
Understanding Nonstate Actor Behavior

The Determinants of Mass Atrocities

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Introduction

In 2014, the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) began a pattern of systematically targeting the Yazidi population in northern Iraq.¹ That aggression involved violent attacks on civilians, forced relocation, starvation, and large-scale massacres. In its 2016 report on this topic, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum argued that this behavior by the IS is genocide (Kikoler 2016). What explains the IS's tactical decision to engage in such behavior? How representative is this action across other rebel groups and violent nonstate actors?

The recent surge in violence by groups such as IS and Boko Haram, along with their deliberate targeting of civilians, has intensified the need to understand the conditions under which nonstate groups choose to deliberately and systematically target civilians for extermination. To date, most of our research into genocide and mass atrocities has focused on those actions perpetrated by state actors. Yet current events have increased the need to understand this behavior across nonstate groups as well. Furthermore, although a well-developed academic literature exists on the civilian targeting behavior of rebel groups, that work has not addressed the tactical variation of groups that choose to systematically target civilians for extermination through large-scale, repeated attacks. In other words, although we have considered the strategy and rationale for civilian targeting, we have yet to systematically investigate the conditions that lead nonstate actors to commit mass atrocities.

This paper sets out to address the question of the conditions under which nonstate actor (NSA) groups commit mass atrocities. That is, when do NSAs choose to deliberately, and on a large scale, target civilians? Understanding the use of this tactic across NSA groups has important implications for how we understand NSA behavior, as well as how we design and implement policy to prevent that behavior. This paper provides an overview of the data collection, research design, and data analysis completed for the 2016–17 Leonard and Sophie Davis Fellowship at the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide. This project aims to address the structural conditions, conflict, and group characteristics that make mass atrocity behavior by nonstate actors more likely with the intention of developing policy prescriptions to reduce or halt this behavior in the future.

What We Know (and Don't Know) about NSA Mass Atrocities

As Scott Straus (2016) lays out in his seminal work on this topic, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*, mass atrocity has no formal legal definition and much debate surrounds whether the term should be defined broadly or narrowly. Straus focuses on “large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations” as his framing of actions that capture the essence of genocide and mass atrocities (Straus 2016, 31). The category of mass atrocities or

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atrocities include genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing. The actions associated with these crimes generally include murder, extermination, enslavement, enforced disappearances, apartheid, and explicit violations of the Geneva Convention (Straus 2016, 35–39). Although these types of violations can be committed by nonstate actors in a wide variety of situations, mass atrocities are distinguished from other forms of civilian targeting by their large-scale and systematic nature.

An extensive literature exists to help us understand when mass atrocities, particularly genocide, by state actors are most likely. Work by Krain (1997), Harff (2003), Straus (2015), and Valentino (2013), for example, focus on the conditions that make genocide and mass atrocity more likely. The Early Warning Project at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, as well as efforts by the Political Instability Task Force, forecasts the countries most at risk for this type of behavior and those locations that should be targeted for prevention. Through this work, the increased use of genocide or mass atrocity by state actors has been found to be related to three key factors:

- Conflict and political instability
- State ideology
- Prior discrimination or violence against a particular group²

Although it is possible that these factors translate to our understanding of NSA atrocity behavior, we have yet to systematically examine the causes and conditions of this conduct.

The literature on NSA behavior has primarily sought to theorize the behavior of rebel groups, their tactics, and strategic interactions with governments and civilians. Specifically, work on civilian targeting by rebels has focused on the conflict, group, and structural characteristics that make certain behaviors more likely. Conflict characteristics affect rebel behavior, specifically the duration and magnitude of a conflict, the issue over which the conflict is being fought (incompatibility), and the total number of actors challenging the state at any given time (Cunningham 2014). Group characteristics—such as how a group finances its rebellion (Weinstein 2006) and the strategic aims of a group (Stanton 2016)—have been found to affect patterns of civilian targeting. Group structure has also been found to play a role in understanding nonstate actor behavior. Staniland (2014), for example, argues that rebel behavior can be explained by organizational structure. More general structural arguments focus on rebel behavior when the group is fighting certain regime types, such as democracies, and rebel opportunity cost reflected by the level of development in the country in which the group is fighting.

² There are also a number of disputed factors found to be related to an increase in the use of genocide, such as the presence of deep-seated hatred between or against groups, low levels of government capacity, authoritarianism, and economic crises (Straus 2016).

In addition to work focusing on the conflict behavior of rebel groups, recent data collection and analysis have sought to understand the functioning of pro-government militias (e.g., Mitchell et al. 2014). In many ways, pro-government militias (PGMs) operate in a middle space between the states they support and the rebel groups they often oppose. Yet the atrocity behavior of states differs from that of PGMs. Recent research has shown that states can either delegate their atrocity behavior to PGMs (see discussion by Mitchell et al. 2014) or complement PGM behavior by engaging in similar atrocities (e.g., Cohen and Nordås [2015] on sexual violence).

