



-- WORKING DRAFT --

Atrocity Assessment Framework

Supplemental Guidance to State/USAID Conflict Assessment Frameworks¹

Purpose of this Guidance

- Mass atrocities are defined generally as large-scale and deliberate attacks on civilians. They are distinct from armed conflict, even as they usually occur in conjunction with it.² They often constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, or genocide.
- The purpose of this assessment framework is to help decision-makers and country watchers understand the dynamics that underpin a situation where there are indications of atrocity risk or where atrocities are underway.³ It can also be used to help identify and prioritize USG options to reduce atrocity risk.
- Although conflict analysis tools such as the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) and the USAID Conflict Assessment Framework (CAF) are good starting points for understanding potential or ongoing atrocities, fully understanding mass atrocities requires additional attention to certain key actors, affected populations, and dynamics that could drive large-scale and deliberate attacks on civilians.

Summary Guidance

- The ICAF/CAF examines how *key actors* mobilize *core grievances* or *social/institutional resiliencies* during *windows of risk or opportunity* to produce *conflict dynamics*. An assessment of ongoing or potential mass atrocities should begin with an assessment of conflict dynamics writ large.
- A mass atrocities-focused assessment should be anchored by the following questions, which focus on important and distinctive issues that might not be captured by a standard conflict assessment:
 - Which, if any, key actors currently have or might plausibly develop the motive, means, and opportunity to carry out large-scale, deliberate attacks on civilians?
 - Which, if any, groups of civilians are currently being targeted or might plausibly be targeted for deliberate attack?
 - Which other actors are enabling atrocities, or playing protecting or peacebuilding roles with respect to ongoing or potential mass atrocities?

¹ This guidance was prepared jointly by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations and USAID's Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance. All comments and questions should be directed to Annie Bird (birdar@state.gov) and Lawrence Woocher (lwoocher@usaid.gov). The Center for the Prevention of Genocide of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum also provided support for the development of this framework.

² Conflict theorists define conflict broadly, as "the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals" (J.P. Folger, M.S. Poole, and R. Stutman, "Conflict and Interaction," in *Bridges Not Walls*, ed. John Stewart, 6th edition, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995, pp. 402-410). "Armed conflict" has specific attributes in international law. See State/USAID paper on the intersection between conflict prevention and atrocities prevention, August 2013.

³ Indications of elevated risk could be drawn from formal risk assessment methods such as quantitative forecasting models, or they could emerge in the course of an assessment done for other purposes.





- This assessment should result in the identification of the dynamics that underpin ongoing or potential mass atrocities; a set of plausible mass atrocity scenarios; key developments to monitor; and recommended prevention and response options.

This guidance discusses various considerations that are particularly salient to developing an understanding of ongoing or potential mass atrocities, organized by the ICAF/CAF components.

Key Actors

The ICAF/CAF defines key actors as the people, organizations, or groups with the power and motivation to mobilize people and resources towards or away from conflict. In a context of mass atrocities, it is important to highlight three groups: 1) potential perpetrators: Though they might purport to represent an entire “social group,”⁴ potential perpetrators are always “key actors,” per the ICAF/CAF definition (e.g., the *Interahamwe*, not the Rwandan Hutu; Syrian Armed Forces, not the Syrian Alawites); 2) targeted groups: These groups might be classified as “social groups” or “key actors” in the conflict assessment, but might not fit perfectly in either of these categories (e.g., Muslims living in certain neighborhoods in Bangui, CAR; Nuer people sheltering at UN compounds in Juba, South Sudan); and 3) influential third parties.

These terms should be used carefully since simplistic sorting of actors into these categories can be inaccurate and, at worst, harmful. As discrete categories, they do not capture variations in vulnerability or in the nature, scale or duration of deliberate attacks on civilians. Further, these broad sweep characterizations can be exceptionally difficult to make in a prevention context. These complications shouldn’t obscure the reality that accurately understanding patterns of violence sometimes necessitates identifying a primary perpetrator, if there is one, as well as primary victims.

Potential Perpetrators

Who are potential perpetrators?

