

# The Intersection of COVID-19, Mass Atrocities, and Atrocity Prevention: Reviewing Literature from Complex Emergencies

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## Introduction

This document illustrates one approach to analyzing the plausible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global risk of mass atrocities and the effectiveness of atrocity prevention actions. Our premise is that COVID-19, as a type of complex global emergency, will have political and social consequences that resemble the effects of other global health shocks, severe weather events, and industrial-scale disasters. Therefore, we briefly review a preliminary subset of the empirical literature on the effects of this class of events.<sup>1</sup>

## Risk factors associated with mass atrocities

Drawing on Straus (2016), we identify three factors associated with an increased risk of mass atrocities that the COVID-19 pandemic may also influence.<sup>2</sup> First, *rebellion and protest* can heighten the risk that state security forces crackdown on threats to their political authority. Second, *autocratization* results in fewer constraints on state violence against civilians, especially in circumstances of political instability. And lastly, *discrimination* creates social conditions in which communities might view large-scale, systematic violence against civilians as an acceptable political outcome.

The strength of COVID-19's effects on global mass atrocity risk will depend on (1) how large and consistent the pandemic's effects are on risk factors such as these *and* (2) how much those factors increase the risk of mass atrocities. In the section below, we summarize the extent of evidence of a relationship between complex emergencies and the risk factor, and note Straus's (2016) assessment of the scholarly consensus surrounding its effects on mass atrocity onset.

*Rebellion and protest:* Inconsistent evidence of effects of emergencies, consistent evidence of increased mass atrocity risk

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<sup>1</sup> One could conduct a similar exercise using empirical literature on other categories of events, such as global economic shocks.

<sup>2</sup> This list synthesizes and excerpts the full set of factors that Straus (2016) discusses. These are (1) large-scale instability, (2) armed conflict, (3) transformative or exclusionary ideologies, (4) prior discrimination or violence against a particular group, (5) deep-seated hatreds, (6) diminished government capacity, (7) authoritarianism, and (8) economic crises. Straus describes the first four factors as "common" findings in the literature, whereas the latter four are "disputed" findings.

In previous health crises, protest movements adapted their strategies and tactics to changing contexts.

- In the United States, the ACT UP movement used both the lagging government response to the HIV/AIDS crisis during the 1980s and the widespread social stigma against HIV-positive individuals to motivate and frame public protests against symbols of discrimination against HIV-positive individuals (Gamson 1989). Initial studies of recent collective action have also observed this pattern in nonviolent activism since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chenoweth et al. 2020).

Public health measures intended to limit the spread of disease also prompt instances of collective backlash against state authorities.

- Ethnographic research about communal responses to cholera in northern Brazilian favelas (Nations and Monte 1996) and HIV/AIDS in Haiti (Farmer 1992) indicates that communities in both cases blamed elites and government authorities for the spread of disease. These beliefs sometimes resulted in protests and attacks on healthcare workers.

*Autocratization*: Consistent evidence of effects of emergencies, inconsistent evidence of increased mass atrocity risk

Complex emergencies provide autocratic regimes with opportunities to strengthen their hold on power and repress potential challenges to their authority.

- Governments commonly adopt “states of emergency” in response to domestic shocks such as severe weather events, terrorist attacks, and pandemics (Lührmann and Rooney 2020). States of emergency allow executives to entrench their rule well after the immediate effects of the emergency have subsided (Lührmann and Rooney 2020), and to formally shirk certain obligations to international human rights treaties (Hafner-Burton, Helfer, and Fariss 2011).
- Richards and Clay (2012) and Neumayer (2013) find that periods of emergency rule--in Neumayer’s (2013) study, under autocratic governments in particular--are associated with higher levels of human rights violations.

Governments may also use disasters to redefine national threats and create or revive “security” narratives that justify additional repression and discrimination against marginalized groups.

- Drawing on ethnographic work in Sri Lanka, Choi (2015) documents the creation of new “tsunami risk management” processes by the Sri Lankan government to increase disaster preparedness and, simultaneously, expand systems of surveillance and social control against Tamil civilians targeted during the government’s counterinsurgency campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

*Group discrimination*: Consistent evidence of effects of emergencies, inconsistent evidence of increased mass atrocity risk

Complex emergencies strengthen individual xenophobic attitudes against already-marginalized groups and increase the likelihood of discriminatory policies against ethnic or political out-groups.

- Recent survey evidence suggests an association between anxiety about the coronavirus and both anti-Asian attitudes and xenophobic behavior (Reny and Barreto 2020).
- Individuals are more likely to express anxiety about members of an out-group when (1) the epidemic or pandemic more directly affects their daily life (Faulkner et al. 2004), (2) they have more sensitive feelings of disgust (Kam 2019; Nelkin and Gilman 1988), (3) their party identification aligns with the party identification of leaders communicating xenophobic message (Adida, Dionne, and Platas 2018), or (4) they accept prejudicial stereotypes (Stuermer et al. 2017).

Complex emergencies also increase the likelihood of *collective* actions and discriminatory policies against ethnic or political out-groups.

- In San Francisco during the early 20th century, municipal authorities used public health conditions to justify the exclusion and segregation of the city's Chinese immigrant population (Risse 2012). Eichelberger (2007) observes an increase in scapegoating and stigmatization by community organizations in New York's Chinatown neighborhood during the 2003 SARS epidemic.

### **Third-party policy responses to mass atrocities**

The scholarly and policy communities have attempted to define the bounds of the "atrocity prevention toolbox," which covers the breadth of diplomatic, legal, economic, and military policy responses by third parties to prevent or mitigate mass atrocities (Albright and Cohen 2008; Straus 2015; Conley-Zilkic, Brechenmacher, and Sarkar 2016). We focus here on policy responses that, in theory, contribute to "operational" or "direct" prevention of mass atrocities: by discouraging specific, identified actors from committing atrocities or limiting their capacity to do so, as opposed to addressing the structural or systemic factors that drive mass atrocities.

Although the number of specific "tools" by which third-party actors can try to prevent or mitigate atrocities is large, most fall into one of three categories of action. First, third parties can offer *diplomatic* assistance to mediate or support dialogue between conflicting parties, or offer support to negotiations intended to bring conflict to an end. Diplomatic initiatives also include naming-and-shaming of perpetrators of mass atrocities in attempts to deter them, sending diplomatic signals by withdrawing diplomats or missions, or pursuing prosecutions in international courts in an effort to deter perpetrators. Second, third party actors can leverage *economic* incentives on perpetrators through targeted or comprehensive sanctions or arms

embargoes, which can both degrade the capacity of perpetrators to commit violence and dissuade them from doing so. Lastly, *military* support to United Nations peacekeeping missions, support to non-state armed groups, or direct military intervention can all impact conflict dynamics and, in theory, prevent mass atrocities--evidence suggests, however, that these military actions can also be counterproductive.

