established to be correlated historically with the future risk of atrocities.
- A second set aims to identify risks of mass atrocities on the near-term horizon—a normal window is within the next year. The analyses usually look for hot spots and triggers in the context of ongoing armed conflicts, searching for signs that indicate conditions are ripe for violence directed at civilians.
- The third set focuses on imminent threats of mass atrocities, where the time frame is three months or less. The forecasting concentrates on spotting tactical military preparations and deployments of resources and personnel that signal attacks on civilians are planned and being put in motion.
- A fourth set involves community-based warning and response systems in which analysis led within countries or communities at risk is developed around context-specific indicators, either in anticipation of a potential trigger event or as part of an ongoing conflict prevention mechanism. These locally-led early warning systems often include development of response capacities such as SMS communication platforms, police engagement, or direct training of mediators

These sets of approaches to early warning link to distinct responses. The first set lends itself to development programs, which require time to design, implement, and exert influence that may eventually forestall the potential for mass atrocities. The second set is suited to quicker conflict mitigation initiatives, in order to alleviate burgeoning hazards. The goal of the third set is to communicate urgent warnings so appropriate actors can rapidly take preventive actions, if possible, or else prepare for tackling the consequences of violence. The fourth seeks to build local capacities for warning and response—backed up by external intervention when needed—which can help close the “response gap” and strengthen local resiliencies for peace.

Meaningful advances are evident with respect to each of these approaches to forecasting, including innovations by several of the workshop participants. Analysts have designed and strengthened structural assessments over roughly the past ten years, using cross-national data that is easily obtained, though normally with a lag. Analyses of near-term risks are increasingly feasible with the accessibility of contemporaneous information from governments, media, civil society, and other sources. Warning of imminent threats draws on new technologies, including social media, crowdsourcing and other forms of big data, plus remote sensing. A growing number of locally-designed and community-based warning and response systems represent an area for further research.

III. Implications for USAID

During the workshop, there was clear affirmation of a major role for USAID in early warning and prevention of and humanitarian responses to atrocities. Participants raised a number of main points:

- USAID’s approach to the prevention of mass atrocities should take account of the basic fact that most cases occur during internal armed conflicts. The natural inference to draw is that development policies can indirectly reduce the incidence of mass atrocities by forestalling the onset of armed conflicts.
- USAID has exceptional access to on-the-ground knowledge and cultivated long-standing relationships with local communities and organizations, which might be leveraged for operational purposes. For example, USAID could strengthen local capacities for early warning, response, and prevention, perhaps through greater research into and support for community-based early warning and early response. Experiences in Liberia, Nigeria, Kenya, and Burundi all offer potential case studies.
- USAID could assume a more active and direct role in atrocity prevention, including protection of civilians under short-term threat of violence. This requires, however, systematic policies of training personnel in intelligence collection and assessment, intensive engagement with local populations during periods of crisis, and coordination with US and UN agencies responsible for political and military responses to warnings of attacks on civilians, which likely go beyond USAID’s mission.
- USAID can and should represent a strong voice for protection and prevention in the Atrocities Prevention Board (APB) and in this setting and others serve as a consistent source for identifying longer-term threats. These inputs are valuable, in so far as high-level governmental bodies skew toward emphasizing short-term problems and give insufficient time and resources to alerting about and heading off threats of mass atrocities and humanitarian emergencies further in advance. Given its mandate and programs, USAID is well situated to ensure that longer-term assessments of countries at risk of armed conflict and mass atrocities are regularly communicated to the APB.

The larger point is that USAID can adopt an integrated approach to addressing mass atrocities, at the intersection between research, program design, field operations, and inter-agency interactions.

IV. Agenda for Future Research

Workshop discussions repeatedly highlighted the significant headway made in recent studies on mass atrocities. To build on that progress, the expert participants offered multiple recommendations for additional research that ought to be conducted to enhance understanding and translate findings into real-world applications to policy and practice. Those recommendations include the following:

- The fundamental matter of which armed conflicts are at greatest risk of escalating into mass atrocities warrants continued exploration. To reiterate, most armed conflicts do

not result in mass atrocities. This unusual outcome, by definition, is intentional on the part of the perpetrator. Presumably, it is also purposeful. Thus, the critical question is one of motivation: why do certain combatants shift their focus from the opposing forces to directing violence against civilians? In particular, what dynamics of the armed conflict induce such a change in strategy and tactics? The more that can be learned about the impetus for these decisions, the better the ability to foresee and react to cases of atrocities before they unfold.

