

PREVENTING MASS ATROCITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Under President Obama, the White House established the Atrocities Prevention Board (APB), a group tasked with identifying, analyzing, and implementing different policy instruments both to prevent and respond to mass atrocities. Motivated in part by events related to the Arab Spring—particularly those in Libya and Syria—the APB made some progress in elevating mass atrocity prevention on the national agenda, although implementing preventive solutions proved exceptionally challenging. Our research, conducted in support of the APB’s mission, demonstrates that external assistance to popular uprisings as well as direct assistance to regimes facing a domestic political crisis are key drivers of mass killings against unarmed civilians. We also find that nonviolent dissent—especially when coupled with defections from the armed forces—is generally safer than using violence, resulting in a lower likelihood of mass killings.

WHAT ARE MASS KILLINGS?

We define mass killings as the intentional killing of 1,000 or more civilian noncombatants by government led or directed forces in a sustained event.¹ Most mass killings occur in the context of popular uprisings, and just under half of all popular uprisings experience mass killings.² Specifically, we find that nearly 43% of all uprisings encounter mass killings (Figure 1A). There is also meaningful variation across space, with the greatest proportion of events concentrated in Africa immediately followed by East Asia and the Pacific (Figure 2B).

WHY DO MASS KILLINGS OCCUR?

Many studies focus on *structural factors*—like state capacity, authoritarianism, or ongoing civil conflict—that might create the motivation and opportunity for a state to commit mass atrocities, and the primary focus of the field has been mass killings during armed conflict.³ However, slow-moving structural indicators do not help to understand the timing of mass atrocities, especially

in the context of fast-moving internal crises that do not escalate to full-scale civil war. And because they are relatively static factors that are difficult to influence in the short-term, they also provide little practical guidance for policymakers seeking to prevent or forestall mass killings in the future.

We explore how particular characteristics of contentious actions, which we classify as *campaign-level factors*, influence mass killings. These campaign-level factors include the primary mode of contention (nonviolent or violent), external interventions supporting the dissidents or the regime, the dissidents’ goals,

Figure 1. Mass Killings in the Context of Major Episodes of Contention

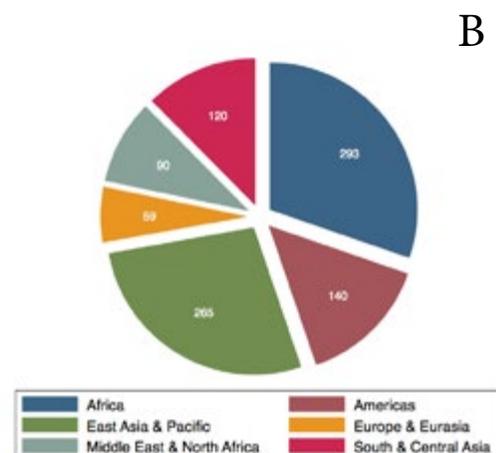
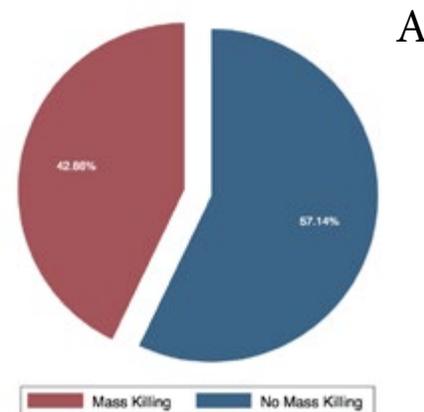
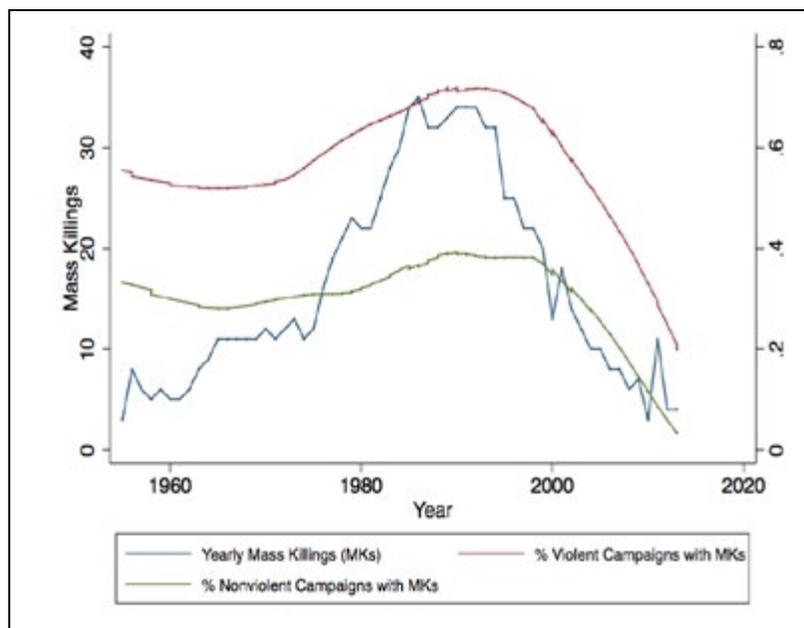


Figure 2. Distribution of Mass Killings across Time and Across Campaigns⁴



IMPLICATIONS

From the dissident's perspective, this research suggests that choices to maintain nonviolent discipline are key, especially when movements are confronting brutal and committed regimes. So are choices about whether to seek direct international aid. The findings provide strong evidence to suggest that internationalizing a primarily nonviolent uprising can make it threatening to both security forces and regime elites in ways that can make their interests converge, making mass killings more likely. Therefore, dissidents should view with caution any attempts from foreign state donors to provide them with direct financial support.