There remain large gaps in the research on the effects of these policy responses on mass atrocities themselves. Yet some discrete areas of inquiry have emerged on how complex emergencies impact the effectiveness of these policy responses in contexts similar to mass atrocities. This body of research is limited to a few cases, focusing mostly on diplomatic efforts to resolve ongoing violent conflicts. In weighing the applicability of these findings to COVID-19, it is important to acknowledge differences between historical cases and the current context--for example, in geographic scope, effects on movement, and global economic consequences.

*“Disaster diplomacy”*: As external shocks, complex emergencies can disrupt intractable conflicts and create space for diplomatic conflict resolution efforts. Studies in “disaster diplomacy” have found that while disasters do not generally produce conflict resolution, they can catalyze steps toward resolution that are already in motion (Streich and Mislán 2014, p. 85, cited in Kelman 2016). For example, the 2004 tsunami highlighted the urgent need for conflict resolution in Indonesia and helped ongoing peace talks succeed (Gaillard, Clave, and Kelman 2007).

Disasters can also affect the perceived legitimacy of belligerents, making room for conflict resolution through dialogue. After the 2004 tsunami, secessionist groups in separate conflicts in Indonesia and Sri Lanka had the opportunity to govern and provide resources in the regions they controlled. When the GAM in Indonesia failed to do so effectively, it lost legitimacy with the public, and an external mediation team stepped in, facilitating a lasting peace agreement. In Sri Lanka, conversely, the LTTE saw a boost in legitimacy after effectively supporting their constituents in the wake of the earthquake, and the conflict continued for five more years (Enia 2008).

*“Vaccine diplomacy”*: Mediation opportunities can also emerge around efforts to create and distribute vaccines in global health emergencies. “Vaccine diplomacy” dates back to the smallpox era, when in the early 1800s the British inventor of the smallpox vaccine shared it widely in France even as the two countries were constantly at war (Hotez 2009). The World Health Organization records humanitarian ceasefires, or ceasefires negotiated in armed conflict to provide health services such as vaccines, in at least 18 countries in its “Health as a Bridge for Peace” project (World Health Organization). Fighting has been temporarily put on hold in Sudan, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo for UNICEF’s national immunization days (Hotez 2001).

*Effects on militaries*: Global health emergencies can also negatively impact the operational effectiveness of military responses to mass atrocities. The HIV/AIDS epidemic disproportionately impacted African militaries, many of which contributed to UN peacekeeping missions. High rates of infection and death among armed forces reduced their numbers, and

resources were diverted to healthcare and recruitment (Tripodi and Patel 2004). Peacekeeping troops also served as vectors of HIV/AIDS both in countries of deployment and upon return home (Tripodi and Patel 2002).

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# The Changing Global Distribution of Power, Mass Atrocities, and Atrocity Prevention

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## Introduction

This brief seeks to stimulate thinking and discussion about how the distribution of power in the international system might affect mass atrocities--large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations (Straus, 2016)--and international efforts to prevent them. It briefly synthesizes relevant academic findings, especially about several mechanisms through which global power shifts could shape the global risk of mass atrocities and the effectiveness of atrocity prevention policies.

### 1. What is known about the relationship between the global distribution of power and mass atrocities?

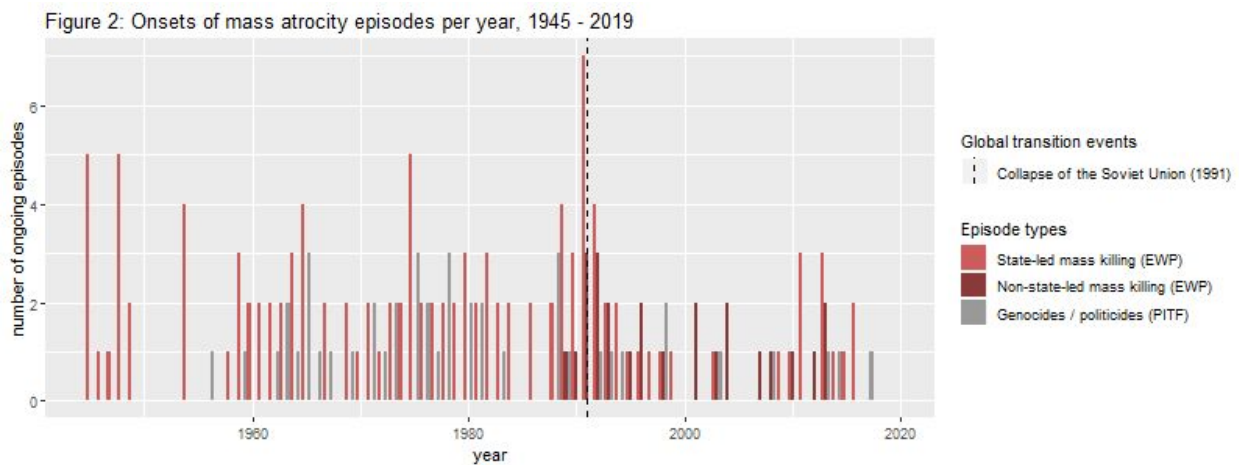
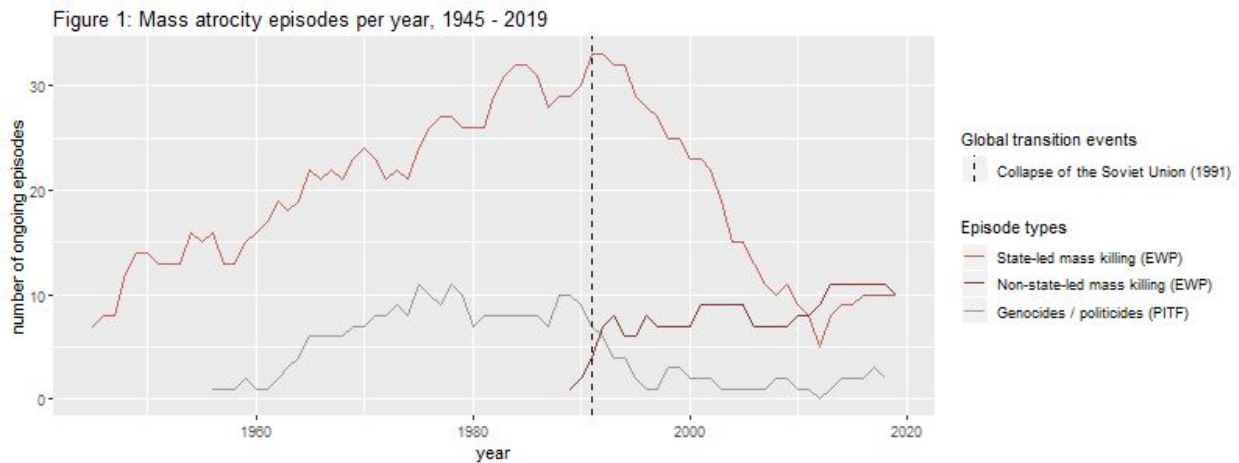
Comparing basic data on mass atrocity episodes during and after the Cold War provides *prima facie* evidence that transitions in the distribution of global power affect mass atrocities. Figures 1 and 2 display the number of ongoing and new state-led mass killings and genocides/politocides--two overlapping, but distinct datasets of mass atrocity episodes.<sup>3</sup> In sum, these data show:

- The number of ongoing mass atrocity episodes grew steadily through most of the Cold War and declined sharply during the two decades immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union;
- The average number of new mass atrocity episodes starting each year was higher during the Cold War than during the immediate post-Cold War period;
- A spike in new mass killings coincided with the end of the Cold War;
- The post-Cold War downward trend appears to have ended around 2011-2013, when there were 9 new mass killing onsets.

