

**SUDIKOFF ANNUAL INTERDISCIPLINARY SEMINAR ON
GENOCIDE PREVENTION
COVID-19: Future Trends in Mass Atrocities and Atrocity Prevention**

Rapporteur's Report

Alex Vandermaas-Peeler

Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, US Holocaust Memorial Museum

10 June 2020

On June 10, 2020, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum brought together scholars, practitioners, and civil society representatives to discuss possible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global risk of mass atrocities and efficacy of mass atrocity prevention. This seminar was the first in a series designed to stimulate new policy-relevant research and begin building a network of scholars and practitioners focused on global trends and their implications for mass atrocities and atrocity prevention. Future seminar series topics include the global distribution of power, new technologies, demographics, climate change, and resource competition, and norms and ideologies. This rapporteur's report summarizes major observations raised during the workshop.

Introduction

As the world grapples with devastation from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important that scholars and policymakers understand the risks of mass atrocities during this time and the potential impacts of the global health crisis on atrocity risk and response worldwide. There is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the effects of the current global health crisis. This seminar addressed some of the uncertainty around the future of mass atrocities and atrocity prevention by providing historical context and analysis, existing scholarship and data, and avenues for future research.

Participants drew attention to existing frameworks on genocide and mass atrocity prevention that recognize the role epidemics may play in mass atrocities and noted how COVID-19 interacts with other factors to increase risk. The UN's Framework for Analysis of Atrocity Crimes lists epidemics as a triggering factor that may exacerbate existing risk or even lead to the onset of mass atrocities. The UN also lists phenomena related to the pandemic as risk factors for mass atrocities, including intergroup tensions or patterns of discrimination against protected groups, political tension caused by autocratic regimes, and weakness of state structures.¹

¹ United Nations (2014). "Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention." https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/about-us/Doc.3_Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes_EN.pdf.

Patterns of Discrimination and ‘Othering’

Participants raised concerns about how certain groups might be subject to ‘othering’ or stigmatization as a result of the pandemic. Participants discussed how states can use pandemics to intentionally push anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies.² The reification of boundaries between groups can be used to shift public opinion against immigration or discriminatory policies against the marginalized populations. Additionally, participants hypothesized that marginalized groups may be less likely to seek health care out of fear of being targeted for harassment.

A historical analysis of pandemics shows that subgroups are often blamed and marginalized for being vectors of disease. Participants identified immigrants as a particularly vulnerable group for ‘othering’ during global public health crises due to their visibility. During outbreaks of the bubonic plague in the United States in the 1920s, Chinese and Japanese immigrants were blamed for spreading the disease while Irish immigrants were not subjected to scapegoating, despite having a higher morbidity and mortality rate. In South Africa, the spread of HIV/AIDS was blamed on immigrants, who then faced stigmatization. In the early years of the AIDS crisis in the United States, the disease was seen as a problem for “homosexuals, heroin users, hemophiliacs and Haitians,” often referred to as the “four Hs.” This ‘othering’ had severe ramifications for public health and the spread of disease among and discrimination against these groups. One participant highlighted how in the early years of the AIDS crisis, the disease was not perceived as a threat unless you were in a marginalized group and many did not take necessary precautionary measures. During the Ebola outbreak in 2014, African immigrants experienced ‘severe’ discrimination in Northern Texas after a Liberian citizen became the first diagnosed case in the U.S.

Participants identified a number of ways this ‘othering’ has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese people, and people of Asian descent more broadly, have experienced increasing verbal and physical attacks.³ Such incidents have been reported across the world, from the United States, Europe, and Africa. Participants also highlighted that this marginalization is built on latent anti-Asian attitudes in the United States.⁴ They identified that this is not a problem that emerged only under the current pandemic, but rather an amplification of existing prejudices. Participants also identified examples of ‘othering’ additional groups. In India and Sri Lanka, the virus has been used to justify anti-Muslim discrimination. Africans have reported increased discrimination, including forcible testing, in Guangzhou, China.⁵

² Claire L. Adida, Kim Yi Dionne & Melina R. Platas (2018). “Ebola, elections, and immigration: how politicizing an epidemic can shape public attitudes.” *Politics, Groups, and Identities*.