States: In most historical cases, the high-level authorities who are responsible for orchestrating mass atrocities are the ones who control states. They include heads of state, cabinet-level officials, military/security and intelligence officials, and political party leaders. Beyond the core leadership are a range of mid-level government, military, and civil society actors who translate national policy into concrete action on the ground. Finally, there are low-level perpetrators, including low-level officials, soldiers, and civilians who carry out physical violence. The low-level perpetrators are not the ones who design the policy or organize others to commit it, but are those who provide the labor and manpower of violence, without whom the execution would not be possible. Each of these levels of potential perpetrator is important to consider in an assessment and

⁴ ICAF 2.0 uses the term “social group” whereas USAID’s CAF 2.0 uses the term “identity group.” We use them here synonymously.





may lend itself to different opportunities for deterrence. High level authorities may have strong command and control over mid- and low-level officials, but atrocities can also be committed by states without strong command and control.

Non-state armed groups: Particularly in states that are in collapse, ongoing armed conflict, or where the power of the state is quite weak, non-state armed groups may direct and authorize atrocities. Non-state perpetrators are typically rebel groups, militia, or “terrorist” groups. The organization of non-state groups differs from states, but most will exhibit some degree of hierarchy or distribution of responsibilities analogous to the high-level, mid-level and low-level perpetrators described above.⁵

What motives drive mass atrocities?

It is important to note that multiple logics may be at play in a given situation, with different motivations dominating at different levels of organization. Often strategic or ideological considerations will dominate decision-making at higher levels of command while criminal, emotional, or opportunistic motivations drive behavior at lower levels and may be manipulated by the senior leadership.

In some cases, the violence is intrinsic to the goals or ideology of the perpetrator. In such cases, whatever the nature of the original or underlying drivers of conflict (e.g., land tenure, control of natural resources), one or more perpetrator comes to view the very existence of a portion of the civilian population as a threat, and thus adopts a strategy that targets them. Where such violence is intrinsic to perpetrators’ goals, it is not only their choice of strategy that must be altered, but their fundamental framing of the situation and understanding of their interests. In such cases, the outright defeat and dismantling of the perpetrator may be required to secure the civilian populace.

In other cases, violence against civilians may be more instrumental than intrinsic to the perpetrator group or its goals. For example, the goal of violence against civilians may be tangible rewards—looting, for example, or seizure of land. Attacking civilians may also be an integral part of a perpetrator’s recruitment and retention strategy. Terrorists and insurgent groups may intentionally attack civilians as part of their strategy to undermine or overthrow a regime, while governments may engage in indiscriminate violence as part of a coercive counter-insurgency campaign. Where violence against civilians is used instrumentally, strategies that seek to raise the costs of such violence may induce perpetrators to seek alternate means to achieve their goals.

Intra-group dynamics are also important. There is often a lot of contestation within groups about the stakes involved and the best course of action prior to the use of violence. The way that contest works out significantly influences on what occurs, and thus offers a potential path for intervention.

⁵ See Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 2014.





A number of motives might drive high-level authorities, or elites, to mobilize mass atrocities; for example, the perception of threat to their power or survival, or an exclusionary ideology that dehumanizes a particular group. Elites also often leverage existing social biases or grievances instrumentally to advance personal political goals. Another motive involves a change in calculations of the efficacy or urgency of mass killing for achieving success in an armed conflict or political struggle, for example, if elites perceive that they have exhausted less violent alternatives to mass killing. Motives are heterogeneous—within individuals and across them—and can be hard to pinpoint. Nevertheless, motive is important to assess since it is a driver of mass atrocities and potentially a focus of preventive action.⁶

What means enable mass atrocities?

It is important to identify the means or logistical capacity that perpetrators need to carry out atrocities, such as weapons, funding, organization, recruitment, and training. When potential perpetrators are already organized into regular or irregular military units, as is usually the case in situations of active armed conflict or where violence has been committed in the recent past, then significant means for mass violence are already in place. In other cases, perpetrators must rely on other strategies to mobilize people to attack civilians, for example, by stoking fear and hatred of the target group, aided by a strong propaganda capacity. The narrative is likely to include “dangerous speech,” such as dehumanization of the target group, accusing it of plotting harm, or emphasizing past instances of supposed harm by the target group.⁷ Marginalization of moderates is a means of consolidating this mobilization capacity, especially by restricting their ability to use mass media. Similarly, restricting interaction with the international community may remove moderating influences.