These observations point to two tentative conclusions about the relationship between global power distribution and mass atrocities: (1) Pervasive global competition between two superpowers, as exemplified by the Cold War, contributes to higher risks of mass atrocities than a unipolar power structure--at least when that dominant power is the United States; and (2) global power transitions can be especially risky moments for mass atrocities.

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<sup>3</sup> Data about mass killing episodes are from the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide's Early Warning Project (EWP); non-state mass killing data are available only from 1989. Episodes of genocide and politicide are from the Political Instability Task Force's (PITF) State Failure Problem Set.



Scholars studying mass atrocities in specific regions attribute these trends to varied mechanisms that may follow from global power shifts.

- Straus (2012) posits that a combination of “geopolitical” mechanisms are responsible for the decline in mass killing episodes and other forms of violent conflict in sub-Saharan Africa, including the “decline in external state support for insurgencies, the promotion of multi-party elections, significant investments in conflict prevention and mediation after the Cold War, and the rise of China” (p. 196).
- Bellamy (2014, 2017) argues that both domestic factors (state consolidation, a common regional approach to domestic economic development) and international trends (the growth of multilateral institutions, a growing balance of power between states) contributed to the decline of mass atrocities in East Asia.

## 2. How is the global distribution of power likely to change over the next 10 years?

While there is no question that the distribution of power in the international system is changing, the direction, extent, and speed of change are uncertain. Some see China’s economic and

military growth as quickly ushering in a bipolar system with material power roughly divided between China and the United States, while others argue that prudent U.S. policies would extend the American power advantage for decades to come. Others yet point to a multipolar “rise of the rest” with fairly equal power distributions across three or more states—with possible additions including India, Russia, Brazil, and the European Union and its member states.

Whatever the emerging distribution of power, most assume that competition among great powers will be more severe in the next decade than it was in the immediate post-Cold War period when U.S. power was unrivaled. The precise nature of that competition and how much its trajectory can be influenced by policy choices are matters of significant debate. For example, Mearshimer (2014) theorizes that competition is inevitable during major changes in the global distribution of power. Other scholars note that the extent of interdependence between major powers may create strong incentives to cooperate in certain domains while competing in others (Campbell and Sullivan, 2019). Additionally, international institutions may provide a new, more peaceful way of balancing power, in which states “counter pressures or threats through initiating, utilizing, and dominating multilateral institutions” (He, 2009).

### **3. How will changes in the global distribution of power in turn affect mass atrocities (e.g., their frequency, severity, perpetrators, civilian populations targeted, type of attacks)?**

*Regime transitions:* During the 20th Century, global power shifts led to “regime change waves,” in which many states became more democratic or more autocratic in short periods of time (Gunitsky, 2014, 2017). These “waves” have tended to run in the direction of the regime type of the most powerful state in the region or globe (Boix, 2011). If this pattern holds, a shift in global power toward China could cause a wave of democratic decline.<sup>4</sup> This could increase the global risk of mass atrocities because the process of democratic backsliding would represent major political instability, which is virtually always a precursor to mass atrocities (Harff, 2003; Straus, 2016), or because autocratic regimes may be more likely to commit mass atrocities (Rummel, 1997), though evidence on this point is mixed.

*Proxy wars:* Political competition between great powers often plays out through support to governments and rebel groups in civil wars. The Cold War was fought through numerous “proxy” conflicts in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with the United States and USSR providing support to opposite sides. Balcells and Kalyvas (2010) find that the fall of the Soviet Union was associated with a decline in irregular civil wars—those in which rebels hold territory—because Marxist insurgencies in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America lost a significant source of international revenue. Higher levels of great power support for state or non-state armed groups could mean higher risk of mass atrocities in two ways: (1) It could lead to more civil wars, which are the contexts at greatest risk for mass atrocities (Valentino 2004); and, (2) it could increase

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<sup>4</sup> Democracy tracking projects have already documented declining levels of democracy globally. Freedom House, for example, called 2019 “the 14th consecutive year of deterioration in global freedom.” <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-freedom-world-2020-finds-established-democracies-are-decline>.

the proportion of civil wars that include mass atrocities, given that civil wars in which multiple states provide military support to a rebel group have been associated with greater civilian victimization (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014).

#### **4. How will changes in the global distribution of power affect attempts by governments, international organizations, and civil society actors to prevent and respond to mass atrocities?**

*International and domestic agenda setting:* Growing focus on great power competition likely means less attention and priority to issues such as atrocity prevention, within governments and internationally. In addition, as political power is more widely distributed across the globe, states' perceived geopolitical interests are likely to place greater constraints on their options to prevent or respond to atrocities. In 2018, for example, the United States declined to administer sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for the internment of the Uyghur population, citing a potential trade deal (Crowley 2020).

*Multilateral cooperation:* Global power shifts affect the ability of international organizations and the member states that comprise them to address mass atrocities through collective action. Pomper (2018), for example, attributes the Obama administration's failure to achieve meaningful action in the UN Security Council on Syria to increased competition between the United States, Russia, and China. Increasingly strained relations among great powers--especially veto-wielding permanent members of the UN Security Council--will translate into less frequent use of a variety of potentially useful preventive actions through the UN, including preventive diplomacy and mediation, fact finding and commissions of inquiry, "naming and shaming," multilateral sanctions, arms embargoes, and deployment of peacekeepers.

Efforts to deploy UN peacekeepers exemplify the potential strain of future global power shifts on preventive efforts. UN peacekeeping is associated with lower levels of anti-civilian violence and less frequent recurrence of civil wars, which increase risks of mass atrocities (Doyle and Sambanis 2000; Fortna 2004, 2008; Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon 2013). Global power shifts will affect both the resources that UN member states devote to these peacekeeping operations and the type of peacekeeping operations that result from multilateral cooperation. For their part, China supports UN peacekeeping efforts as both a troop contributor and a significant source of funding. It is likely that China will remain supportive of peacekeeping operations that have the consent of host governments. Given their normative commitment to state sovereignty and non-interventionism described below, however, whether China will provide similar support to peacekeeping operations that present a more direct challenge to state sovereignty is unclear (Hirono and Lanteigne 2011; Lee, Chan, and Chan 2012).