A number of comprehensive data collection efforts on nonstate actors and their organizational structure have been brought to bear on questions regarding NSA behavior during civil wars. For example, the Non-State Actor Data set (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013) catalogs group characteristics of rebel groups during conflicts identified in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)'s Armed Conflict Data set. The Non-State Armed Groups (NAGs) data set collects group-level information on those groups engaged in violent conflict against governments either within or outside the state(s) in which they operate. Group profiles in the NAGs data include information on the foundation year of each group, its objectives, and ideational characteristics (San-Akca 2015). The PGM data set provides information on nonstate actor groups linked (to varying degrees) with state actors (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013). This project builds on these existing data collection efforts to directly address the question of mass atrocity behavior by nonstate actors.

Testing Our Knowledge of Nonstate Behavior

Following from our current understanding of rebel and PGM behavior during armed conflict, many questions are still unanswered about the use of mass atrocities as a tactic of war. Transferring our knowledge from the existing literature, we would expect NSA atrocity behavior to be affected by conflict characteristics, group characteristics, and structural conditions.

To begin to address these questions I compiled existing data and coded new variables on the use of mass atrocities by nonstate actors. Although nonstate actors can be conceptualized in many ways, for this project I rely on a definition of nonstate actors that includes rebel groups and pro-government militias. This definition (and subsequent coding) does not include armed criminal gangs, ethnic groups engaging in violence against other ethnic or identity-based groups (i.e., groups not engaged in violence against the government or as an actor in a civil or interstate war), or terrorist organizations not engaged in a specific incompatibility against the government.³ The nonstate actor groups used in my analysis were identified from the Non-State Actor Data set (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013) and the Pro-Government Militia Database (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013).

³ Note, rebel groups and PGMs that commit violent acts of terror are included in this analysis.

The focus on rebel groups and PGMs is justified for three reasons. First, the project is exclusively interested in those organizations' ability to inflict large-scale, systematic violence on civilians. I am interested in those actions that are politically motivated and systematic rather than random or accidental. For that reason, I have focused my study on organized groups of individuals who are able to mobilize and recruit and who have a central operating mandate (in the case of PGMs) or incompatibility with the government (in the case of rebel groups).

Second, this decision was determined by data constraints. To conduct such an analysis, we need a full list of actors within a given actor type in order to distinguish between the actor that committed a mass atrocity and the one that did not. If we were interested in compiling a wider range of actors, that would involve gathering information on all actors in that group type; for example, we would need information on all opposition political parties in order to test which groups have committed mass atrocities. Rebel groups and PGMs represent the most likely candidates for committing mass atrocities, and this focus helps limit the scope of the analysis so that meaningful claims can be made about this subset of actors.

Third, as an early step toward understanding the behavior of nonstate actors, the project is interested in identifying those groups that can be most easily and directly targeted with policy interventions. Those groups without an organizational identity or a stated incompatibility are not easily targeted for behavioral change.

To test the effect of conflict and group characteristics and structural factors on nonstate actor mass atrocity behavior, I run a series of logistic regression models to determine those variables that influence the nonstate actor's use of mass atrocities. Based on data collection and limitations, the data in this analysis have two main inclusion criteria. First, I only include rebel and PGM groups that were formed between January 1, 1989, and December 31, 2007. This coding decision was made because of existing data restrictions. The two data sets from which my actor list is derived are the NSA data set and the Pro-Government Militia Database (PGMD v.1.1). The NSA data set spans from 1945 to 2011 and the PGMD v.1.1 spans from 1987 to 2007. Further, I built on events data in the UCDP Georeferenced Events Data set v.5 (Sundberg and Melander 2013) that covers the years 1989 through 2015. To use all three data sets, the overlap period (1989–2007) was selected.

Second, I analyze only those groups that have been involved in an armed conflict. For rebel groups, that means they have a UCDP conflict ID (which they do by definition since the NSA data set builds on UCDP data). For PGMs, that means they were assigned a UCDP conflict ID in the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict Data set v.1.0 (Cohen and Nordås 2014).⁴ This coding

⁴ The SVAC v.1.0 data set includes all active armed conflicts during the period 1989–2009, as defined by the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database (Gleditsch et al. 2002) and the UCDP Dyadic Data set (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Harbom and Wallensteen 2010). It includes conflicts that have either been active in one or

decision was made to ensure a comparable structural environment for all groups (namely, an armed conflict) and to concentrate the analysis on those contexts in which mass atrocities are more likely (e.g., Harff 2003; Straus 2016).

On the basis of these coding criteria, 184 rebel groups and 147 PGM groups are included in the data for a total of 331 nonstate actors.

Response Variable

The response variable in the analysis is mass atrocity. In defining mass atrocity for this project, I rely on a measure of civilian deaths from the UCDP GED v5 (Croicu and Sundberg 2016). These data capture the intentional and deliberate targeting of civilians by rebel groups and other nonstate actors. Information is recorded in event form, including the number of people killed in an individual event. Large variation exists in the number of civilians killed by the groups in these data. The variable ranges from no civilians killed by a group to 35,078 killed (see figure 1).⁵

As discussed above, mass atrocity behavior can be defined and measured in alternative ways. The GED data are limited in that they do not involve atrocity crimes outside of civilian death, such as mutilations, sexual violence or sexual slavery, or systematic policies of resource reduction that could intentionally lead to disease, malnutrition, or starvation. However, although this is a limitation of the analysis to follow, it is important to note that nonstate actors do not have the same resources and infrastructure as state forces; therefore, these alternative patterns of systematic atrocities will be less likely to occur across nonstate actors. In my conclusion, I recommend that future research expand the data collection on mass atrocity behavior to include variations in the ways in which nonstate actors target civilians.

more of the years 1989–2009 (the study period) or were active in one or more of the five years preceding the study period. *Armed conflict* is defined as “a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths” (Gleditsch et al. 2002, 1).