Under the Trump administration, the widespread expectation is that the U.S.'s focus on mass atrocity prevention—and human rights defense more generally—will decline. Yet, for leaders seeking

and the behavior of repressive agents (e.g. defection). Drawing on new data from 1955-2014, we find that several characteristics of contentious episodes⁵—such as whether the dissidents remains primarily nonviolent, the behavior of the military during the episode, and the degree of external involvement in the crisis—play important roles in explaining and predicting mass killings. These findings suggest a counterintuitive paradox—that dissidents who remain unarmed and maintain an indigenous support base are at less risk of provoking widespread civilian victimization than those who take up arms and/or seek outside support to protect themselves against state abuses. Moreover, providing support to a state facing a popular uprising is associated with a higher risk of that state committing a mass atrocity.

Our analysis suggests that some variables associated with mass killings are relatively static and unalterable by outside actors (regime type, poverty, subgroup discrimination, and coups). However, there are other factors that either dissidents or outside forces can affect, like the campaign's strategic choices (maintaining nonviolent discipline despite regime provocations or eliciting support from external states), refusing to support the incumbent regime, or coordinating defections among security forces. Of course, long-term strategies might include promoting policies that reduce subgroup discrimination, bolster democratic institutions, and encourage economic development over the course of years or decades.

to have an impact, our findings have several implications. First, and as we allude to above, overt support for foreign uprisings as well as foreign regimes raises the likelihood of mass killings. Regimes may feel particularly threatened when facing a foreign-backed adversary, leading them to consider using violence against their own civilians. On the other hand, foreign support for the regime may convince them that they are justified in their actions, no matter how violent they may be. Political support, rather than direct financial or material assistance, might therefore be the way to go. Second, since violent uprisings are more likely to experience mass killings, states could use their leverage to pressure movements to remain nonviolent. Political support and diplomatic engagement, for instance, could be conditional upon foregoing acts of violence. The benefits of this are twofold: while we find that nonviolent movements are generally safer, other research suggests that such movements are more likely to succeed as well.⁶ Third, since we find that military defections are negatively correlated with the odds of mass violence, states could take steps to undermine the cohesion of foreign regimes and their armed forces. Offering exile to military leaders and their families, for instance, could help prevent regime crackdowns from taking place. Fourth, and finally, we find that it is not only campaign-level factors that affect the odds of mass killings—structural factors are important as well. States should therefore focus on reducing poverty and discrimination while also cultivating democracy, which may reduce the frequency of mass atrocities in the long run.

ENDNOTES

- 1 We borrow this definition from Ulfelder and Valentino (2008), whose data on mass killings we use in the coming analyses. For a further discussion of this definition, refer to their article.
- 2 We define popular uprisings as maximalist, nonviolent or violent mass movements in pursuit of a political objective. For our current purposes, we focus only on episodes that involve multiple coordinated events of at least 1,000 observed participants occurring within one week of one another and enduring longer than one week. The events must explicitly possess “maximalist” goals of the removal of the incumbent government, secession, or the removal of a foreign occupying military.
- 3 Hill, Daniel W., Jr., and Zachary M. Jones. 2014. An empirical evaluation of explanations for state repression. *American Political Science Review* 108(3): 661–687; Davenport, Christian. 2007. State repression and political order. *Annual Review of Political Science* 10:1–23. Valentino, Benjamin. 2004. *Final solutions: Genocide and mass killings in the 20th century*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Valentino, Benjamin, Paul Huth, and Dylan Balch-Lindsay. 2004. Draining the sea: Mass killing and guerrilla warfare. *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (May): 375–407. Kalyvas, Stathis. 2006. *The logic of violence in civil war*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Davenport, Christian D. 2008. *State repression and the domestic democratic peace*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 4 Figure 1 uses a country-year unit of analysis.
- 5 Defined in detail below. We use the terms “campaigns,” “uprisings,” “episodes” and “struggles” interchangeably. We use the words “nonviolent,” “civil,” “peaceful,” and “unarmed” interchangeably. We use the terms “violent” and “armed” interchangeably. The term “dissidents” refers to both armed and unarmed resistance actors, although we use the term “activists” to refer specifically to nonviolent dissidents.
- 6 Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria J. Stephan. 2011. *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*. New York: Columbia University Press.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Korbel Quickfacts concisely explore the policy-relevant dynamics that characterize contemporary security challenges. The series is produced by the Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy, a center of excellence within the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed are those of the authors.

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