*Anti-atrocity norms:* Shifts in the international distribution of power can alter consensus around anti-atrocity norms. Norms are fluid and contested standards of behavior to which states and other actors in the international system agree, rather than stable ideas that pre-determine state action. Following the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, and the NATO intervention in

Kosovo, the norm of the “responsibility to protect” (R2P) emerged to ensure that prevailing norms of state sovereignty would not give license for severe atrocity crimes, without endorsing a “right to intervene.”

China’s global rise and its continued adherence to the principle of non-interference may restrict efforts to prevent and respond to mass atrocities guided by the R2P norm. Although China has supported UNSC resolutions that fall under pillar one (reminding states of their responsibility to protect) and pillar two (providing assistance to states at risk), they have rarely accepted pillar three actions, with the exception of UNSC Resolution 1973 that authorized the NATO-led operation in Libya (Barelli 2018).

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# **New Technology, Mass Atrocities, and Atrocity Prevention**

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## **Introduction**

This brief seeks to stimulate thinking and discussion about how new technologies might affect mass atrocities—large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations (Straus, 2016)—and international efforts to prevent them. While there are a variety of technologies that may relate to mass atrocities and atrocity prevention, this memo focuses on information communication technologies (ICTs)—e.g., the internet and cell phones—and surveillance technologies.

### **1. What is known about the relationship between new technologies and mass atrocities?**

#### **Surveillance technology**

Surveillance is defined as “any collection and processing of personal data, whether identifiable or not, for the purposes of influencing or managing those whose data has been collected” (Lyon 2001). Increasingly sophisticated surveillance technologies enhance governments’ ability to monitor and control the activities of civilians. These surveillance activities may increase the scope and scale of ongoing mass atrocities by increasing government capacity to identify potential victims, carry out violence, and hide evidence. For example, research about China’s surveillance apparatus indicates that the Chinese government uses a range of information-collection technologies to surveil and deter potential dissent (Dutton 2005; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). In the context of violence against the Uyghur population, public commentators and policymakers describe these surveillance practices as a “tech-enabled genocide” (Cai 2020) and note, “What makes this genocide so uniquely dangerous is its technological sophistication, allowing for efficiency in its destruction and concealment from global attention” (Asat and Diamond 2020).

An alternate reading suggests that mass surveillance may result in successful repression of anti-regime threats, lowering the risk of future mass atrocities. More advanced technology may allow states to distinguish individual threats, thus enabling them to target their repression more narrowly instead of targeting an entire identity group. Alternatively, if a state can deploy advanced technology to achieve complete control over a “problematic” population, the state may not feel the need to physically eliminate that population to neutralize the perceived threat. Some would argue that Xinjiang is an example of this phenomenon.



## Information communication technology

ICTs are “all those technologies that enable the handling of information and facilitate different forms of communication among human actors, between human beings and electronic systems, and among electronic systems” (Hamelink 1997). Although there are a range of ICTs, two prominent innovations in communication technologies are the internet and mobile communications technology (i.e. cell phones).<sup>5</sup> The UN estimated that at the end of 2019, 53.6% of the world’s population was using the internet, up from 16.8% in 2005 (International Telecommunication Union 2019). Additionally, in 2020 61.7% of the world’s population are estimated to have a cellphone (Gu 2020).

*ICTs and collective action:* As the Arab Spring cases demonstrate, ICTs increase opportunities for collective action by civilians, which may lead governments to use excessive violence against threats to their authority (Valentino 2004) or better enable non-state actors (e.g., ISIS) to perpetrate mass atrocities themselves. Conflicting findings reinforce the uncertainty surrounding the relationship between technology and mass atrocities, and the importance of the political and strategic contexts in which groups deploy these new technologies.

Access to ICTs may create new opportunities for groups to organize collective action against the state by:

1. aiding in recruitment via enabling groups to more widely publicize grievances (de Mesquita, Ethan, and Dickson 2007) and giving groups direct access to potential supporters (Zeitoff 2017). (For example, Salafi-jihadist groups such as ISIS use social media to recruit foreign fighters, as do far-right groups in the US and Europe);
2. providing new opportunities to monitor and discipline group members as their actions may be more closely tracked by group leadership (Gohdes 2017);
3. enabling groups to organize large-scale public dissent, as in the Arab Spring (Howard and Hussain 2011); or
4. assisting groups in garnering international support and recognition for their causes (Howard and Hussain 2011).

Studies on ICT access and violent conflict present conflicting findings. Some evidence points to ICT access increasing risks for violence:

- Pierskalla and Hollenbach (2013) find that cell phone coverage increased the probability of organized and violent collective action in African countries.
- Warren (2015) shows that prevalence of “social” communications technologies—i.e., cell phones—corresponds with higher levels of violence in the same region.
- Drawing on evidence from ethnic groups across 121 countries, Bailard (2015) finds that cell phone access created both new opportunities for violent collective action and a more efficient means of communication between potential rebels.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, social media (Facebook, Twitter, Tiktok, etc.), email, Skype, Zoom, WhatsApp, SMS, and other cell phone-enabled communications.

Conversely, Shapiro and Weidmann (2012) find that the presence of cell phone towers corresponded with lower levels of insurgent violence in Iraq. They identify two opposing dynamics at play: on the one hand, cell phones strengthen insurgents' position vis a vis coalition forces; on the other, cell phones also improve the surveillance capacities of counterinsurgent forces and lower the cost of whistleblowing for the local population.

*ICTs and dangerous speech:* ICTs may facilitate the dissemination of "dangerous speech" that calcifies animosity towards members of historically marginalized groups in societies at risk of mass atrocities, which in turn influences armed group recruitment and violence against certain groups, according to Goldstein and Rotich (2008) in their study of the 2007-2008 Kenyan Presidential Election Crisis. In a study of social and traditional media across 24 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Warren (2015) found that the "reach of social media penetration generates substantial increases in collective violence, especially in areas lacking access to mass media infrastructure." She theorizes that ICT access fundamentally changes communications within a society by creating opportunities for increased horizontal communication, thereby increasing "the ease with which social divisions can be promoted and exploited."

## **2. How will changes in technology in turn affect the dynamics of mass atrocities, including their frequency, severity, perpetrators, civilian populations targeted, type of attacks, and other characteristics?**

While there is no question that the role of technology in mass atrocities is rapidly changing, the direction, extent, and speed of change are uncertain (Tuckwood 2014). Technological or cyber utopianism argues that ICTs and other technologies enable new and more sophisticated methods for predicting, preventing, and deterring mass atrocities, with the positive benefits transforming the field and outweighing negative implications. Pessimists warn that the benefits of new technology work both ways, with ultimately unclear results, as malicious actors are equally able to benefit from increased connectivity as benevolent actors (Sandvik and Raymond 2017).