The means for carrying out atrocities may also be supported by strong obedience to authority, such as legitimacy with non-targeted groups, a culture of obedience, an effective system for detecting and punishing noncompliance, and rewards for compliance. Rewards might include permitting seizure of victim property and positions, with choice prizes going to those with exemplary compliance. Rapid promotion within perpetrator organizations might also be awarded for exemplary compliance. Once key actors get a critical mass following their will, they may be aided by strong peer pressure and social ties within the perpetrator identity group creating a band wagon effect. This may be supported by strong penalties for nonconformance and weak or absent positive ties to the target group. Another set of means are logistical: perpetrators need control of infrastructure, borders and arms to carry out large scale attacks effectively.⁸

⁶ See Max Kelly, “Protecting Civilians: Proposed Principles for Military Operations,” Stimson Center, Spring 2010.

⁷ This term is used to describe the type of inflammatory hate speech commonly seen before and during genocide and mass atrocities. See voicesthatpoison.org.

⁸ See Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 2014.





Targeted Groups

Who are targeted groups?

Targeted groups include civilian groups/populations that might be subject to large-scale and deliberate attack. Groups might be targeted based on any of a wide variety of actual or perceived characteristics, including nationality, ethnicity, religion/sect, race, assumed political affiliation, social class, means of livelihood, identities being constructed as inferior, or geographical location. The targeting is generally based on a perception that the group impedes or threatens the power, interests or goals of the perpetrator. Threat perception can be aggravated if the group is perceived as supporting or being affiliated with a combatant group (e.g., co-ethnics with a rebel group). Other times, they are targeted for strategic reasons such as to gain territory or impose control. Within targeted groups, it is important to identify subgroups that are more vulnerable and more likely to suffer (e.g., displaced persons). It is also possible for individuals within targeted groups to “become” perpetrators if they commit violence against civilians based on their identity or social group.

What motivates how targeted groups prevent or respond to atrocities?

It is safe to assume that physical survival is the primary “motive” of any group targeted for large-scale deadly attack, but other interests will affect their interactions with potential perpetrators, third parties and other members of the targeted group in ways that impact how effective they are at preventing or reacting to mass atrocities. Members and leaders of targeted groups may have a variety of motives, such as: survival (physical, cultural, political); retaining property or residency; regaining an original homeland; gaining more control over their own group; personal profit or careerism; preserving the pride of group or self; removing the threat; or revenge. Leaders of targeted groups can play an important role in mobilizing people or resources against atrocities, and their personal motives may differ from the dominant motives of the group or what they publicly express. The personal ambitions and motives of community leaders, and actions of third parties, could shape the pathways toward violent or non-violent action. Furthermore, a group’s history may already involve mass atrocities or other severe violence which through a similar logic contributed to the actions of the current perpetrators. The process of detecting, analyzing and breaking such cycles is likely to be a key component of a sustainable solution.

What means do targeted groups have to reduce their vulnerability or protect themselves?

A group’s means of self-protection are any capacities to counter, mitigate, deter or avoid a threat.⁹ Means may include methods of civil resistance, flight, countering propaganda, diversifying media reporting, efforts to resolve underlying conflicts, building alliances with moderates in the perpetrator group or third parties, nonviolent protests, documenting and publicizing the threat or actual atrocities, and legal action. Members of targeted

⁹ See Aditi Gorur, “Community Self Protection Strategies: How Peacekeepers Can Help or Harm,” Stimson Center, August 2013.





groups may also resort to violence and may even commit atrocities, thereby becoming perpetrators themselves.

Influential Third Parties

Influential third parties can include “enablers” and “disablers” of atrocities, as well as others, such as bystanders.

Who are third-party enablers?