³ Anti-Defamation League (2020). “Reports of Anti-Asian Assaults, Harassment and Hate Crimes Rise as Coronavirus Spreads.”
<https://www.adl.org/blog/reports-of-anti-asian-assaults-harassment-and-hate-crimes-rise-as-coronavirus-spreads>.

⁴ Tyler T. Reny & Matt A. Barreto (2020). “Xenophobia in the time of pandemic: othering, anti-Asian attitudes, and COVID-19.” *Politics, Groups, and Identities*.

⁵ Human Rights Watch (2020). “China: Covid-19 Discrimination Against Africans.”
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/05/china-covid-19-discrimination-against-africans>

Democratic Backsliding and Autocratization

Participants discussed the likelihood of democratic backsliding during the pandemic. Democratic backsliding, or autocratization, is the decline of democratic institutions and freedoms, such as constraints on the chief executive, free and fair elections, or freedom of press.⁶ Drawing on analysis by the Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) project on pandemic democratic-backsliding, 48 countries were identified as being 'high risk' for autocratization.⁷ Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic V-DEM concluded autocratization was accelerating throughout the world.

Participants identified a few factors related to democratic backsliding that are particularly impacted by states' response to the pandemic: states of emergency, restrictions on freedom of movement, and restrictions on media. States of emergency, which many states have declared in response to COVID-19, have been previously linked with an increased risk of autocratization. During some crises, heads of state are given emergency powers that allow them to circumvent democratic constraints. Participants expressed fears that in some countries these changes will become permanent.⁸ Participants highlighted freedom of movement as an important democratic institution to observe during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there are legitimate reasons for states to limit movement by their citizens, participants raised concerns about movement restrictions that are limited to marginalized groups or enforced in a discriminatory fashion. Additionally, participants considered the possibility that states may restrict movement for longer than necessary for disease containment. Finally, one participant raised the example of Hungary's intensifying restrictions of the media. Prior to the current pandemic there were already significant challenges to a free press in Hungary, and they have significantly worsened in recent months.⁹ Media restrictions also make it difficult to trace both autocratization and the pandemic itself as it is difficult for journalists to access vulnerable populations as governments become less transparent.

Weakness of State Structures

Participants discussed the impact of COVID-19 on state capacity and non-state armed group activity. As a result of the pandemic and the related economic crisis, states are facing major challenges to meet the demand for public services. Participants suggested that decreased state capacity may in some cases decrease atrocity risk. As state forces are spread thin, will this lower the ability of the state to perpetrate violence against civilians? As participants noted, however, COVID-19-related cease-fires have largely failed. Other participants discussed that

⁶ Anna Lührmann et al. (2020). "V-Dem Democracy Report 2020. Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows." V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.
https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/f0/5d/f05d46d8-626f-4b20-8e4e-53d4b134bfc/democracy_report_2020_low.pdf.

⁷ Anna Lührmann Amanda B. Edgell, Seraphine F. Maerz (2020). "Pandemic Backsliding: Does Covid-19 Put Democracy at Risk?" V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.

⁸ Lührmann, Anna and Bryan Rooney. Forthcoming. "Autocratization by Decree: States of Emergency and Democratic Decline." *Comparative Politics*.

⁹ Jamie Wiseman (2020). "Crisis Point: COVID-19 Intensifies Challenge for Independent Media in Hungary." *International Press Institute*.
<https://ipi.media/crisis-point-covid-19-intensifies-challenge-for-independent-media-in-hungary/>

the pandemic may create opportunities for non-state armed groups to consolidate power by providing public services to gain support. Additionally, non-state armed groups may take advantage of over-stretched states to accelerate their activities, both violent and non-violent.

Questions for Further Research

- Through which mechanisms (e.g., strained intergroup relations, autocratization, eroding state capacity) will COVID-19 most affect mass atrocities and policy efforts to prevent and respond to them?
- Does COVID-19 alter motives or incentives for potential perpetrators of mass atrocities?
- What are the potential long-term risks of trends of autocratization and discrimination seen during the COVID-19 pandemic?