Those who study surveillance in China raise concerns that Xinjiang is a testing ground for technology that will soon be deployed across the country—with a party official expressing the hope "that every household is surveilled, every individual is monitor[ed], and the moment trouble arises it can be reported immediately with the click of a button" (Leibold 2020)—and likely exported to other countries. Even as humanitarians and other "benevolent" actors expand their use of technology for good, they may expose populations to additional risk, and themselves collect information that could be used against the people they aspire to help (Sandvik and Raymond 2017).

The future of technology in mass atrocities may depend on the degree to which technological developments benefit state or non-state actors. For example, if we expect technological developments to disproportionately benefit states—as is the case currently in China—we may anticipate fewer overt civilian killings as states maintain power through repressive means. Alternately, if new technologies swing power in the favor of individuals and non-state groups, we

might expect more frequent serious challenges to state power, and in turn, more atrocities against perceived threats as well as more mass atrocities perpetrated by non-state groups.

Recent trends suggest that ICT access will continue to increase globally. We may thereby expect the current trends in mass atrocities and political violence to continue. Technology access gives more power to non-state agents (when previously communications were monopolized by states), ultimately making conflict more likely (Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013). Gohdes (2017) also suggests that increased diffusion of internet access may make it easier to organize collective action against the state, but this also could (1) increase risks of actions that trigger large-scale crackdowns against civilians; and (2) create additional opportunities for surveillance and repression of anti-state challenges. This may result in more frequent but less severe mass atrocity episodes.

We should anticipate that new social networking technologies will emerge. Also, as access to technology connects people more easily, quickly, and comprehensively to different forms of state surveillance, it likely will spur new developments in states' already sophisticated surveillance architectures. An additional concern is the export of surveillance technology to new state and non-state actors, some of whom may currently have the motive but lack the means to commit mass atrocities.

The future of the regulatory environment in which new technologies exist and are created will also critically influence their role in mass atrocities. In China today, surveillance is a state project, while in the West, it is both a public and private enterprise. What and who is regulated, and by whom, will determine the future influence of various technologies. The private sector is far from a "neutral transmitter" but rather has active interests that may affect violent conflict (Deibert et al. 2010, 2011; Gohdes 2017; Zittrain and Palfrey 2008). Likewise, increasing government-controlled internet shutdowns may critically influence flow of information. This may decrease atrocity risk, as shut-downs may stifle the spread of protest movements. However, it also may increase atrocity risk, as an internet shutdown might pull a veil over activities being undertaken by a state, shielding it from international attention.

### **3. How will changes in technology affect attempts by governments, international organizations, and civil society actors to prevent and respond to mass atrocities?**

While considering the risks, it is also important to discuss the role of technology in enabling and improving efforts to prevent mass atrocities. New technologies may impact: (1) documentation, identification, and assessment of situations at risk of mass atrocities; (2) effectiveness of preventive strategies and tools; (3) political support for preventive action.

New technologies enable rapid information sharing, which may assist in risk identification and early warning efforts. ICTs have been described as "force multipliers" as they remove atrocity prevention's reliance on human-to-human contact for both early warning and documentation (Sandvik and Raymond 2017). Within a country, they also enable information-sharing amongst civilians, potentially reducing opportunities for violence (Shapiro and Siegel 2015). As

technology advances, old atrocity prevention strategies may be pursued in new ways, while new strategies entirely may be adopted. New technologies, in some cases, make preventive action cheaper, opening a field dominated by governments to non-state actors. ICTs enable groups opposing the state to make their case internationally, possibly leveraging their ability to communicate their goals and grievances to spur support and preventive action.

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# Demographic and Climate Change, Mass Atrocities, and Atrocity Prevention

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## Introduction

This brief seeks to stimulate thinking and discussion about how climate and demographic change might affect mass atrocities—large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations (Straus, 2016)—and international efforts to prevent them.

### 1. What is known about the relationship between demographic and climate change and mass atrocities?

Most research examines the impact of climate and demographic change on armed conflict writ large, not mass atrocities specifically. The strongest macro-level predictor of mass atrocities is large-scale instability, most commonly armed conflict (Straus 2016). Therefore, an increase in armed conflict will likely also lead to an increase in mass atrocities, though the two concepts are distinct. This section summarizes what is known about the relationship between climate and demographic change and armed conflict, highlighting specifically where these findings pertain to mass atrocities.<sup>6</sup>

Climate and demographic change are interrelated. As the growing population of humans burns fossil fuels, deforests, and produces agricultural emissions, greenhouse gases are emitted. Greenhouse gas emissions cause shifts in climate and weather patterns, which in turn produce demographic shifts. The following sub-sections summarize the knowledge on climate change and demographic change separately, noting where the phenomena interrelate.

#### *Climate change*

Scholars generally agree that intensifying climate change, including increasing temperatures and extreme rainfall fluctuations, will increase the risk of conflict, though it remains less influential than other factors such as economic development and state capacity (Mach et al. 2019; Busby 2019; Hsiang et al. 2013). According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Climate change can indirectly increase risks of violent conflicts in the form of civil war and inter-group violence by amplifying well-documented drivers of these conflicts such as poverty and economic shocks” (IPCC 2018, p. 20).

The specific mechanisms connecting climate change and violent conflict are not well established. Early research points to resource scarcity as the intermediate outcome through which climate change impacts conflict and mass atrocities (Busby 2019). However, a causal relationship is difficult to establish as mass atrocities and civil wars themselves often cause resource scarcity (Hendrix 2016).

- Bagozzi et al. (2017) find that following severe droughts and resulting food shortages, rebels commit atrocities “which forcibly separate civilians from their lands and food

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<sup>6</sup> See Hendrix (2016) for a published summary of the knowledge on climate and demographic change and mass atrocities.



- stockpiles” to “preempt” efforts by civilians to defend their limited food supplies.
- Narratives of resource scarcity can be manipulated by leaders to justify mass atrocities, as in the Holocaust and genocide against indigenous populations (Snyder 2015; Hendrix 2016; Zimmerer 2014). By this account, the actual scarcity of resources may be less important than perceptions and fears associated with it.
- “Resource optimists,” on the other hand, suggest that resource scarcity may drive innovation and thus long-term peace (Urdal 2005).

Other mechanisms by which climate change may impact conflict include livelihoods (by making violence more profitable than agriculture) and state capacity (by lowering states’ abilities to provide public goods and prevent conflict) (Busby 2019).

Despite fairly wide consensus that climate change will increase aggregate risks of conflict, there exists little agreement on the role of climate change in specific cases of violent conflict or mass atrocities. Climate change has been cited (and contested) as a cause of conflict in Darfur (Kevane and Gray 2008), Syria (Kelley et al. 2015; Selby et al. 2017), and the Sahel (International Crisis Group 2020).

The effects of climate change on specific conflicts are almost certainly mixed and shaped by contextual factors.