⁵ The UCDP GED v5 is noted for being a very conservative estimate of civilian deaths. That factor biases our results in favor of our null hypotheses—a group not committing a mass atrocity.

Table 1: Mass Atrocities by Nonstate Actors with over 1,000 Civilian Deaths

Group	Country of Conflict	NSA Type	1,000 Deaths per Year
Alliance of Democratic Forces (ADF)	Uganda	Rebel group	
Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo–Kinshasa (AFDL)	Congo, Dem. Rep.	Rebel group	✓
Al-Qaeda	United States	Rebel group	✓
Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC)	Sierra Leone	Rebel group	✓
Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA)	Algeria	Rebel group	
Army for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALiR)	Rwanda	Rebel group	✓
Army for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALiR)	Congo, Dem. Rep.	PGM	✓
Beli Orlovi (White Eagles)	Yugoslavia	PGM	✓
Chetniks	Yugoslavia	PGM	✓
Civil Defense Organization (ODC)	Angola	PGM	✓
Communist Party of India (CPI) Maoist	India	Rebel group	
Communist Part of Nepal (CPN) Maoist	Nepal	Rebel group	
Islamic State (IS)	Iraq	Rebel group	✓
Janjaweed	Sudan	PGM	
Kashmir insurgents	India	Rebel group	
National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL)	Liberia	Rebel group	✓
National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL)	Liberia	PGM	✓
National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA)	Angola	Rebel group	✓
Patani insurgents	Thailand	Rebel group	
Popular Defense Forces (PDF)	Sudan	PGM	✓
Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD)	Congo, Dem. Rep.	Rebel group	✓
Revolutionary United Front (RUF)	Sierra Leone	Rebel group	✓
Rwanda Patriotic Front (FPR)	Rwanda	Rebel group	
Serb Volunteer Army (Arkan's Tigers)	Yugoslavia	PGM	✓
South Sudan Defense Forces (SSDF)	Sudan	PGM	✓
Taliban	Afghanistan	Rebel group	
United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC)	Colombia	PGM	

Note: Both ALiR and the NPFL committed mass atrocities as a rebel group and then later in their operations as a pro-government militia (PGM). As such, they are included twice in the data.

The research on genocide and mass atrocities committed by state actors models mass atrocity as 1,000 civilians killed in a single year (e.g., as measured by the Early Warning Project). Very few nonstate actor groups are able to reach this 1,000 death per year threshold. Table 1 presents a list of the 17 nonstate actor groups that killed at least 1,000 civilians in one year during the group's life span as well as those groups which killed at least 1,000 civilians over the group's entire life span.

Theoretical Variables of Interest

Using the existing work on nonstate actor behavior during armed conflict, I test three theoretical categories of variables: (a) conflict characteristics, (b) group characteristics, and (c) structural factors.

Conflict Characteristics

The variables in this category include indicators of the conflict in which a particular group is operating. Data were collected on (a) conflict incompatibility,⁶ (b) total number of battle deaths in a given conflict (as a proxy for conflict severity), (c) duration of the conflict, (d) number of other rebel groups in the conflict, and (e) region in which the conflict took place. Incompatibility, battle deaths, duration, and region measures were taken from UCDP/PRIO ACD (Gleditsch et al. 2002; Melander, Pettersson, and Themnér 2016). The number of rebel groups was self-coded based on my complete actor list.

Group Characteristics

In this category, the variables include characteristics of the group itself. Data were collected on (a) ideology of the group, specifically, Islamist or leftist; (b) duration of the group, that is, length of time in existence; (c) central command structure of the group, if any; (d) corresponding political party of the group, if any; and (e) the group's practice of recruiting primarily along ethnic lines, if any.

For rebel groups, group size, group duration, central command structure, and corresponding political party were coded from the NSA data set (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013). Ethnic membership/recruitment information was coded from the ACD2EPR data (Vogt et al. 2015). Islamist⁷ and leftist⁸ ideology was primarily coded using Wood and Thomas (2017).

⁶ Conflict incompatibility is coded as a dummy variable for whether or not the conflict was being fought for secessionist goals. When the NSA is a rebel group, this variable is a measure of whether or not that group has secessionist goals. When the NSA is a PGM, this variable is a measure of whether or not the PGM is operating in a conflict context in which the incompatibility is over secessionist goals.

⁷ Wood and Thomas (2017) define *Islamist rebels* as those who "seek to organize society and government in accordance with a strict (fundamentalist) interpretation of Islamic law" (35). Groups coded as "religious" in either the Terrorist Organization Profiles or National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism

For PGMs, group size,⁹ group duration, ethnic membership/recruitment, and corresponding political party were coded from the PGMD v1.1. Islamist¹⁰ and leftist¹¹ ideology was self-coded for those groups that did not appear in Wood and Thomas (2017). Central command was self-coded following the NSA data set (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013) definition and coding rules for central command.

