

The Responsibility to Do What We Can: Understanding and strengthening local, nonviolent strategies for civilian self-protection in the context of mass atrocities

Sentinel Project

Danny Hirschel-Burns

9 December 2013

The Responsibility to Protect doctrine, instituted in 2005, exemplifies the dominant paradigm for action during mass atrocities: international intervention. While R2P places the primary responsibility on states, the international community is nonetheless positioned as the final authority on issues of civilian protection. This approach has many benefits, but suffers from an inherent response gap. The international community is simply unable to react effectively to every mass atrocity scenario because of structural constraints. Therefore, most civilians that survive mass atrocities do so with little organized or institutionalized help from anyone beyond their immediate communities. But exactly how civilians manage this is a severely understudied phenomenon even within the larger (already neglected) subfield of mass violence against civilians. The lack of empirical work on civilian self-protection makes drawing concrete solutions on how to improve future civilian protection strategies difficult, and therefore a more apt approach combines theory on how mass atrocities function with non-comprehensive empirical work.

There are many schools of thought on why mass atrocities happen and how they work. Despite the many legitimate points scholars have made over the years, one seems beyond challenge: mass killing is an instrumental process. For political leaders, mass atrocities serve some other political goal and only occur after other attempts to accomplish the goal fail. Another point of agreement among scholars is that mass atrocities are much more likely to occur during war; the upheaval caused by war gives extremist leaders a better chance of seizing power. A point more contested among scholars, but no less convincing, is that beyond the leadership directing mass atrocities, ideology plays only a peripheral role. Perpetrators of mass atrocities are not bloodthirsty killers, but rather more like, as Christopher Browning termed it, ordinary men. For the most part, they are more convinced to kill by in-group coercion than ethnic hatred or sadism.

Broadly, there are two types of mass atrocities that commonly occur today: counterinsurgent (COIN) and communal mass atrocities. Many mass atrocity scenarios, such as the violence we see today in Syria, has an element of both. Strategies for civilian self-protection are significantly different between COIN and communal mass atrocities. Therefore, for the purposes of understanding them, categorically separating the two types is necessary despite the potential analytic simplification.

During counterinsurgent mass atrocities, civilians have the best chance of escaping violence by attempting to remove themselves from the conflict. If they can gain the trust of armed actors that they are not providing information or aid to either side, they may be able to avoid conflict altogether. During communal mass atrocities, the task is similar, but the tactics are different. Instead of simply removing themselves, civilians must change the logic that makes them targets in the first place. Misinformation and social myths are rampant in every communal mass atrocity, and countering these rumors is crucial in preventing the outbreak of violence. Secondly, leaders manipulate information to whip up ethnic hatred and instigate attacks. Therefore, either discrediting these leaders or removing them from power can have positive effects. Research on civilian self-protection during communal mass atrocities is still in its infancy, and scholars could do practitioners a huge hand by emphasizing the topic more in the future.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of instances in which nonviolent, local civilian self-protection strategies don't work. Violence during mass atrocities is an escalatory process, and the more entrenched cycles of violence become, the harder it is for civilians to bargain their way out of trouble. This happens for multiple reasons: the collective action problem intensifies, psychological pressures harden combatants' violent instincts, and lines of command falter. Finally, armed groups with inflexible ideological commitments or significant economic incentives are much harder to work with for civilians in mass atrocity contexts.

NGO's are in an ideal position to improve civilian self-protection strategies because of their ability innovate and their relative lack of institutional constraints. NGO's should always seek to work with existing community structures rather than inventing new ones, because in mass atrocity scenarios, nearly every social structure serves a protective purpose. NGO's should also be pragmatic, refrain from making moral judgments, and place civilian survival above every other consideration. NGO's have the ability to provide and disseminate crucial information communities often lack and should focus their efforts here. Once civilians have this information, NGO's should assist civilians in their efforts to protect themselves, but ultimately defer to civilian choices. Civilian self-protection does not present a comprehensive strategy for ending mass atrocities, but understanding and aiding the process could go a long way in filling the atrocity response gap.

[Read the full report.](#)