**SUDI KOFF ANNUAL INTERDISCIPLINARY SEMINAR ON
GENOCIDE PREVENTION**
**The Changing Global Distribution of Power: Future Trends in Mass Atrocities and
Atrocity Prevention**

Rapporteur's Report

Alex Vandermaas-Peeler
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13 July 2020

On July 13, 2020, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum brought together scholars, practitioners, and civil society representatives to discuss how the distribution of power in the international system might affect mass atrocities and international efforts to prevent them. This seminar was the second in a series designed to stimulate new policy-relevant research and begin building a network of scholars and practitioners focused on global trends and their implications for mass atrocities and atrocity prevention. Additional seminar series topics include the COVID-19 pandemic, new technologies, climate and demographic change, and norms and ideologies. This rapporteur's report summarizes major observations raised during the workshop.

Introduction

In this seminar, participants discussed how shifts in global power relations--i.e., the rise of China and a shift to a multipolar balance of power in the international system--could create instability that could increase risk for mass atrocities and/or influence the anti-atrocity norms such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. Large-scale instability is one of the strongest macro-indicators for mass atrocities--large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations (Straus, 2016). Throughout the conversation, participants traced how a shift in global power relations could create instability that could increase risk for mass atrocities.

Two central scenarios emerged as possible futures: the rise of China and the rise of "the rest." The debate also remains open on whether China will act as a balancing power to the U.S. creating a Cold-War like bipolar system, or if this a return to a multipolar system as seen in Europe prior to WWI. Though, some participants argued that neither previous system accurately encapsulates the complex power dynamics in a globalized world. Participants also raised concerns that using only one comparative case (the Cold War) limits the certainty of any predictions or extrapolations for the present day. They suggested incorporating cases of major geopolitical transformation prior to the 20th century, such as the power balancing between European states in the 17th century, to widen the lens and include more variation.

In the field of atrocity prevention, participants highlighted the ways in which these geopolitical shifts might shape anti-atrocity norms, including the possible reconstruction of R2P to deemphasize the role of interventions from the international community to prevent domestic atrocities. As power is redistributed through the international system, norms can be contested and reshaped. Anti-atrocity norms may serve as particular areas of contestation, as military intervention by external forces remains a fear for rising powers.

Rise of China

Participants discussed how the rise of China might influence anti-atrocity norms, particularly R2P. Participants questioned China's commitment to R2P, particularly in regards to authorizing military intervention to protect civilian life. They also discussed how the case of NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 has only proven to make China more hesitant to embrace R2P given their concern over the use of western military intervention to institute regime change in autocratic contexts.

Another point of discussion was the ongoing systematic persecution of Uyghur Muslims in China and what that suggests about China's future role in atrocity prevention. Participants raised concerns for what an increase in global power for China might mean for atrocity prevention when China is presently accused of perpetrating crimes against humanity against the Uyghur ethnic minority.¹⁰ One participant noted that if China is not held accountable for its actions against the Uyghurs, a growing number of states might support the idea that the international community does not have a role in atrocity prevention. Others noted that China shows concern for its international reputation, which could indicate resilience of anti-atrocity or civilian protection norms.

Decline of the U.S. and the Rise of “The Rest”

Participants drew inconsistent conclusions on what the decline of U.S. power means for contemporary threats of genocide and mass atrocity. They described the U.S. as being generally accepting of R2P and atrocity prevention more broadly, making its decline in global influence a concern. However, some participants suggested that the U.S. lacks credibility to speak out against abuses worldwide, given its own documented domestic and international human rights abuses. In these participants' view, the decline of American influence might then be a good thing, as its own human rights record is incongruous with being a leader in atrocity prevention. Notably, while the decline of U.S. global influence was discussed as both a positive and a negative for capacity and will for atrocity prevention, no participants questioned whether the U.S. was in fact in decline as a global power.