Mass atrocities are complex, organized crimes, and perpetrators are rarely able to carry them out alone. They often rely on “enablers”— local, national, regional, and international actors—to provide the goods and services (such as weapons, resources, and training) necessary to commit their crimes.¹⁰ Together, enablers facilitate a supply chain that fuels violence against civilians. They may also offer political and moral support to perpetrators. Enablers’ motives may be similar to the perpetrators’, or may derive from their own power or economic interests. Also, the international community can inadvertently enable atrocities, e.g., by pushing for elections at a sensitive point in time or providing foreign assistance that reinforces inter-group inequalities and systemic discrimination.

Who are third-party disablers?

Third party disablers include actors that work to prevent or respond to atrocities. These actors may be located in the country where atrocity risks are present, in the region, or international actors. Domestic actors may include local peacebuilding or human rights groups, religious organizations and leaders, or other community groups. Regional actors, including neighboring states and organizations such as the African Union or Organization of American States, may help respond to atrocities. International actors, including the wide range of UN agencies, peacekeeping missions, human rights rapporteurs and treaty bodies, as well as international NGOs and foreign state governments can also help prevent and respond to atrocities. Transitional justice mechanisms such as international, hybrid, and domestic courts, commissions of inquiry, and other measures may play an important preventive role as well. Domestic and international media outlets and businesses can also help reduce risks. The motivations of third party disablers are diverse – they could be humanitarian, legal, religious, political, diplomatic, military, or economic. The means of each of these actors also vary widely. They all have different relationships with, or access to, perpetrators and targeted groups that can be used to prevent or respond to atrocities.

Who are bystanders?

Bystanders are people who witness but are not directly affected by the actions of perpetrators and neither support nor resist atrocities. They help shape society by their reactions. “They can define the meaning of events and move others toward empathy or indifference. They can promote values and norms of caring, or by their passivity or

¹⁰ See Human Rights First, “How to Disrupt Enablers of Mass Atrocities,” February 2013.





participation in the system, they can affirm the perpetrators.”¹¹ There are different degrees of bystander behavior. Analysts should consider what actions might help move bystanders to reject or resist atrocities.

Core Grievances

Although grievances will be examined in a conflict assessment, it is important to assess what grievances, if any, are driving an increase in atrocity risk, e.g., history of past atrocities, lack of access to or competition for resources and/or land, identity group discrimination, lack of political representation, corruption, and impunity. Some experts suggest that atrocity risk rises when the government’s perception of threat is sharply increased by a specific grievance or set of grievances being expressed or the manner in which it is expressed – for example, calling for the removal of senior officials due to alleged electoral fraud. However, in contexts where there are significant atrocity risks, there is typically not just one grievance, but many that feed each other. It is therefore necessary to look at the dynamic interaction of grievances.

Social and Institutional Resiliencies

Resiliencies, according to the ICAF/CAF, are social relationships, structures or processes that are able to provide dispute resolution and meet basic needs through non-violent means. Resiliencies that might be activated domestically to prevent or stop mass atrocities include: bridging identities, relationships, networks and organizations; shared culture or values between targeted groups, perpetrators or potential allies that mitigate against mass atrocities, such as religious teachings or a strongly unifying historic event or figure; promotion of and respect for norms and laws against atrocities; revulsion to past atrocities or severe violence; exhaustion with cycles of violence; traditions and values of questioning authority or protecting freedom of information; and economic relationships that depend on the victim population. Trans-border resiliencies include a desire by perpetrators and third parties to be seen as respectable and law-abiding and to maintain political, economic and military relationships, and relationships between victim groups and internationals. Resiliencies may involve respect for international human rights and humanitarian norms and laws and military capacity for rapid intervention and civilian protection.

Triggers and Windows of Atrocity Risk

Windows of atrocity risk are changes in the strategic situation increasing incentives or feasibility for perpetrators or enablers to mobilize people or resources for atrocities. *Triggers* are more discrete, highly salient events (or chain of events) that instigate or catalyze the perpetration of atrocities. Triggers can be understood as a situation or process producing a sufficient change in a potential perpetrator’s cost-benefit analysis or perceived opportunities to lead to atrocities.

What are possible triggers of mass atrocities?

¹¹ See Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and other Group Violence*, Cambridge University Press, 1989: 87.





