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Advancing Research on Mass Atrocities Perpetrated by Non-state Actors:
Rapporteur's Report
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On June 3, 2016, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum brought together scholars, civil society representatives, and U.S. government officials to discuss the state of research about mass atrocities perpetrated by non-state actors and policy efforts to prevent them. This rapporteur's report summarizes major observations raised during the workshop, including opportunities for new research into the topic.

Introduction
The recent rise and violence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria and Boko Haram in Nigeria have underscored the role of non-state actors as perpetrators of mass atrocities. To date, most research about the phenomenon of mass atrocities has focused on atrocities orchestrated by states and state-affiliated security forces. This focus is understandable, as states historically have perpetrated the greatest number of and most severe mass atrocities. The recent mass violence of IS, Boko Haram, and other non-state actors, however, suggests that non-state actors may perpetrate mass atrocities more frequently in the near future.

How are the causes, drivers, and patterns of mass atrocities unique to state actors similar to or different from large-scale, systematic violence against civilians perpetrated by non-state actors? Participants in this research workshop evaluated the conceptual issues inherent in the study of violence by non-state actors, the current state of knowledge about mass atrocities perpetrated by non-state actors ("the topic"), policy efforts to prevent those atrocities, and opportunities for additional research on the topic. Informed by a broad range of research subjects, methods, and professional experiences, the participants identified several potential research areas to shape the Simon-Skjodt Center's future work on non-state actors.

Conceptual Issues
Current knowledge about the topic draws from studies of the overlapping phenomena of political violence, violent conflict, and mass violence against civilians. To date, however, there is limited discrete research about the topic as such. Most scholars, especially in the field of comparative politics, study violence against civilians perpetrated by a specific type of non-state actor, such as rebel groups, pro-government militias, or transnational terrorist organizations. This research has generated significant findings about mass atrocities by specific actors, but rarely about the full spectrum of actors outside the state who conduct large-scale, systematic atrocities.

Participants discussed two general conceptual issues that complicate further research about the topic: (1) the definition and categorization of non-state actors; and, (2) the definition and categorization of mass atrocities. Participants agreed that a rigorous understanding of both concepts is essential to the evolution of the topic's research agenda and related policy efforts.

They suggested that neither IS nor Boko Haram are unique in their methods of mass atrocity. Accordingly, a systematic study of the topic requires analysis of a broader, more diverse set of cases.

In general, both scholars and policymakers working on political violence define non-state actors by what they are not; that is, non-state actors are not the state. Participants identified two major characteristics of non-state actors that are likely to be important in studies of mass atrocities: first, an actor's degree of institutionalization; and, second, an actor's relationship with populations in areas under its control (i.e., degree of legitimacy). These characteristics occupy a relative spectrum rather than absolute categories of political activity: some actors are more "state-like" in their control over and governance of specific territory than others; by the same token, some actors seek greater compliance from and/or have greater legitimacy among the civilian populations that they govern than others.

Participants agreed that specific research questions should guide the categorization of both non-state actors and the types of violence that those actors perpetrate. They suggested that the political goals and organizational structure of non-state actors are useful variables across multiple possible typologies of non-state mobilization. They noted that forecasting and explanatory analysis, two separate but related areas of the Simon-Skjodt Center's nascent research initiative on the topic, may require different operational definitions and categories to describe non-state actors. Participants cautioned against using assumptions about collective group behavior, such as an actor's ideological belief system, to define non-state actors. Some participants suggested that these assumptions have resulted in questionable findings about the use and occurrence of terrorism by non-state actors.

Participants raised three additional conceptual challenges in the study of non-state actors that require additional clarification. First, participants observed that shifting state alliances, mechanisms of covert and informal support to proxy actors, and bureaucratic factionalism within state institutions often blur the categorical distinction between state and non-state violence. Second, participants concluded that while variations in the institutionalization of non-state actors have been studied, variations in relations between non-state actors and the civilian populations that they target for violence require additional description and analysis. Third, participants suggested that some actors' desire for official recognition and support from transnational organizations, such as global jihadi networks, may also affect these actors' strategic decisions and use of violence.