- International Crisis Group (2020) contends that the poor regulation of access to “increasingly coveted resources” such as land is driving conflict in the Sahel rather than resource scarcity. Other factors beyond climate change such as expanding farmland, armed banditry, and the Malian government’s prioritization of modernizing agriculture have disrupted pastoralism in the Sahel, leading to conflict.
- Hendrix (2016) suggests that demographic-environmental stress is more likely to lead to mass atrocities in societies characterized by exclusive institutions and high groupness<sup>7</sup>, though he emphasizes that this effect is conditional on the choices of politicians (p. 2).
- Based on a study of Darfur, Plowman (2015) found that fragile states are at greater risk for climate-related conflict.

### *Demographic changes*

Studies have found that population growth and density are associated with higher risk of armed conflict, though they fall short of making a definitive causal link (Raleigh and Urdal 2007; Diehl and Gleditsch 2001; Goldstone et al. 2012; Hauge and Ellingsen 1998; Homer-Dixon 1999). Population growth is thought to be tied to resource competition due to scarcity, therefore leading to increased armed conflict.

- Brückner (2010) uses variation in population growth caused by randomly occurring droughts in Sub-Saharan Africa to find that a five percent increase in population size raises the risk of civil conflict by roughly six percentage points.
- Acemoglu, Fergesson, and Johnson (2020) find that population growth does not promote resource scarcity related conflict in countries with positive economic conditions.

There is mixed evidence that urbanization is worsening conflict, though the shift to cities has changed the dynamics of conflict, particularly for civilians.

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<sup>7</sup> Hendrix (2016) defines groupness as “the degree to which individuals in society depend on distinct identity groups for their economic prospects, physical security, and as a platform to pursue political power” (2).

- Urdal and Buhaug (2013) conducted a cross-national analysis of 55 major cities in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa since 1960, finding little evidence of an association between urbanization and conflict.
- Nedal, Stewart, and Weintraub (2019) find higher urban concentration is associated with civil war onset and a higher number of battle-deaths once conflict begins.
- The International Red Cross (2017) found urban offensives accounted for eight-times as many civilian deaths as other types of fighting in Syria and Iraq during a 16 month period.

Youth bulges--or a high density of the young population--are often cited as drivers of conflict.

- Research indicates that countries with large youth populations are more likely to experience violent conflict when educational and economic/employment opportunities are limited, state institutions are weak, and youth are unable to migrate (Urdal 2004; Rustad et al. 2017).

## **2. What demographic and climate changes are forecast over the next 10 years?**

### *Climate change*

Scientists predict global climate change will cause precipitation changes, melting snow and ice, rising sea levels, acidic ocean water, changes to severe weather, changes to ocean cycles, and changes to carbon and life cycles, varying by region and environment.

- The leading multilateral climate governance institution, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), warns that 1.5C degree average warming of the global climate would mean severe, possibly irreversible, damages (IPCC 2018).
- The IPCC report finds that 1.5C global average warming is expected between 2030-2052, though 20-40% of the world's population have already experienced 1.5C warming for at least one season (IPCC 2018).

More droughts and heat waves, more severe hurricanes, and sea level rises will impact where and how people can live.

- The humanitarian community is bracing for the impact of climate change as large-scale displacement, water shortages, diminished food supply from desertification, and water borne illnesses from flooding threaten basic human security (UNHCR).
- The effects of climate change are predicted to create 143 million climate migrants from three regions (Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia) by 2050 (Kumari Rigaud et al. 2018).
- The worldwide threat assessment of the US Intelligence Agency reports climate change and environmental degradation are "likely to fuel competition for resources, economic distress, and social discontent" for the upcoming years (Coats 2019).

### *Demographic change*

Scientists forecast significant demographic changes in the next decade, particularly across the Global South. Per UN population projections, the world's population will continue to increase in coming decades, but growth rates vary greatly across regions.

- The world's population is projected to grow 10% by 2030, from 7.7 billion in 2019 to 8.5 billion in 2020 (UN 2019).
- By 2030, Africa's under-18 population is estimated to increase by nearly 170 million

(UNICEF 2017). Sub-Saharan Africa's population is expected to double by 2050, which is more than twice as fast as South Asia (1.2%) and Latin America (0.9%) (UN 2019).

- The world is projected to have at least 43 cities with more than 10 million people in them by 2030, compared with 33 today (UN 2019).
- Nearly 7 in 10 (68%) of the world's population is expected to live in urban areas by 2050 (UN 2019).
- National Intelligence Council (NIC)'s Global Trends report predicts that non-state armed groups will increasingly use urban environments to increase their efficacy (2017).

### **3. How will demographic and climate changes in turn affect mass atrocity episodes, including their frequency, severity, perpetrators, civilian populations targeted, type of attacks, and other characteristics?**

The following points attempt to forecast likely changes for mass atrocities, but are inherently speculative.

*Frequency:* If climate change substantially increases the likelihood of armed conflict, we should expect to see a rise in the frequency of mass atrocity episodes, since mass atrocities occur most frequently in the context of armed conflict (Straus 2016).

Beyond the number of armed conflicts, if more conflicts are driven by group competition over access to scarce natural resources, combatants might conclude that eliminating their enemy is the only solution. This could lead to mass expulsion or mass killing rather than less severe repression or negotiated resolution.

*Location:* Mass atrocities might shift to occur more frequently in climate-vulnerable areas<sup>8</sup>, including coastal communities most affected by climate change. Specifically, areas with access to scarce resources (and possibly the minority populations which reside in these areas) may be the target for attacks.

- In Yemen, water reservoirs and desalination plants have been targeted for attacks since 2015 amid water scarcity (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect 2019).

As the number of climate migrants rises, conflicts could arise in locations where migrants and host communities compete over issues such as scarce resources (Fearon and Laitin 2011).

*Perpetrators:* As resource competition increases, armed groups may recruit substantially from populations with resource-related grievances.<sup>9</sup> The ideologies that underpin mass atrocities may shift to stress the existential threat posed by other groups (Snyder 2015).

- In recent years a far right ideology known as ecofascism, which combines neo-nazi ideology with environmentalism to argue racial purity is necessary for the planet's survival, has grown its online reach (Manavis 2018). Last year, perpetrators of separate attacks in El Paso, Texas and Christchurch, New Zealand wrote extensively about ecofascism in their manifestos (Darby 2019).

As the youth population increases, armed groups may also recruit higher numbers of child

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<sup>8</sup> For research on climate-vulnerable areas, see Busby et al. (2013).

<sup>9</sup> International Crisis Group (2020) notes that "for Sahel governments, linking jihadism to climate change is perhaps a way of attracting financial assistance by connecting two issues that mobilise international donors... For Sahelian leaders, this link also has the potential advantage of attributing the causes of violence to large-scale external factors for which they cannot be held responsible."

soldiers. Youth unemployed or disenfranchised as a result of youth bulges may also be more likely to join armed groups (Rustad et al. 2017).