Structural Factors

Structural factors include static measures of state capacity and behavior, such as gross domestic product (GDP) and regime type. I also collected data on whether or not the state had or was committing mass atrocities during a group's lifetime and whether or not a state had ever committed mass atrocities. These variables are designed to develop a picture of the overall political and normative conditions under which a nonstate actor group is operating. The state atrocity variable was taken from the Early Warning Project. GDP data come from the Penn World Tables v.9 (Feenstra, Inklaar, and Timmer 2015). The regime type variable relies on the Polity IV score (Marshall and Jaggers 2003).

databases were examined to determine whether reports refer to the group as Islamic, whether the group publicly advocates the implementation of a system of governance based on Sharia law, or whether the group advocates the establishment of a theocratic state based on Islamic principles among its primary political objectives.

⁸ Wood and Thomas (2017) define *leftist rebels* as “typically draw[ing] on Marxist philosophies of class struggle and promote revolution as a strategy through which to liberate peasants, workers, and other oppressed class groups.” They continue, “Rebellions adopting these ideologies typically propose a fundamental reshaping of existing social hierarchies in order to ‘liberate’ the population” (34). Groups coded as “leftist” in either the Terrorist Organization Profiles or National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism databases are coded as being “leftist.” Those that do not appear in those data sets are examined to determine whether reports indicate that “groups adopt a Marxist-inspired ideology (e.g., socialist, communist, Maoist, or Marxist-Leninist)” (39).

⁹ Note, where data were missing from the PGM data set, I did additional research to code that variable using the highest estimate that was found.

¹⁰ I followed the same criteria as Wood and Thomas (2017) in deciding whether a group was Islamist. For example, a BBC report describes Turkish Hezbollah as “an extreme fundamentalist Islamist terrorist organization [that] released a manifesto . . . [calling] for Kurds to be governed by Islamic law.” According to that report, Hezbollah “is regarded as a violent extreme Islamic fundamentalist organization in Turkey seeking to install—through the use of force, if necessary—an Islamic regime based on the Islamic law in Muslim Turkey, a country defined as secular by its Constitution.” The report states that the group publicly advocates the implementation of a system of government based on Sharia law and is therefore coded as Islamist. Just because a group's membership is Muslim does not mean the group is Islamist. For example, describing the Mohajir Qaumi Movement, an article in the *Guardian* describes members as “Mohajirs, Urdu-speaking refugees” and goes on to explain that “a young firebrand leader, Altaf Hussein, founded the Mohajir Quami Movement to demand official recognition of a fifth nationality in Pakistan.” The article indicates that although the group's members are Muslim, they do not seek the political outcomes associated with Islamism. Instead, the group is demanding that Urdu-speaking refugees be recognized as a distinct nationality in Pakistan.

¹¹ I followed the same criteria as Wood and Thomas (2017) in deciding whether a group was leftist. For example, the Mapping Militants Project at Stanford University indicates that “of the five major Tamil militant groups in the 1980s, including the EPRLF, TELO, EROS, PLOTE, and LTTE, PLOTE was the group that adhered most to Marxist-Leninist ideology.” Because the project indicates that the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) adheres to a Marxist-Leninist ideology, PLOTE is coded as leftist.

Data for this project were compiled from existing data where possible. However, new variables were coded when data were lacking, as described above. Variables not included in existing data sources were coded by graduate and undergraduate research assistants at Indiana University. To code this information, the research assistants consulted media reports, nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports, online databases, academic books and articles, and other online sources. Media reports were obtained through Google and LexisNexis searches. Examples include the BBC, the *Telegraph*, the *New York Times*, the *Economist*, and the *Guardian*. Some local media sources were also included where applicable. NGO reports were obtained through Google searches. By far the most cited NGO source was Human Rights Watch. Reports produced by United Nations agencies and tribunals, such as the UN Refugee Agency and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia were also cited.

All databases consulted are publically available online. The two most cited databases were the UCDP Encyclopedia and the PGMD v1.1, but other databases—such as the Mapping Militant Organizations database and data from the Country Studies Series by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress—were also included. Other online sources were consulted when information was difficult to find. Those sources were obtained through Google searches. Some examples of online sources are GlobalSecurity.org, an organization that compiles online information about security and conflict-related issues, and IRIN, a nonprofit media venture dedicated to reporting from the front lines in conflict zones. Any text pertaining to the ideological orientation of the group, abusive behavior toward civilians, the organizational structure of the group, and the strength of the group from the sources was recorded.

Patterns of NSA Mass Atrocity Behavior

Before turning to the results of the analysis, I present an overview of some of the main patterns in the data. First, as identified earlier, mass atrocity behavior by nonstate actors is rare. Of the 331 groups analyzed in this study, only 17 groups killed 1,000 or more civilians in a given conflict year. Mass atrocities are evenly divided between rebel groups and pro-government militias. Out of 17 mass atrocity groups, 9 are rebel groups and 8 are PGMs.

The behavior of targeting civilians varies widely across nonstate actor groups. For the majority of groups, 206 out of 325,¹² there is no evidence that the group deliberately targeted civilians (see figure 1). Only 27 groups intentionally killed over 1,000 civilians over their group life span. The three biggest killers were the AFDL (Democratic Republic of Congo), the IS (Iraq), and Arkan's Tigers (Yugoslavia).

