



POLICY BRIEF INITIATIVE

COMMUNAL SELF-PROTECTION DURING GENOCIDE

Dr. Deborah Mayersen

In “Is Help Coming?” Communal Self-Protection During Genocide,” Deborah Mayersen examines whether communal self-protection offers a viable strategy for vulnerable groups attempting to mitigate the impact of genocide.¹ Communal self-protection is defined here as cooperative communal activities undertaken by civilians to avoid or mitigate genocidal oppression. Despite recent initiatives in atrocity prevention, including the Responsibility to Protect principle, vulnerable groups continue to experience genocide. Some, such as the Yazidis in Iraq in 2014, have attempted to mitigate the impact of genocide through self-protection strategies. Yet communal self-protection is only feasible as a strategy in limited circumstances. Even in a best-case scenario, attempts at self-protection can only offer a temporary and highly precarious reprieve from genocide. Ultimately, groups attempting self-protection are reliant upon external rescue for survival, which may or may not be forthcoming. Therefore, communal self-protection should not be considered as a viable strategy to mitigate the impact of genocide in any circumstances. This is an important consideration for policymakers and practitioners responding to genocide, or the threat of its imminent onset.

Communal Self-Protection and Atrocity Crimes

In recent years, there has been considerable research into communal self-protection during violence and mass atrocities. Communities are sometimes able to mitigate the worst effects of conflict and protect or partially protect themselves from atrocity crimes through utilizing self-protection strategies. These might include adopting positions of neutrality during a civil war, taking shelter, and/or creating self-protection militias.

Several typologies identifying and categorizing self-protection strategies have been developed. The unique nature of genocide, however, means that such models may lack applicability for this crime. For example, self-protection strategies that rely on non-engagement are unlikely to be possible when a genocidal regime specifically targets a vulnerable population. This calls into question whether self-protection can ever be a viable strategy in response to genocide. A multiple case-study analysis of historical examples of attempted communal self-protection sought to examine this issue.

Historical Examples of Attempted Communal Self-Protection

Large-scale attempts at communal self-protection during genocide are relatively rare. In most circumstances, such attempts are all but impossible. Perpetrators routinely employ strategies to prevent them. These include disarming populations, removing men from different locations, incarcerating community leaders, and displacing whole populations (e.g., ghettos during the Holocaust), all of which make communal self-protection extremely difficult. Therefore, it is only in exceptional circumstances that communal self-protection can even be attempted. Nonetheless, there are some historical examples in which communities experiencing genocide have attempted self-protection.

During the 1915 Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian community living around the coastal mountain of Musa Dagh collectively decided to retreat to the mountain and attempt self-defense, rather than obey deportation orders. Several thousand Armenians fought off repeated attacks by Turkish forces, despite being besieged and lacking access to critical supplies. Following more than seven weeks of fighting and in dire circumstances, they were rescued after attracting the attention of a passing French naval ship.

During the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the Tutsi of Bisesero, a mountain range in Kibuye in the west of the country, undertook a large-scale attempt at resistance. Up to 50,000 Tutsi sought refuge in the steep hills of Bisesero. There, they hid in caves, mineshafts, and the forest, while attempting to defend themselves using rocks and the few machetes at their disposal. Repeatedly attacked by militias, they also had to contend with heavy rain, a lack of clean drinking water, and very little to eat. By late June, only around 2,000 Tutsi remained alive. The failure of French forces during Operation Turquoise to immediately rescue these survivors meant that only about 1,000 of them survived the genocide.

In 2014, Daesh (also known as ISIS and ISIL) conducted an offensive in the Iraqi region of Sinjar. Tens of thousands of Yazidis, aware of Daesh's genocidal intentions, fled to nearby Mt. Sinjar. There, they became trapped on the barren mountain in harsh summer conditions, lacking access to food, water, and medical supplies. The Yazidis used their mobile phones to beg for help. Within days, this led to life-saving intervention. U.S. forces dropped critical supplies to the mountain-top, while the *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG) (the militant wing of the Syrian Kurdish party) created an escape corridor for the besieged Yazidis, enabling them to reach the safety of a nearby Kurdish-controlled region of Iraq.

"In each case in which communal self-protection did lead to the survival of most of the group, it only did so due to timely external intervention."

A Typology of Communal Self-Protection during Genocide

Communal self-protection during genocide is only viable in exceptional circumstances. A typology identifies four key factors: 1) strong intracommunal communication and cooperation; 2) capacity for avoidance; 3) resistance; and 4) appeals for external rescue. In each case study, the role of intracommunal communication and cooperation was critical to the capacity for self-protection. Local knowledge facilitated such cooperation. Avoidance strategies were vital in enabling each group to attempt communal self-protection. The ability for each group to retreat to a mountain, where they could have a short reprieve from engagement and an opportunity to develop a strategy, also played a key role. Violent resistance was a central strategy in the Armenian and Rwandan cases, prolonging survival. Ultimately, however, the success of each attempt at communal self-protection was contingent upon the ability to obtain timely external rescue. The deeply asymmetrical nature of genocide means that even when all these strategies were deployed simultaneously or in close succession, self-protection was—at best—only temporarily viable. In no case did communal self-protection offer sustainable living conditions, only a desperate and precarious temporary survival.

IMPLICATIONS

- Communal self-protection should not be considered a viable strategy to mitigate genocide in any circumstance.
- If a state is not meeting its responsibility to protect its population from genocide, the international community should take immediate action to avoid vulnerable groups needing to attempt communal self-protection from genocide.
- In the event that a community group does attempt communal self-protection from genocide, the international community must recognise the precarious and time-critical nature of such an attempt and take immediate action to protect the group.

About the Author: Dr. Deborah Mayersen

Deborah Mayersen is a Lecturer in International and Political Studies at the University of New South Wales Canberra at the Australian Defence Force Academy. Deborah's research expertise is in the field of genocide studies, including the Armenian genocide, the Rwandan genocide, and genocide prevention. Her publications include *On the Path to Genocide: Armenia and Rwanda Reexamined* (Berghahn Books, 2014) and the edited volumes *A Cultural History of Genocide in the Modern World* (Bloomsbury, in-press), *The United Nations and Genocide* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), and *Genocide and Mass Atrocities in Asia: Legacies and Prevention* (with Annie Pohlman, Routledge, 2013).

Contact: d.mayersen@adfa.edu.au

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