#### **4. How will demographic and climate changes affect attempts by governments, international organizations, and civil society actors to prevent and respond to mass atrocities?**

Since climate and demographic change are global phenomena, their impacts on mass atrocities will likely be both transnational and indirect. As such, systemic and structural atrocity prevention efforts may be better suited to address atrocity risks associated with demographic and climate change, even while operational or “direct” prevention efforts will remain necessary.

*Systemic prevention:* It seems likely that leaders, such as the UN Secretary-General, who promote cooperative solutions to global challenges, will increasingly judge addressing climate change as the top priority. As a result, advocates may need to find new ways to fit atrocity prevention into the climate change conversation, such as by emphasizing atrocity risk as a reason to prioritize climate change mitigation.

*Structural prevention:* Since the effects of climate change on atrocities will hinge on governance and management of scarce resources, external interventions such as development assistance have potential to moderate the negative impact of climate change. There will be a need for both conflict- and human rights-sensitive assistance in adapting to climate change and more focused support for equitable access to resources to help prevent mass atrocities (International Crisis Group 2020). Beevor (2020) cautions that equitable resource management is not a substitute for conflict resolution, however, and often the underlying ideological grievances driving conflict will have to be addressed alongside resource management to prevent conflict.

*Operational prevention:* As climate and demographic change intensify, mass atrocity forecasters and early warning systems might be able to improve by incorporating climate and population data. Local civil society and media may play an increasingly important role in monitoring these indicators (Hendrix 2016).

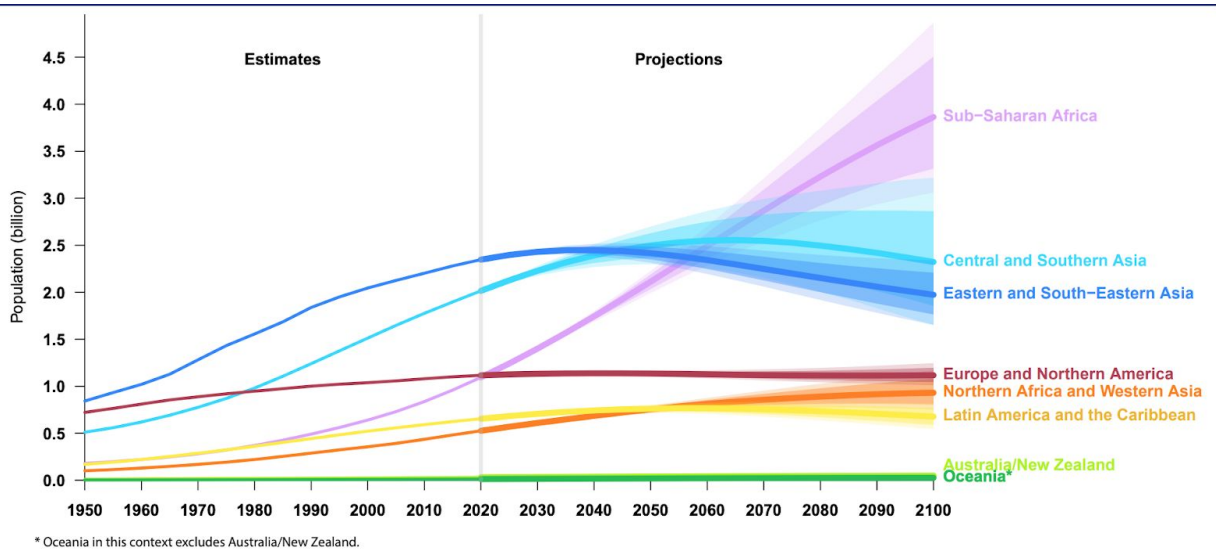
If mass atrocities become increasingly driven by climate and demographic-related resource competition, technical expertise on resource management might become more important to the success of political efforts to prevent atrocities. Increased international cooperation around climate change could also benefit mediation attempts.

As certain scarce resources become more coveted and valuable, targeted sanctions intended to deter the commission of atrocities may be designed to limit potential perpetrators’ access to natural resources.

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## Appendix

### UN Population Projections by Region



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# Ideologies, Norms, Mass Atrocities, and Atrocity Prevention

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## Introduction

This brief seeks to stimulate thinking and discussion about how changes in the realm of ideas might affect mass atrocities—large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations (Straus 2016)—and international efforts to prevent them. We focus on atrocity-justifying ideologies and anti-atrocity norms because of indications that both are likely to change significantly over the next decade, and because these changes could in turn have important consequences. For a more detailed resource about the contemporary scholarship on ideas and violence, see Leader Maynard’s [annotated bibliography](#).

For the purposes of this memo, I define ideology “as a set of more or less systematic ideas that identify a constituency, the challenges the group confronts, the objectives to pursue on behalf of that group, and a (perhaps vague) program of action” (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2014: 214).

By anti-atrocity norms, I mean ideas that seek to define large-scale, deliberate attacks on civilians as unjustifiable and to encourage action to prevent and respond to threats of mass atrocities. I use the term “norm” not to assert that these ideas have necessarily achieved this status of a common understanding among international actors, but because supporters of the ideas aspire for them to become consistent, internalized standards of international behavior (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

### **1. What is known about the relationship between ideologies, anti-atrocity norms, and mass atrocities?**

First, mass atrocities are associated with exclusionary ideologies (Fein 1993; Harff 2003) that define particular groups as alien to domestic social and political life. Additionally, regimes that use certain ideologies such as Communism (Valentino 2004) and other revolutionary programs (Kim 2018) to justify their rule are associated with more severe mass atrocities than those that lack this ideological backdrop. Self-evidently violent ideologies such as Nazism or Hutu nationalism justify national-level policies of group-targeted violence and motivate individual and group violence against those targets (Wildt 2014; Mamdani 2001, respectively). The influence of these exclusionary or revolutionary ideologies on mass atrocities may also depend on the

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simultaneous presence of other factors, such as the occurrence of “irregular” political transitions such as national independence or regime change (Nyseth-Brehm 2016) or totalitarian regime types (Rummel 1995).

The effects of ideologies on mass atrocities also vary across political contexts. For non-state groups—which have perpetrated a relatively small subset of mass atrocity episodes since 1945—adherence to Communist or other left-wing ideologies is associated with lower levels of violence against civilians than adherence to other ideologies (Thaler 2012; Hoover Green 2016; Stanton 2013), although these effects vary by type of left-wing ideology (Balcells and Kalyvas 2015; Kim 2018). Although Loyle (2018) does not find that the effect of Islamist ideology on non-state-led mass atrocities is statistically distinguishable from zero in general, groups such as the Islamic State have used exclusionary ideologies to justify genocide and other mass atrocities against specific populations.