¹⁰ “Simon-Skjodt Center Director Delivers Remarks on China’s Systematic Persecution of Uyghurs.” March 6, 2020. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/blog/simon-skjodt-center-director-delivers-remarks-on-chinas-systematic-persecut>

Participants discussed states likely to benefit from the global redistribution of power, which included India, Indonesia, Turkey, Nigeria, and European states. The diffusion of power from one center to many other states may have indeterminate effects on the dynamics of mass-atrocities and atrocity prevention. One proposed hypothesis was that if the world no longer has one hegemon, regional powers will be increasingly influential in their role in conflict and atrocity prevention.

As the world shifts away from having only one or two centers of global power, states are able to assert their dominance and influence in their particular regions. This dynamic is evident in Russia's influence in Eastern Europe. While Russia may not be the global power the Soviet Union once was, it still maintains significant power over neighboring states. In another example, participants argued that while China maintains the power to shape outcomes in Asia, it has far less control in Latin America. Similarly, regional organizations have gained influence in recent years with prominent examples like the African Union (AU). Regional organizations and leaders each have their own set of predispositions towards atrocity prevention. Impacts of this dynamic will be contextually driven and dependent on what regional organizations exist and which regional powers wield the most influence. Anti-atrocity norms will be upheld or disputed through regional powers with their own interests, which are likely to vary. This variance would likely mean inconsistent acceptance and enforcement of anti-atrocity norms.

Questions for further research:

- Can civil society organizations or other civilian actors fill gaps left by states in maintaining anti-atrocity norms?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the rise of regional organizations for atrocity prevention?
- Will external support to civil wars increase with heightened competition between world powers?
- Are there more comparative points of geopolitical shifts before The Cold War to expand the universe of cases?
- What role does Europe play in the future of atrocity prevention?

This seminar was made possible by the generous support of the Sudikoff Family Foundation, which funds the Museum's Sudikoff Annual Interdisciplinary Seminar on Genocide Prevention.

**SUDIKOFF ANNUAL INTERDISCIPLINARY SEMINAR ON
GENOCIDE PREVENTION
New Technologies: Future Trends in Mass Atrocities and Atrocity Prevention**

Rapporteur's Report

Alex Vandermaas-Peeler
Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, US Holocaust Memorial Museum
14 August 2020

On August 14, 2020, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum brought together scholars, practitioners, and civil society representatives to discuss how the use of new technologies might affect mass atrocities and international efforts to prevent them. This seminar was the third in a series designed to stimulate new policy-relevant research and begin building a network of scholars and practitioners focused on global trends and their implications for mass atrocities and atrocity prevention. Additional seminar series topics include the COVID-19 pandemic, the global distribution of power, climate and demographic change, and norms and ideologies. This rapporteur's report summarizes major observations raised during the workshop.

Introduction

In this seminar, participants discussed how new technologies might impact the dynamics of mass atrocities and international efforts to prevent them. The seminar generally focused on two forms of technology: Surveillance technologies and information communication technologies (ICTs)—e.g., the internet and cell phones. Participants discussed the possible positive and negative impacts of these technologies on mass atrocities. Participants noted that technology can be an enabler and a magnifier of targeted violence against civilians, but it can also enable and support civilian self-protection efforts or efforts to garner international action to prevent or stop mass atrocities.

Participants noted that technology experts and specialists focused on conflict and mass atrocity prevention may differ in their definition of “new” technologies. Most of the new technologies discussed throughout the seminar—in particular, information communication technologies such as internet-enabled cell phones—were not necessarily created in the last decade. However, what is new is the worldwide dissemination of these technologies and their use by actors involved in the organization of mass atrocities as well as efforts to prevent and mitigate them. These new applications make these technologies increasingly important in shaping the dynamics of mass atrocities and the efficacy of atrocity prevention.