Participants agreed that non-state actors, like state actors, use different types of mass atrocities to achieve different strategic goals. While non-state actors may use torture, sexual violence, forced displacement, and other large-scale abuses as strategies of coercion and control, participants suggested that a preliminarily narrow focus on lethal violence--that is, mass killing--is empirically and morally useful. Participants suggested, however, that research focused on preventive rather than responsive action requires comparative analysis of all possible perpetrators of mass killing. Accordingly, large-scale, non-lethal abuses by non-state actors may be a useful group-level indicator of potential mass killing. Participants suggested that a group's willingness and capacity to kill are also significant group-level indicators of the likelihood of mass atrocities by non-state actors.

Participants suggested that a "pooled" approach to forecasting mass atrocity events by any state or non-state actor could improve on existing forecasting models, which focus exclusively on the relative likelihood of future state-led mass atrocities. Participants noted, however, that the output of a forecast from a pooled analysis would not distinguish between the risk of state and non-state mass killing within a country.

How and Why Do Non-state Actors Perpetrate Mass Atrocities?
Surveying data about the topic, participants observed that non-state-led mass atrocities are relatively rare events; rarer, even, than their state-led counterparts. Some participants noted that prevailing risk factors for state-led mass killing are also associated with risk of non-state-led mass killing, including infant mortality, total population, ongoing government mass killing, and the existence of significant political instability. Additionally, participants agreed that the less accountable a non-state actor is to the communities in which they operate, the more likely they are to perpetrate mass atrocities. They suggested that access to lootable resource rents and foreign funding are both necessary, but not sufficient indicators of a relatively predatory actor that may later perpetrate large-scale, systematic atrocities.[1] Participants also suggested that the norms of violent behavior that group leaders communicate and structures of internal group and external governance are significant determinants of the likelihood of mass atrocities.[2]

Participants discussed a number of problems with cross-national data about the topic, many of which are similar to those associated with data about state-led mass atrocities. While, in general, more recent data are both more comprehensive and more reliable, the quality of atrocity data varies across countries and atrocity events, with data on smaller events more susceptible to bias. Additionally, actor-centric datasets only capture atrocity events claimed by specific groups, rather than all civilian deaths. This constraint is especially significant for datasets on terrorist violence, such as the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism's Global Terrorism Database, as groups claim terrorist violence now less frequently than in the past.[3] Participants also observed that methods of data-gathering that rely on open-source media, a characteristic of most cross-national, comparative datasets about political violence, carry a systematic bias against non-state actors that seek to conceal their atrocities from external observation.

Participants noted the relative lack of cross-national, comparative data about the types and group-level characteristics of non-state actors that perpetrate or might perpetrate mass atrocities. Participants noted that the most comprehensive dataset of this information to date--Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan's Non-State Actors in Civil Wars dataset--only captures group-level

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[1] For research about the influence of lootable resource rents, see Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For research about the influence of foreign funding on non-state actors, see Idean Salehyan, David Siroky, and Reed Wood, "External Rebel Sponsorship and Civilian Abuse: A Principal-Agent Analysis of Wartime Atrocities," *International Organization* 68 (2014), 633 - 661.

[2] For research on the influence of organizational leadership on the use of sexual violence, see Elisabeth Wood, "Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When Is Wartime Rape Rare?," *Politics Society* 37 (2009), 131 - 62.

[3] See National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. "Global Terrorism Database." Accessed June 18, 2016. https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/.

data in the context of armed conflict.[4] The changing contemporary context for the topic requires research into a broader set of potential non-state perpetrators of mass atrocities, rebel groups and otherwise. The study of terrorist violence, for example, relies as much on the strategic and operational decisions of non-state groups as on the rare, large-scale occurrence of the violence itself. Participants cited the following datasets as exemplary efforts to consolidate knowledge about group-level institutions, processes, and behaviors: Stewart's Insurgent Social Service Provision dataset, which includes information about healthcare and education provision by insurgent groups from 1945 - 2003; Cunningham's forthcoming Organizational Behavior in Self-determination Disputes dataset, which includes information about violent and nonviolent actions by self-determination groups from 1960 - 2005; and, Asal, Brown, and Dalton's dataset of 112 ethnopolitical organizations in the Middle East.[5]

Participants also identified three characteristics of non-state-led mass atrocities that merit additional study. First, there is little cross-national, comparative knowledge about the civilian populations whom non-state actors target. As participants observed, this gap is consistent with the field's limited knowledge about the relationship between non-state actors and local populations. Second, some participants suggested that effective efforts to prevent atrocities require a more systematic analysis of patterns of violent escalation. Participants suggested that a comparative analysis of the "repertoires of violence" that non-state actors use might yield group-level explanations of how and why non-state violence against civilians escalates. Third, participants disagreed about the extent to which ideology contributes to the use of mass atrocities by non-state actors. Some participants highlighted Atran et al.'s research on "sacred values" to highlight the unchanging nature of specific group-level beliefs.[6] Others, however, questioned scholars' ability to measure the diverse individual-level motivations that contribute to aggregate, group-level behaviors.