Partly in response to the perceived spread of atrocity-justifying ideologies during cases such as genocides in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, international institutions, third-party states, and non-governmental organizations have embraced anti-atrocity norms that encourage states to refrain from and prevent violence against civilians. These instances of “norm entrepreneurship” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) resemble past efforts by individual advocates and non-governmental organizations to craft international consensus against mass atrocities and closely-related forms of violence against civilians. Examples of these past efforts include the International Committee of the Red Cross’s (ICRC) campaigns around the Geneva Convention (Kinsella 2011) and Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin’s post-World War II campaign for the Genocide Convention (Greenhill and Strausz 2014). Phaddon-Rhoads and Welsh (2019) observe that the “responsibility to protect” doctrine, a cornerstone of contemporary anti-atrocity norms, emerged from international debates of the early 2000s as “a political rather than a legal principle” (p. 601) that states invoked to justify particular actions to avert mass atrocities and other human rights violations. In this respect, anti-atrocity norms may more closely resemble an ideology of international responsibility for preventing mass atrocities than a shared norm of behavior among states in the international system.

Relevant scholarship provides inconsistent expectations about the relationship between anti-atrocity norms, the actions that follow from them, and patterns of mass atrocities themselves. The combination of anti-atrocity norms and atrocity prevention *institutions* (e.g., the International Criminal Court)—which create expectations of international action in response to potential mass atrocities—increases the costs of violence and discourage potential perpetrators (Kydd and Straus 2013). A stronger consensus around anti-atrocity norms can also embolden advocates of restraint within regimes, either lowering the risk of new mass atrocities or making new mass atrocity episodes less lethal than they might otherwise be (Bellamy 2012). At the same time, the expectation of costs imposed by intervening third parties against potential state perpetrators may encourage reckless rebellion that furthers short-term risks of mass atrocities (Kydd and Straus 2013; Kuperman 2008). In civil war contexts, interventions may also harden exclusionary identities and encourage further violence (Sambanis et al. 2020).

Scholars have also explored *how* ideology affects the onset, organization, and persistence of mass atrocities. Three mechanisms stand out in the current literature. Leader Maynard (2019) describes these as “micro” factors, but they cut across different levels of individual, group, and community involvement in mass atrocities.

- First, Straus (2015) suggests that national ideologies contribute to mass atrocities (and their absence) by shaping *elite perceptions* about the legitimacy of group-targeted violence. Where elites embrace inclusive visions of a nation in crisis, mass atrocities are less likely; where exclusive founding narratives are more widespread, mass atrocities are more likely to occur.
- Second, findings are inconsistent about the effect of identification with exclusionary ideologies on *participation* in mass atrocities. Although Straus (2006) indicates that Hutu nationalist ideologies did not contribute to the onset of the Rwandan genocide, he finds that individuals engaged in violence grew more attached to exclusionary ethnic categories and ideas of Hutu nationalism deepened as the genocide progressed. In another mass atrocity context, Ugarriza and Weintraub (2015) find that more ideologically committed ex-fighters in the Colombian civil war--fighters with a higher degree of agreement with “meta-narratives” about Colombian political development--were less likely to use violence against civilians.
- Third, studies about the effects of media during the Rwandan genocide (Straus 2007; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014) suggest that violent ideologies also provide a language of exclusion for hateful *speech* that can motivate or coordinate group-targeted violence.

## **2. How will changes in violent ideologies and anti-atrocity norms affect the dynamics of mass atrocities, including their frequency, severity, perpetrators, civilian populations targeted, type of attacks, and other characteristics?**

In recent decades, groups advocating xenophobic ideas that justify discrimination and violence against ethnic and religious minority groups and immigrant populations have grown in membership and political influence (see Mudde 2019 for a global survey). At the same time, ideological programs that were previously associated with notable instances of state-led mass killing such as Communism (Valentino 2004) are relatively dormant. These atrocity-justifying ideologies have motivated recent episodes of large-scale political violence, including pogroms in Delhi, India; bombings against Christians in multiple cities in Sri Lanka; and shootings in cities such as Christchurch, New Zealand; El Paso, Texas; and Pittsburgh, PA. The US National Intelligence Council’s most recent Global Trends report argues that “exclusionary national and religious identities” will grow more pronounced in coming years “as the interplay between technology and culture accelerates and people seek meaning and security in the context of rapid and disorienting economic, social, and technological change” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2017).

The expansion and deepening of ties between transnational networks organized around atrocity-justifying ideologies can create opportunities for larger-scale, more systematic, or more coordinated atrocities. Common ideas about politics motivate participation in transnational movements, financial assistance between movements, and coordinated action against common ideological opponents. The spread of “foreign fighters” with shared ideological commitments, for example, enabled the initial growth of the global Islamist movement during the late 1970s and early 1980s, although differences within the movement over beliefs, strategies, and tactics quickly emerged (Hegghammer 2010). These shared ideologies have also created opportunities for alliances between otherwise-under-resourced groups in contexts of civil war (Blair et al. 2020).

There are growing ties between political movements that advance these atrocity-justifying ideologies, such as financial assistance from states and non-state actors to other movements, interpersonal connections between movement leaders, and statements of symbolic support for ideologically-aligned efforts in other countries (see, e.g., Bob 2012). Although local political factors likely also contribute to the emergence of these ideologies, we can understand xenophobic movements as norm “antipreneurs” (Bloomfield 2016) that resist broader notions of human rights and collective responsibility underpinning global anti-atrocity norms.

Separately, global consensus around anti-atrocity norms appears to be weakening. This trend may be a consequence of anti-atrocity norms changing as they have adapted to new political contexts (Acharya 2004), of institutional overreach in the enactment of norms (Acharya 2013), and / or of backlash by groups that resist the norms in principle (Bloomfield 2016). Whatever the mechanism of declining consensus, the weakening of anti-atrocity norms may lead potential perpetrators to perceive mass atrocities as more acceptable or lead states and other actors that disagree with these norms to increase their support for potential perpetrators.

### **3. How will changes in violent ideologies and anti-atrocity norms affect attempts by governments, international organizations, and civil society actors to prevent and respond to mass atrocities?**

Declining support for global anti-atrocity norms in international fora may make these ideas less effective tools against potential perpetrators. The effectiveness of international anti-atrocity norms in signalling costs depends in part on the extent to which states are willing to authorize actions that reinforce these norms. If the group of governments that embrace atrocity-justifying ideologies expands, the potential size of the group willing to support anti-atrocity norms against these ideologies will decrease in turn. The dwindling size of that “anti-atrocity coalition” will make concerted action against mass atrocities motivated by atrocity-justifying ideologies more difficult to accomplish.

Reducing the credibility of the anti-atrocity signal that R2P and anti-atrocity institutions send will reduce the extent to which international action figures into the calculus of these actors. As ideas such as China’s adherence to the principle of non-interference challenge international consensus around anti-atrocity norms, it may also be more difficult for international

organizations such as the United Nations to muster the collective commitment of states to restraint.

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