¹² Note that data are missing for six groups in the GED data set.

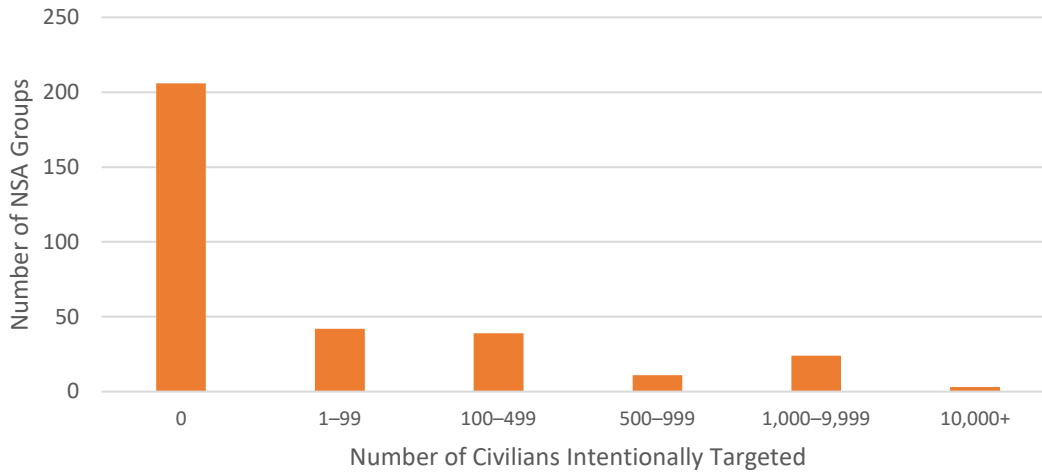


Figure 1: Civilian targeting by nonstate actor groups.

Mass atrocities by nonstate actors are not a recent phenomenon. They occurred relatively continuously from 1989 through 2007, with spikes in the mid-1990s for the civil war in Liberia and the breakdown of the former Yugoslavia (see figure 2). Mass atrocities declined from 2000 through 2007, though this pattern does not allow us to assess whether the decline is related to the advent of the International Criminal Court or other international pressures or whether what we are observing is simply a product of a reduction in high-intensity conflicts during that period.

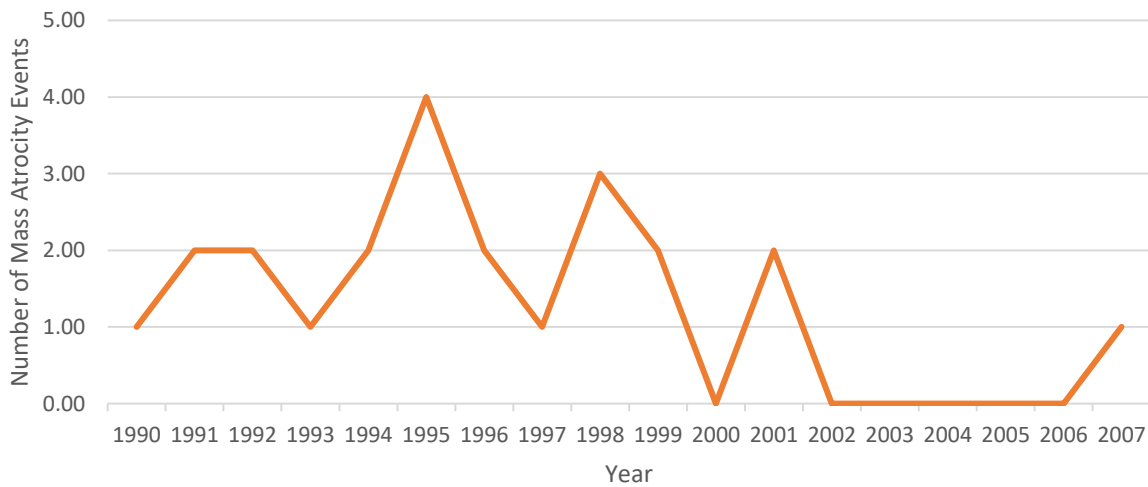


Figure 2: Mass atrocities by nonstate actors over time.

As figure 3 shows, the mass atrocities committed by nonstate actors between 1989 and 2007 took place during eight major conflicts: (a) the Angolan civil war; (b) the international war in the

Democratic Republic of Congo; (c) conflict in Iraq; (d) the civil war in Liberia; (e) the civil war in Sierra Leone; (f) the civil war in Sudan; (g) the al-Qaeda terror attack on September 11, 2001; and (h) the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. Although these events are distributed throughout the globe, for the most part, they all rely on preexisting conflicts as a site for the mass targeting of civilians. Al-Qaeda is a notable exception. A distribution of mass atrocity events by region is presented in appendix 1.