Surveillance Technologies

Participants discussed surveillance technologies as an area of particular concern in dynamics of mass atrocity and atrocity prevention.¹¹ Some participants commented that high levels of surveillance and state repression might actually lead to lower risk of mass killings. When states are highly oppressive, opportunities for civilians to challenge the state are reduced, which can lower the risk of state-perpetrated mass killings. However, one participant noted that even if the number of state-sponsored mass killings goes down due to increased state repression, the ability to prevent mass killings in these high surveillance authoritarian contexts, when mass killings do occur, would be exceptionally difficult. Other participants noted that technologically sophisticated surveillance is only likely in some contexts, namely, highly capable states.

Participants cited China's [surveillance](#) and subsequent [systematic persecution](#) and mass detention of Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims populations in Xinjiang as examples of how state surveillance technologies can impact the dynamics of mass atrocities and atrocity prevention. Participants noted the Chinese government did not stop at mass surveillance, instead creating a system of mass detention, which indicates state repression might not serve as a deterrent for further mass atrocities.

One participant noted that the major challenge of determining the impacts of surveillance technology on mass atrocities is that much of the surveillance is not visible. Without an accurate read on how much surveillance is happening or how it is happening, it becomes difficult to determine its effects.

ICTs and Social Media

The seminar also focused on the use of information communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the widespread use of social media. ICTs increase the ability of civilians to engage in collective action against the state, such as public protests, which participants noted might lead governments to use excessive violence against these civilians. However, participants also noted that social media could provide opportunities for more effective collective action to prevent mass atrocities by communicating information about mass atrocities to local and international audiences. Additionally, participants noted that states can restrict access to the internet as a form of authoritarian control, often during political uprisings. These internet shutdowns could intersect with government violence creating possible conditions for mass atrocities by allowing atrocities to occur unchecked by the international community.

As an example, participants discussed Facebook's role in mass atrocities committed against Rohingya people in Burma. The Burmese military [used Facebook](#) to disseminate anti-Rohingya propaganda during the 2017 [genocide](#). Participants noted that the scale of Facebook's audience and the social network's penetration of daily life is markedly different from any media outlet in previous decades. Facebook is now a policymaker in the international system, negotiating policy

¹¹ For more on the classification of ICTs and surveillance technology, see the background memo for this seminar (Zapata 2020).

with both democratic and authoritarian regimes. Additionally, participants discussed how existing norms and legal mechanisms fall short of addressing the role private companies play in atrocity prevention. States are often seen as the primary actors in preventing mass atrocities and atrocity prevention institutions and norms--from the Genocide Convention to R2P--were designed for states. Participants noted that the state-centric focus of these norms provides an opportunity for multinational corporations to skirt responsibility. They noted the most effective way of addressing this is to expand domestic and international law to reflect changes in technology use.

Questions for Further Research

- How does access to ICTs impact the risk of violence against civilians?
- What are the best avenues for updating the legal framework of atrocity prevention to more effectively account for the rise of multinational corporations and the spread of new technologies?
- Do new technologies change the opportunity or incentive structures for possible perpetrators of mass atrocities?
- Are internet shutdowns associated with higher risk of state sponsored mass atrocities?
- How do new technologies like deep fakes and facial recognition software impact the dynamics of mass atrocity and international efforts to prevent atrocity crimes?

This seminar was made possible by the generous support of the Sudikoff Family Foundation, which funds the Museum's Sudikoff Annual Interdisciplinary Seminar on Genocide Prevention.

**SUDIHOFF ANNUAL INTERDISCIPLINARY SEMINAR ON
GENOCIDE PREVENTION**
**Climate and Demographic Change: Future Trends in Mass Atrocities and Atrocity
Prevention**

Rapporteur's Report

Alex Vandermaas-Peeler
Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, US Holocaust Memorial Museum
14 September 2020

On September 14, 2020, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum brought together scholars, practitioners, and civil society representatives to discuss how demographic and climate change might affect mass atrocities and international efforts to prevent them. This seminar was the fourth in a series designed to stimulate new policy-relevant research and begin building a network of scholars and practitioners focused on global trends and their implications for mass atrocities and atrocity prevention. Additional seminar series topics include the COVID-19 pandemic, the global distribution of power, new technologies, and norms and ideologies. This rapporteur's report summarizes major observations raised during the workshop.