- In this regard, an encouraging avenue of recent research is the responses of military and political leaders to the deteriorating performance of their conventional military forces. What conditions give leaders reason to believe that targeting civilians will reverse their declining military situation? Findings about these questions highlight concrete indicators that would be worthwhile to watch closely.
- Another novel angle involves examining militias that coordinate with the state. These militias may be proxies to engage in victimization of civilians, which the state can claim not to know about or control. Overlooking this set of actors would miss a piece of the equation. Promising research on militias is underway.
- A different perspective is that attacking civilians signifies less of a response to setbacks in conventional military operations and instead more of a preventive strike ahead of rising support for the adversary. Why do some leaders perceive themselves to be vulnerable to a bolstered armed insurgency? Patterns of political divisions and polarization could predict civilian support for rebel forces. For example, minority governments that rely on discrimination and coercion to keep majority ethnic groups out of political power in peacetime may be quick to resort to attacks on civilians once armed conflicts ensue. Appreciating these sorts of subtleties about the landscape of competition will yield more nuanced expectations about risks of atrocities.
- A related dimension is when do leaders and combatants feel confident that attacking civilians will not provoke international sanctions and even military interventions by individual states or the UN—or else ignore these possibilities? This question trains on the restraints against atrocities, which in principle are indispensable to prevention, assuming they are truly effective. Research must consider the point of view of those affected by a response, not just the implementation side.
- Establishing the conditions under which interventions by the UN and other external actors can prove effective in protecting civilian populations continues to be a leading topic of interest. Building on valuable recent studies (Kathman & Wood 2011; Hultman, et al., forthcoming), further analyses are needed that assemble and use disaggregated spatial and temporal data on civilian populations, the operations of armed combatants, and deployments of intervention forces. Integrated research along these lines would be helpful in gauging the extent and basis of the deterrent clout of international actors.

- Similar questions about whether international institutions affect the dynamics of armed conflict—for better or worse—have been brought to the fore by the recent advent of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Advocates of the ICC argue that the threat of prosecution deters mass atrocities. Critics counter that those facing criminal accountability have an incentive to do whatever is necessary to prevail in the war and stay in power, fighting to the bitter end if necessary. Because the ICC is barely a decade old, the impact is tough to detect as yet. Also, the ICC has conducted only a small number of prosecutions, confined to Africa, which may diminish its credibility and reach as a deterrent. Going forward, as the ICC endures and expands the set of prosecutions, evaluating the bearing that this institution and its authority has on actions of leaders and combatants will be both feasible and necessary.
- Continued research into how best to utilize technology like crowd-sourcing, crisis mapping, and SMS text networks, for community-based early warning and response is another avenue for exploration. Recent experience in places like Kenya demonstrates the need to better link such technology-based efforts with strengthening human capital and social networks engaged in warning and response.
- In addition, the rigorous study into whether, and under what conditions, locally-led early warning and response systems are effective at mitigating atrocities, as well as what the appropriate balance is between community-based action and external intervention, could provide some evidence for how best USAID might support such efforts in future.
- A final area of research well worth USAID consideration is more dedicated study to the role of assistance and development programming in early warning and prevention of mass atrocities, particularly in relation to understanding the most effective interventions within different timeframes and the distinctions between upstream atrocity prevention and ongoing peacebuilding. As of yet, no strong body of evidence in this field exists that can point conclusively toward the most effective programming and policy options to help avert atrocities when warnings are raised.

Many additional topics exist, but not all of them can be pursued, given the data that is publicly available at present. To facilitate more research, the workshop participants advocated investing in the collection of data, as well as collaborating with scholars who would be provided access to classified and sensitive information that is compiled on an ongoing basis by the US government.

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