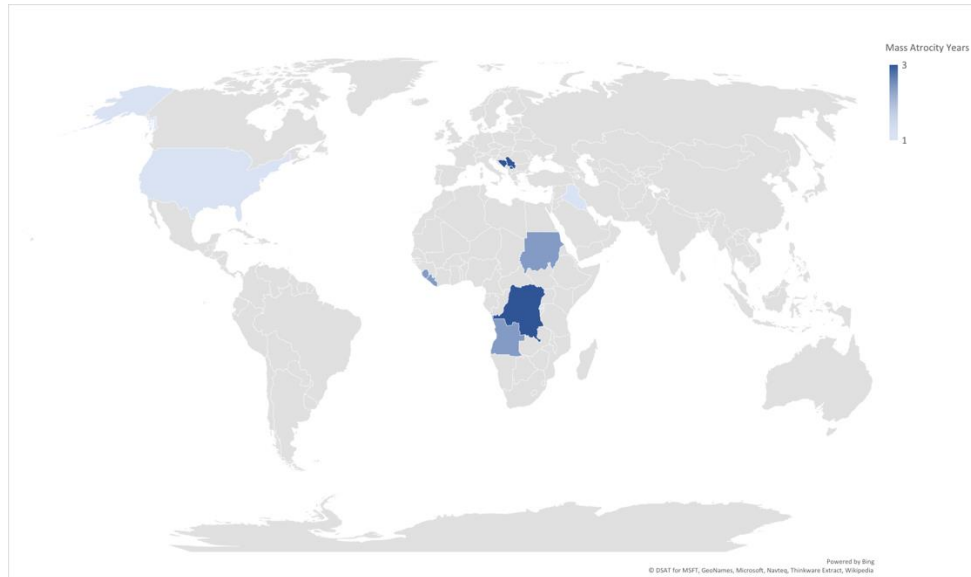


Figure 3: Mass atrocities by location.

Structural conditions are also likely to affect the use of mass atrocities by nonstate actors. This behavior is more common in nondemocratic regimes; however, in general, armed conflicts are more likely in this context (see figure 4).

One of the strongest correlations in the data is the relationship between nonstate actor mass atrocities and state behavior. Nearly all of the mass atrocities committed by nonstate actors took place in a context in which the state had also committed a mass atrocity within that group's lifetime. The only exceptions are al-Qaeda's attack on the United States and the Patani insurgents operating in Thailand.

Of the PGMs that committed mass atrocities, three were semiofficially linked to the state, whereas five were informally linked. Informal PGMs are allied or linked to the government, and although they may be armed or trained by the government, there is no official or formal acknowledgment of the link (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013). Semiofficial PGMs have a formally or legally acknowledged relationship with the government, but they are distinct from police and security forces (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013). The three semiofficially linked

groups are the Civil Defense Organization (Angola), the Popular Defense Forces (Sudan), and the South Sudan Defense Forces.

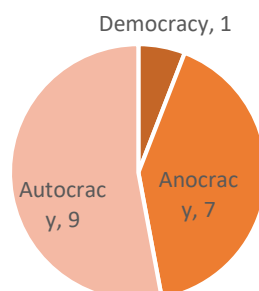


Figure 4: NSA mass atrocity behavior, by regime type.

Table 2 presents the descriptive characteristics of the 17 NSA groups that committed mass atrocities in the data (as defined as 1,000 intentional civilian deaths in a single year). Of note, although much attention has been drawn to atrocity behavior by Islamic extremist groups, only 3 out of 17 groups in the data for 1989 through 2007 are characterized by Islamist ideology (see footnote 9 for the coding definition of Islamist). These groups include al-Qaeda, the IS, and the Popular Defense Forces in Sudan.

Empirical Results

This section presents the results from a series of logistic regression models on NSA use of mass atrocity in order to determine the conflict and group characteristics and structural conditions that make this behavior more likely.

The research on genocide and mass atrocities committed by state actors models mass atrocity as 1,000 civilians killed in a single year (e.g., as measured by the Early Warning Project). To replicate these efforts, a measure of mass atrocity is included where an NSA kills 1,000 civilians in a given year. The response variable in the model is a dichotomous variable for whether or not a group intentionally killed 1,000 civilians in a year. Table 3 presents the three models that employ the full sample of nonstate actor groups (model 1), rebel groups only (model 2), and pro-government militias only (model 3).¹³

¹³ Because of issues of missing data and collinearity within the model, the model specification does not include the following variables: conflict duration, central command, state atrocity behavior, and GDP. Region was excluded from the model as 70 percent of mass atrocities took place in Africa, causing the African regional binary to account for much of the variation in the outcome of interest. Full models for these specifications are included in appendix 2.

Table 2: Characteristics of Nonstate Actor Groups That Commit Mass Atrocities

Group	Country of Conflict	NSA Type	Region	Regime Type	Islamist	Separatist Conflict	Ethnic Membership
Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo–Kinshasa (AFDL)	DRC	Rebel group	Africa	Autocracy			✓
Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRCP)	Sierra Leone	Rebel group	Africa	Autocracy			
Army for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALiR)	Rwanda	Rebel group	Africa	Autocracy			✓
Army for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALiR)	Congo, Dem. Rep.	PGM	Africa	Autocracy			✓
Al-Qaeda	United States	Rebel group	Americas ^a	Democracy	✓		✓
Beli Orlovi (White Eagles)	Yugoslavia	PGM	Europe	Anocracy		✓	
Chetniks	Yugoslavia	PGM	Europe	Autocracy		✓	✓
Civil Defense Organization (ODC)	Angola	PGM	Africa	Anocracy			
Islamic State (IS)	Iraq	Rebel group	Middle East	Autocracy	✓		✓
National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL)	Liberia	Rebel group	Africa	Anocracy			✓
National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL)	Liberia	PGM	Africa	Autocracy			✓

