Advancing knowledge on the role of civilians in preventing and mitigating mass atrocities
Project description
January 2018

Motivation: Research on mass atrocities and their prevention has overwhelmingly focused on the actions of states as the most common perpetrators of atrocities and most visible actors in attempts to prevent or respond to them. High-profile atrocities committed by non-state actors have recently spurred greater attention on non-state groups as potential perpetrators. Much less focused research has explored the roles of civilians—working through civil society organizations and/or less formal, local community mechanisms—in helping prevent mass atrocities and mitigate imminent threats. As a result, civilians are too often presumed to be passive victims or bystanders. Recent studies suggest that civilians in fact use a range of active strategies, yet many questions remain about these strategies, the conditions for their success, and external actors' roles in relation to them.

Overview: The Simon-Skjodt Center's new research project aims to address gaps in knowledge about the role of civilians in preventing and mitigating atrocities. We divide our inquiry into two roughly separate "phases" of a mass atrocity episode: (1) the "prevention" phase, when there are observable risks of escalation but mass, systematic violence against civilians has not yet begun, and (2) the "mitigation" phase, when mass, systematic attacks against civilians are ongoing. In the prevention phase, our research effort will study the mechanisms by which civil society organizations—that is, civilians organized to express themselves and advance their interests, including but not limited to religious groups, NGOs, and community organizations—serve as a restraining factor against mass atrocities. In the mitigation phase, our research effort will study the factors that contribute to the varying effectiveness of civilian efforts to protect themselves from imminent threats of mass atrocities, sometimes termed "civilian self-protection."

For both projects, we are seeking to commission a policy report about how external actors, including international donors and humanitarian organizations, can support civilian efforts most effectively.

Research questions: Table 1 presents the principal research questions and corresponding research strategies.

Key audiences: Public and private donors, policymakers on civil society and humanitarian issues, NGOs, scholars

Operational plans: This research will be conducted by a combination of Center staff, fellows, and consultants. We will also explore potential organizational partnerships or collaboration, as appropriate.

Table 1
Overview of research questions and strategies on the role of civilians in preventing and mitigating mass atrocities

		Type of research		
		Descriptive	*Explanatory*	*Prescriptive*
Prevention ("civil society's role")	*Question*	How is civil society strength associated with the onset of mass killing episodes?	What factors explain variation in the effectiveness of civil society in helping prevent mass atrocities?	How can external support for civilian-led prevention and protection efforts result in the greatest reduction of atrocities? How can external assistance (especially from the US) avoid unintentionally increasing risks for civilians?
	Strategy	Using new cross-national quantitative data from V-Dem, analysis of the association between the robustness of civil society and the onset of mass killing.	Quantitative analysis on contextual variables that interact with civil society to explain mass killing onset. Comparative case study analysis of potential explanations of variation in mass atrocity outcomes based on characteristics and choices/actions of civil society groups (holding macro context and overall civil society robustness constant).	Interviews with officials from donor agencies, civil society groups, other experts.
Mitigation ("civilian self-protection")	*Question*	How do civilian self-protection strategies vary across different types of contexts, phases of conflict, and locations in which conflict takes place?	What explains variation in the effectiveness of civilian self-protection efforts?	See above.
	Strategy	Comparative analysis of civilian responses to mass atrocities during multiple episodes (in varied contexts)	Comparative case studies of civilian self-protection efforts that had varying levels of success (holding macro context constant)	See above.