Triggers for atrocities can be hard to identify in advance or in real time because it is difficult to predict whether a particular event will lead to atrocities. Triggers may involve a concrete event that immediately activates atrocities, or a series of events that over time produce atrocities. Triggers may include attacks, assassinations, coups, etc. that change perpetrator calculations of the efficacy or urgency of atrocities. Particularly relevant triggers include events that can be characterized as violent, treacherous or offensive acts by members of the targeted group, such as assassination of a leader or a blasphemous social media post. Early warning indicators can help identify the universe of places to monitor closely and those events that may act as triggers.

What are possible windows of atrocity risk?

Windows of atrocity risk may include: elections or other regime transitions, major legal reforms, presence of foreign enablers or other forms of regional destabilization; and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs that are poorly designed or implemented. Risks are also presented by other crises that distract powers that otherwise might intervene, at times when leadership of the victim group is passive, weak or in turmoil, or when the victim group loses an ally.

Windows of Opportunity to Prevent Atrocities

Windows of opportunity are changes in the strategic situation increasing incentives or feasibility for perpetrators or enablers to turn away from atrocities or for disablers or targeted groups to mobilize people or resources to prevent or respond to atrocities. Windows of opportunity may be available, for example, during ceasefires, interventions by peacekeepers, events providing international access to the country or its leaders, deadlines for international decisions, key moments in ICC proceedings such as the opening of investigations, and UNSC and HRC resolutions, or perpetrator infighting or logistical overreach.

Actors may respond differently to the same window or trigger – infighting among perpetrators might be an opportunity for victims to escape, protectors to apprehend leaders of the worst faction, or peacebuilders to press for a deal – or infighting might pose a risk of an extremist wing instigating atrocities that the group or its leaders had previously resisted.

Outputs of an Atrocity Assessment

- *Three to five key “atrocity dynamics.* Each should describe 1) a key actor with motivation and means to mobilizes people or resources for or against atrocities, 2) grievances, interests or resiliencies that the key actor uses to mobilize followers, and 3) window and/or trigger that increases the atrocity risk or prevention opportunity, if identifiable. The dynamics may be already happening or likely to develop in the near future. Analysts should also identify key unknowns to answer.
- *A set of plausible scenarios in which mass atrocities could be committed based on these dynamics:* The goal is not necessarily identification of the most likely scenarios. Some plausible scenarios might be unlikely but high impact, meriting consideration because they would result in high numbers of civilians injured or killed. Exploration of the





scenarios should be used to better understand how and why atrocities are being committed, or could be committed in the future, and to communicate this to policy makers.

- *Key developments to monitor:* An assessment should identify trends or events to track over time that would signal significant change in the potential for mass atrocities. While these should be tailored to specific atrocity dynamics and scenarios, in general, trends to watch might include the following: rising discrimination; an increase in dangerous speech; media restraints or control; marginalization of moderates; increasing withdrawal from the international community; rising discussion of expulsion or extermination of an identity group as a solution; concentration or limitations on movement of potential victim groups; widespread organization of hate groups; large-scale purchase of small arms; localized atrocities that might be trial runs for larger pending atrocities; increasing arrests or disappearances of influential members of the potential target group; and formation or expansion of paramilitary organizations associated with potential perpetrators.
- *Recommendations:* An assessment should identify and prioritize a discrete set of recommendations for atrocity prevention or response. Depending on the context and audience of the assessment, recommendations may be focused on the U.S. government or address international or domestic actors that can be influenced. Recommendations should be made with an eye towards the comparative advantages of each relevant actor and should consider the timeframe, bureaucratic hurdles, and any risks of unintended harm that the recommendations may pose. Note that each element of this framework could be a basis for intervention, but all are inter-related and a strategy should address multiple elements of the framework:
 - Reduce windows of risk and increase the potential of windows of opportunity for prevention.
 - Shift the motives or means of potential perpetrators and enablers away from committing atrocities.
 - Enhance the motives and means for prevention and self-protection by likely target groups and atrocity disablers.
 - Expand resiliencies that can be used to prevent atrocities and reduce the strength or salience of relevant grievances.