National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA)	Angola	Rebel group	Africa	Anocracy		✓
Popular Defense Forces (PDF)	Sudan	PGM	Africa	Autocracy	✓	✓
Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD)	Congo, Dem. Rep.	Rebel group	Africa	Autocracy		✓
Revolutionary United Front (RUF)	Sierra Leone	Rebel group	Africa	Anocracy		
Serb Volunteer Army (Arkan's Tigers)	Yugoslavia	PGM	Europe	Anocracy	✓	✓
South Sudan Defense Forces (SSDF)	Sudan	PGM	Africa	Autocracy		✓

Note: ALiR and NPFL committed mass atrocities as a rebel group and then later in their operations as a pro-government militia (PGM).

^a UCPD codes the al-Qaeda attack on September 11, 2001, as a conflict that took place on US soil.

The findings from the full model suggest that a number of the variables of interest affect the likelihood that a group will commit mass atrocities. In particular, the presence of a separatist incompatibility makes mass atrocities less likely. As the number of rebel groups in a given conflict increases, it also decreases the likelihood of NSA mass atrocities. The likelihood of mass atrocities increases during more intense conflicts, as measured by those with a higher number of battle deaths. Mass atrocities by nonstate actors are also more likely by groups with a longer life span and groups operating in a less democratic context.¹⁴

¹⁴ Regime type is a categorical variable with democracy coded as 0, anocracy coded as 1, and autocracy coded as 2.

Table 3: Nonstate Actor Use of Mass Atrocity, 1,000 or More Civilian Deaths in One Year

Variable		(1) Full NSA Sample	(2) Rebel Group Only	(3) PGM Only
Conflict characteristics	Separatist incompatibility ^a	-1.523* (0.853)		0.217 (1.340)
	Total battle deaths (log)	0.518*** (0.162)	0.993*** (0.297)	0.249 (0.291)
	Number of rebel groups (in conflict)	-0.389*** (0.133)	-0.461*** (0.153)	-1.618 (0.245)
Group characteristics	Islamist ideology	-0.102 (0.777)	-0.311 (0.965)	-0.727 (1.513)
	Group duration	0.133*** (0.046)	-0.021 (0.093)	0.152*** (0.053)
	Political party link	0.481 (0.639)	-0.492 (0.967)	2.144** (0.958)
	Ethnic membership	0.804 (0.701)	-1.475 (1.017)	1.901** (0.881)
Structural variables	Regime type	1.211** (0.596)	0.398 (0.849)	1.391* (0.869)
	Constant	-9.034*** (1.870)	-9.254*** (2.275)	-9.433*** (3.461)
Observations		325	178	147

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

^a The separatist variable is not included in the Rebel Group Only model (model 2), because separatist rebel groups did not commit any mass atrocities; given this lack of variability, its effect on mass atrocity behavior cannot be estimated.

The results from the Rebel Group Only and PGM Only models suggest that different patterns are driving the atrocity behavior of each type of nonstate actor group. The Rebel Group Only model suggests that mass atrocity behavior across this subset is driven in large part by conflict characteristics. In particular, groups engaged in high-intensity conflicts are more likely to commit mass atrocities. Rebel group behavior is also influenced by the number of rebel groups within a given conflict. As the number of other rebel groups in a conflict increases, the likelihood of mass atrocity behavior by one rebel group decreases. Of note, no rebel groups with a separatist ideology are coded as committing any mass atrocities.

PGM behavior is influenced more by group characteristics. In particular, a link to a specific political party and recruitment along ethnic lines make PGM mass atrocity behavior more likely,

as does the longer duration of a PGM group. PGM mass atrocities are also more likely in less democratic contexts.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Future Research

The findings suggest that although NSA mass atrocity behavior is affected by many of the same characteristics as government atrocity behavior and patterns of civilian targeting by rebel groups, all of the unique factors that could be driving these patterns have yet to be adequately theorized. Furthermore, two important findings need to be highlighted:

- Mass atrocities by nonstate actors take place in conflict contexts in which states also engage in this behavior. This finding suggests that a breakdown of norms or a contagion effect occurs in these environments, which makes the intentional targeting of civilians a permissible or a useful strategy.
- Mass atrocities appear to cluster in certain conflicts. Similar to the point raised above, mass atrocity behavior of one NSA group is often accompanied by that behavior from another group. For example, the breakup of the former Yugoslavia saw mass atrocity behavior by Beli Orlovi, Chetnik groups, and Arkan's Tigers. The Armed Forces Revolutionary Council and the Revolutionary United Front both committed mass atrocities during the civil war in Sierra Leone. The Army for the Liberation of Rwanda and the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo–Kinshasa both committed atrocities in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Again, this finding suggests that atrocity behavior is more permissible or more useful in certain contexts that drive the atrocity behavior of multiple actors.

At least three areas of future research will help advance this study. First, although the empirical models find some relationship between characteristics of the conflict and mass atrocity behavior, the current data cannot determine variation in patterns of atrocity behavior within conflicts and across time. There is reason to believe that, in addition to certain groups being more prone to atrocity behavior, some conflicts make this behavior more likely. Future research should investigate patterns of atrocity across individual conflicts and across the different groups within a conflict. Using new geographic information system data on the location of atrocity events, the scholarly community is uniquely situated to begin to address some of these questions.