Introduction

In this seminar, participants discussed how demographic and climate changes might impact the dynamics of mass atrocities and international efforts to prevent them. As a starting point, participants clarified that there is little research directly on mass atrocities and climate or demographic change and the most closely related literature is on armed conflict. The most common setting for mass atrocities is armed conflict,¹² so focusing on the conflict literature provides the closest proxy.¹³ This evidence base is growing, with more certainty that climate change is associated with higher risk of armed conflict.¹⁴ However, participants also agreed that as a whole climate and demographic change are unlikely to be the *most* influential factors on the onset of armed conflict.

Multiple Pathways to Conflict

Participants discussed how in some cases the direct effects of climate change could be linked to the onset of conflict or mass atrocities. Specifically, they discussed natural disasters as an

¹² Straus, Scott. 2016. *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*. USHMM. 55.

¹³ For a review of the literature on mass atrocities and climate change see Hendrix, Cullen. 2016. "Putting Environmental Stress (Back) on the Mass Atrocities Agenda." Stanley Foundation. <https://stanleycenter.org/publications/pab/HendrixPDB1016.pdf>

¹⁴ Mach, Katharine J., Caroline M. Kraan, W. Neil Adger, Halvard Buhaug, Marshall Burke, James D. Fearon, Christopher B. Field et al. 2019. "Climate as a risk factor for armed conflict." *Nature* 571(7764) 193-197.

opportunity for states to use violence against civilians. Participants highlighted another possible pathway linking climate change to mass atrocities: climate-related migration. The societal “othering” and [discrimination](#) that migrants often face is also associated with higher risk of mass atrocity onset.¹⁵ Participants cited a study on migration and climate change that found the pace of migration flows and the characteristics of sending and receiving communities influenced the propensity towards violence and conflict.¹⁶

Other participants clarified that climate change does not have one singular impact on conflict. Rather, through a variety of mechanisms, in diffuse ways, the impacts of climate change slightly increase the probability of conflict occurrence over thousands of potential cases. While there may not be a smoking gun case where climate change can be proven to cause a conflict, the statistical evidence shows the risk of conflict onset is higher where the impacts of climate change are felt more strongly. Participants expressed concern that this level of nuance and that climate change is one of many causes make the issue unappealing to policymakers.

Impacts on Atrocity Prevention and Prosocial Behavior

As climate change increases domestic pressures by way of natural disasters, rising sea levels, and extreme heat, participants questioned whether it will become more difficult to advocate for state actions to prevent atrocities. They discussed how possible isolationism could occur if states focus on their own interests in the face of the climate crisis. Other participants had a more optimistic view, positing that states will be more likely to cooperate with each other in the face of the climate crisis. They explained that given the inherent global nature of the climate crisis, states may create stronger cooperative networks, which could then be used for atrocity prevention. Similarly, studies of violent conflict have found individuals personally exposed to violent conflict are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior.¹⁷ Prosocial behavior includes actions, such as volunteering, donating to charity or helping a friend or neighbor, that are intended to benefit others rather than being only oneself. Participants discussed how this finding might apply to other forms of social unrest, like an environmental crisis. Individuals personally impacted by climate change might then also be more likely to exhibit prosocial behavior.

Research Concerns and Disaggregation

Participants discussed how qualitative research was more likely than quantitative research to find a link between climate change and conflict. They further discussed how perhaps mixed-method approaches may help the two strands of literature more closely align.

¹⁵Straus, Scott. 2015. *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*. USHMM. 59.

¹⁶ Werz, Michael and Conely, Laura. 2012. “Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict Addressing complex crisis scenarios in the 21st Century.” Center for American Progress. https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/01/pdf/climate_migration.pdf

¹⁷ Voors MJ, Nillesen EE, Verwimp P, Bulte EH, Lensink R, Van Soest DP. 2012. “Violent conflict and behavior: a field experiment in Burundi.” *American Econ. Review* 102:941–64; Christian Davenport, Håvard Mogleiv Nygård, Hanne Fjelde, David Armstrong. 2019. “The Consequences of Contention: Understanding the Aftereffects of Political Conflict and Violence.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22(1), 361-377.