How Can Non-state-led Mass Atrocities be Prevented?

Policymakers working on the prevention of mass atrocities often suggest that many of the policy tools the U.S. government and international organizations have devised to prevent state-led mass atrocities do not apply to the phenomena of non-state-led mass atrocities. Some participants cited institutional or legal constraints that restrict the application of specific strategies, such as counterterrorism laws that prevent diplomatic engagement with specific non-state groups. Others observed that the lackluster performance of policy strategies intended to prevent *state*-led mass atrocities suggests that these same measures stand little chance of success if applied without adaptation to threats by non-state actors. Further, some participants suggested that such policy

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[4] See David Cunningham, Kristian Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, "Non-state actors in civil wars: A new dataset," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 30 (2013): 516 - 31.

[5] For Stewart's dataset, see Megan Stewart. "Insurgent Social Service Provision Dataset." Accessed June 18, 2016. http://www.meganastewart.org/#!data/c1bm5. For Cunningham's dataset, see Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "The Efficacy of Nonviolence in Self-determination Disputes" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Atlanta, Georgia, March 16 - 19, 2016). For Asal, Brown, and Dalton's dataset, see Victor Asal, Mitchell Brown, and Angela Dalton, "Why Split? Organizational Splits among Ethnopolitical Organizations in the Middle East," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (2012): 94 - 117.

[6] See, for example, Jeremy Ginges et al., "Sacred bounds on rational resolution of violent political conflict," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 104 (2007), 7357 - 60.

efforts will do little to deter non-state actors that have already committed themselves to the use of mass atrocities.

Some participants questioned the judgment that preventive actions are less likely to succeed against non-state threats than states, for several reasons. Non-state actors are much weaker than states in almost all cases. Many non-state groups rely on political and/or material support from states, which can be targeted for influence by existing policy tools. Plus, a non-state group's financial and military means to commit atrocities are probably more vulnerable to coercive policy tools than are a state's.

Participants discussed gaps in knowledge on the topic that most concern policy practitioners. Noting the substantial overlap between strategies and tools under the banner of "preventing or countering violent extremism" (PVE/CVE) and preventing mass atrocities by non-state groups, some participants noted that the major gap in thinking on PVE/CVE concerns the tools and strategies that can be effective when prevention fails, but forceful military measures are not taken. Participants cited three areas where increasing knowledge would assist practitioners: (1) how efforts to resolve violent conflicts related to those focused on preventing atrocities; (2) the individual motivations of perpetrators, including both leaders and followers; and (3) mass atrocities committed by "quasi-state actors."

Some participants observed that certain strategies that have proven effective in reducing the overall risk of mass atrocities have generated separate abuses against civilian populations, including state-led protection efforts and the creation of community self-defense militias. Others suggested that policymakers look to reinforce efforts at civilian self-protection, such as the strengthening of community institutions and mediation between civilian groups and violent non-state actors.

Opportunities for Additional Research on Mass Atrocities Perpetrated by Non-state Actors
Participants suggested that the following seven research questions merit additional attention, through cross-national, quantitative studies, qualitative case studies, and other relevant methods:

Drivers of Non-state Mass Atrocities
- What factors make a country more likely to experience mass atrocities by a non-state group?
- What characteristics of non-state groups (e.g., size, political goals, organization, ideology, leadership) affect the likelihood of mass atrocities by that group?
- What factors associated with a non-state group's strategic context (e.g., nature of conflict with the state or other non-state groups, relationship between non-state actors and civilian populations) affect the likelihood of mass atrocities by non-state groups?
- How do relationships between non-state actors and local populations affect the likelihood and evolution of mass atrocities by the non-state group?

Preventing and Ending Non-state Mass Atrocities
- What causes non-state actors to transition from limited violence into the use of mass atrocities or vice versa?
- What causes non-state-led mass atrocities to end?
- How do international policy efforts to prevent non-state-led mass atrocities affect the evolution of these events?