Second, future research should address the possible variations in the definition of mass atrocity for nonstate actors. Although the above analysis focuses on the existing definition based on state atrocity behavior, an empirical question remains about how the variation in resources and skills across NSA groups may lead mass atrocity behavior to manifest itself differently. For example, should the death threshold be less for lower-resourced groups that may still intend to systematically target a group on a mass scale but do so with fewer than 1,000 deaths in a given

year? Additional data should also be collected on mass atrocity behavior beyond intentional civilian deaths. As introduced earlier, a wide range of behaviors compose mass atrocity beyond just the intentional killing of civilians. Although these data may be difficult to collect systematically, particularly for smaller NSA groups, they could lead to new information about the tactics and strategies that NSAs use and the potential effect of those behaviors on the civilian population.

Third, in addition to variations in the types of behavior that characterize mass atrocities, additional data should be collected on the target of atrocity violence. Although recruitment along ethnic lines was determined to be a significant influence on atrocity behavior by NSA groups, especially for PGMs, the GED data on civilian deaths do not allow us to draw meaningful conclusions about the types of people who are being targeted by a given NSA group. Additional research should be undertaken to match the ethnic characteristics of the NSAs to the target of their atrocities.

Policy Recommendations

At least two policy recommendations emerge from this work. The first addresses the relationship between mass atrocity behavior and armed conflict. In 16 of the 17 mass atrocity cases, large-scale, destabilizing armed conflict was already taking place. Similar to the findings in the state atrocity literature, mass atrocities by nonstate actors are committed in the midst of large civil wars characterized by violence and political instability. Although admittedly easier said than done, the clear policy recommendation from this finding is that ending the war is one mechanism for ending atrocity behavior or at least making that behavior less likely across nonstate actor groups.

The second recommendation relates to the observed contagion of mass atrocities. Nearly all of the mass atrocity cases in the data took place in a context in which the state itself had committed a mass atrocity at some point during the group's life span. The data, therefore, suggest a contagion effect of this behavior across groups. This factor allows for a quick litmus test of existing cases. For example, we would expect mass atrocities by nonstate actors to be more likely in those countries where the state is already targeting a given population or has done so in the past.

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Appendix 1: Additional Summary Statistics

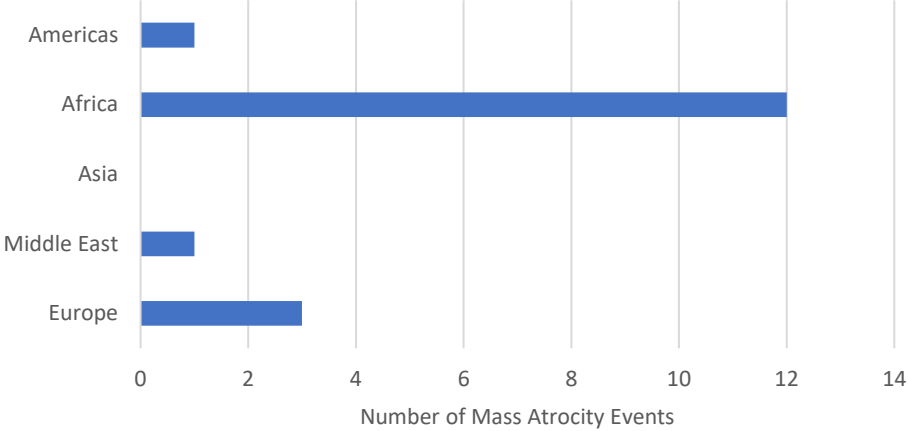


Figure A1: Mass atrocities by region.

Appendix 2: Full Models for 1,000 Deaths per Year Specification

Table A2: Nonstate Actor Use of Mass Atrocity, 1,000 or More Civilian Deaths in One Year					
	Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Conflict characteristics	Separatist incompatibility	-0.369 (0.831)			-
	Total battle deaths (ln)	0.877*** (0.190)			0.174 (0.389)
	Conflict Duration	-0.135*** (0.054)			0.051 (0.099)
	Number of rebel groups (in conflict)	-0.212 (0.135)			-0.518*** (0.197)
	Africa	1.147** (0.601)			2.531*** (1.228)
Group characteristics	Islamist ideology		0.351 (0.689)		0.597 (1.481)
	Group duration		0.092** (0.040)		0.257*** (0.089)
	Central command		-		-
	Political party link		0.285 (0.575)		0.771 (0.985)
	Ethnic Membership		0.716 (0.587)		1.165* (0.799)
Structural variables	State committed atrocity			-	-
	GDP (log)			-0.683* (.379)	-0.647 (0.464)
	Regime type			.13** (.476)	2.343*** (0.785)
	Constant	-9.430*** (1.760)	-4.032*** (0.607)	.289 (2.73)	-6.206 (4.446)
	Observations	325	288	240	153

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1

NOTE: Reported models are logit models with 1,000 deaths per year binary DV.

The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide

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The assertions, opinions, and conclusions in this occasional paper are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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