Additionally, participants raised concerns that the literature was over-aggregating the impacts of climate change. Rather than studying each discrete impact of climate change (e.g., more severe storms, extreme heat) most scholarship looks at the aggregate of all impacts combined. Given the vast number of possible effects of climate change, it could be helpful to disaggregate different effects to test various pathways. For example, acute natural disasters may affect possible mass atrocities in different ways than extreme heat or rising sea levels. Some impacts are annual or regularly timed while others are rare and irregular. Participants thought this temporal element was an important dimension along which to disaggregate the impacts of climate change.

Questions for Further Research:

- Do individuals personally impacted by climate change show increased prosocial behavior or attitudes?
- Are the impacts of climate change being underestimated by studying only direct and not indirect impacts?
- What is the difference in impact on conflict and mass atrocity between the daily effects of climate change (e.g., rising temperatures, droughts) versus its irregular and sporadic effects (e.g., natural disasters like hurricanes or tornadoes)?
- What role does state capacity play in the link between climate change and conflict?

This seminar was made possible by the generous support of the Sudikoff Family Foundation, which funds the Museum's Sudikoff Annual Interdisciplinary Seminar on Genocide Prevention.

**SUDIHOFF ANNUAL INTERDISCIPLINARY SEMINAR ON
GENOCIDE PREVENTION**
Ideologies and Norms: Future Trends in Mass Atrocities and Atrocity Prevention

Rapporteur's Report

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16 October 2020

On October 16, 2020, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum brought together scholars, practitioners, and civil society representatives to discuss how changes in ideologies and norms might affect mass atrocities and international efforts to prevent them. This seminar was the last of five in a series designed to stimulate new policy-relevant research and begin building a network of scholars and practitioners focused on global trends and their implications for mass atrocities and atrocity prevention. Additional seminar series topics include the COVID-19 pandemic, the global distribution of power, new technologies, and climate and demographic change. This rapporteur's report summarizes major observations raised during the workshop.

Introduction

In this seminar, participants discussed how changes in norms and ideologies might impact the dynamics of mass atrocities—large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations (Straus 2016) and international efforts to prevent them. The conversation focused on changes in two areas: atrocity-justifying ideologies and anti-atrocity norms.¹⁸ For the purpose of this conversation, participants used Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood's definition of 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."¹⁹ Importantly, while the conversation centered on the role of ideology in mass atrocities, participants noted that ideologies themselves do not cause mass atrocities. Rather, norms and ideologies can be used by perpetrators as justification for mass atrocities and can create conditions that make mass atrocities more likely.

Atrocity-Justifying Ideologies

The first ideational change participants discussed was the possible rise in atrocity-justifying ideologies. One participant observed that the early literature on mass atrocities and ideology

¹⁸ For more on these definitions and classifications see the preparatory memo for this seminar (Daniel Solomon, 2020).

¹⁹ Gutiérrez-Sanín, Francisco, and Elisabeth Jean Wood (2014). "Ideology in Civil War: Instrumental Adoption and Beyond." *Journal of Peace Research* 51 (2): 213–26.

focused on “transformational” or “utopian” ideologies that sought a complete re-ordering of society, like Communism or Nazism, noting that state adherence to these ideologies is no longer as common in global politics as it was during the Cold War period. Some participants also posited the use of utopian ideologies by actors involved in perpetrating mass atrocities has declined in the 21st century. They argued that the important area of study is “strategic ideologies,” in which the need to preserve the state and order within it is used to justify atrocities. While autocracy is in itself not an ideology, some autocratic regimes use an ideological logic of regime survival and state preservation to justify mass atrocities. Participants discussed the [mass detention](#) of Uyghur Muslims in China and state violence against civilians in Syria as examples of these strategic ideologies at work.

Other participants questioned whether transformational ideologies are truly in decline, particularly given the governance of and violence by the Islamic State (IS). They argued that IS’s regime in Iraq and Syria sought societal transformation that was comparable to previous utopian ideologies like Communism. IS used this ideology to justify genocide against the Yazidi and crimes against humanity against other religious minorities in Iraq²⁰. Recent research also found that differences within IS’s ideology played a critical role in determining what types of violence the group perpetrated against different religious groups.²¹

The seminar also explored the impact of populist and nationalist ideologies on the dynamics of mass atrocities. In particular, participants raised concerns that exclusionary forms of populism and nationalism create conditions favorable for the onset of mass atrocities. Religious and ethnic minorities were seen as particularly vulnerable targets for this type of violence. Other participants questioned if the danger of populism is subsumed by the concept of exclusionary ideologies, meriting a focus on the exclusionary aspects specifically rather than populism as a whole.

Anti-Atrocity Norms

Participants discussed changes in international support for anti-atrocity norms, although there was not a consensus on the direction of these changes. The anti-atrocity norm participants discussed was the idea that large-scale, deliberate attacks on civilians are unjustifiable and the international community should respond and intervene to prevent and respond to such attacks.²² Anti-atrocity norms therefore shape what actions the international community uses to prevent mass atrocities and how potential perpetrators interpret the costs of committing mass atrocities. Some participants described a clear decline in global consensus around anti-atrocity norms,

²⁰ For more, see “‘Our Generation is Gone.’ The Islamic State’s Targeting of Iraqi Minorities in Ninewa.” (2015). US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/Iraq-Bearing-Witness-Report-111215.pdf>.

²¹ Redlich Revkin, Mara and Wood, Elisabeth Jean (2020). “The Islamic State’s Pattern of Sexual Violence: Ideology and Institutions, Policies and Practices.” *The Journal of Global Security Studies*. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3654558>

²² Norms are consistent, internalized standards of international behavior per: Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink (1998). “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change.” *International Organization* 52 (4): 887–917.

noting that it is becoming more acceptable for states and non-state actors to commit atrocities against civilians. Others said the biggest normative change is that military intervention is seen as a less acceptable response to mass atrocities. These participants argued the contestation in anti-atrocity norms is not about whether the crimes themselves are viewed as acceptable, but rather if there should be international interventions to prevent or halt such atrocities.

Some participants argued there has been no retrenchment in anti-atrocity norms, citing evidence of [recent UN votes](#) in the General Assembly and Human Rights Council reaffirming the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). They argued that the norm is not in decline, but rather it is finding more consensus given the increased number of states who have signed on to R2P. In their view, the resilience of the R2P norm was impressive as it has managed to span two U.S. presidents and has become [codified into law](#) in the Elie Wiesel Act.

Participants also discussed how the contrasting cases of military intervention in Libya and international non-response to the genocide in Rwanda have had a disproportionate impact on anti-atrocity norms. Most cases are not at either end of this spectrum in terms of international response. Given this variation, participants argued that examples like Sudan, Mali, and Burma were more representative of most international responses to mass atrocities.

Finally, participants discussed how the growth of global civil society might increase the resilience of the norm. They highlighted the increasing role of non-governmental organizations and other civilian groups in constructing and contesting norms around mass atrocities. Some segments of civil society have shown continued support for the anti-atrocity norm, particularly transnational human rights groups. As states are increasingly not the only influential actor in setting norms, these civil society groups may be able to provide more stability and resilience for anti-atrocity norms.²³

Questions for further research:

- What accounts for the gap between the ratification of anti-atrocity norms and their implementation?
- Are costs for inaction to prevent atrocities declining?
- What is the role of regime type in atrocity-justifying ideologies?
- Do ideologies become more extreme or violent over time?
- Is the rise of populism associated with higher risk of mass atrocities?

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²³ For more on the role of civil society in atrocity prevention, see: "The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities" (2020). US Holocaust Memorial Museum. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/simon-skjodt-center/work/research/projects/the-role-of-civilians-in-preventing-and-mitigating-mass-atrocities>.