



POLICY BRIEF INITIATIVE

MASS ATROCITIES TRIGGERS

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This brief analyzes events that can “trigger” mass atrocities. Although we know a great deal about the conditions that elevate the risk of atrocities, understanding the timing of atrocity onset is a crucial component of any prevention strategy. The brief discusses some general conceptual issues around triggers, presents the most common types of trigger events, and argues for their systematic integration into early warning models, while also noting limitations on their use for atrocity forecasting.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, scholars and atrocity prevention practitioners have developed sophisticated understandings of the main causes of mass atrocities, which include genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing. We now know that atrocities are more likely under conditions of war, authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, extremist ideologies, histories of mass violence, dehumanizing political discourse, and ongoing severe political instability.¹ These factors are nevertheless often relatively static; their presence may elevate the risk of atrocities, but they do not tell us much about the timing of when atrocities may occur. Central to prevention is understanding those events that can trigger actual, widespread violence against civilians. Nevertheless, there is relatively little systematic research on trigger events beyond case-specific scholarly studies or practitioner reports on particular countries, and more research is required to understand their general patterns. However, we can infer a few conclusions from current scholarly and practitioner research on the most common trigger events, how they operate, and what to look for in preventing them.

Conceptualizing Triggers

A trigger is an event or closely linked set of events that change the decision calculus of political leaders and that is strongly linked to a mass atrocity. Events are triggers precisely because they *reframe* the status quo in the eyes of leaders (whether government or armed challengers), either by creating a new opportunity to secure or expand control, or more typically, by creating a perceived new or escalating threat that “requires” a violent response. The actual trigger may be a relatively discrete exogenous shock *event* (e.g., a coup) or *part of a pattern* of cumulative instability (e.g., violent protests) that legitimizes atrocities.

1. See generally, Hollie Nyseth Brehm, “Re-examining Risk Factors of Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 19, no. 1 (2017), 61-87.

Triggers are essentially catalysts for violence in highly unstable contexts; for instance, the assassination of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana was not a main cause of the 1994 genocide and civil war, but the ensuing power vacuum led to the immediate resumption of violence. Furthermore, not all trigger-type events are followed by atrocities. An assassination in one case (e.g., Habyarimana in 1994) may precipitate violence, where in another (e.g., John F. Kennedy in 1963) it may not. Context matters enormously, especially the high-risk contexts listed earlier. Outside of these contexts, the atrocity triggering effect of many of these events drops substantially. Additionally, even in high-risk situations, not all such events trigger atrocities, and not all atrocities are preceded by obvious triggers. The key is awareness of how leaders in unstable situations perceive opportunities and threats given their particular interests, preferences, objectives, and general political ideologies. Given these caveats, we can nevertheless identify some common triggers from current research.

General Findings and Responses

In an ongoing research project, we are investigating which trigger-type events are most likely to precipitate state-led mass killings (100 civilian deaths or more in a month) cross-nationally over a range of background conditions. The three broad clusters of triggers we are currently analyzing are as follows:

- *Changes in armed conflict conditions* (government battle deaths, killings committed by rebels, conflict spillover from a neighboring country);
- *Threats to leadership integrity* (successful or attempted coups); and
- *Popular opposition mobilization* (widespread and sustained protests, new or expanding opposition movements).

We find that escalations in armed conflict—especially if measured in government battle deaths—and threats to leadership integrity—such as coups—are the most consequential triggers. These events are most likely to catalyze killings within a year and often within less time. Beyond that time frame, the effect drops significantly (though unevenly by type of event), indicating that other subsequent events may play a role in shaping leaders' decisions. This is not surprising. Leadership integrity threats are rare, present an immediate danger, and happen quickly, often eliciting violent responses, while armed conflict escalation can also represent an impending threat to leaders.

Our research also confirms that triggering effects are highly context dependent. For instance, armed conflict escalation, such as government battle deaths, are an especially important trigger where there is weak rule of law or ongoing political instability, regardless of whether the government is authoritarian, semi-authoritarian, or democratic. However, the triggering effect of government battle deaths follows a U-shape: battle deaths trigger civilian killings within 1-4 months or 9-12 months (but not within 5-8 months), which suggests that ensuing violence will be either highly reactive or will follow after some significant planning. Coups are especially strong triggers within 8 months when they occur in non-democratic countries with already high levels of instability or with low rule of law. Popular mobilization against the government, however, is not a particularly strong predictor of mass killings, though there is some indication that violent protests can trigger killings within a year in authoritarian states. These findings offer an overview of the patterns and risks that can help country-case expertise to frame likely conflict dynamics and dangers.

- Triggers can serve as short-term indicators of likely atrocity. As such, they should be systematically integrated into broad-based early warning and risk assessment models, especially quantitative models, which often do not capture short- and mid-term conflict dynamics well.
- The time frame for response is normally relatively short, a year or often less; conditions can change rapidly, especially after a coup or conflict escalation events.
- Some potential trigger events can be anticipated, allowing for greater prevention preparation. Others, like coups, are harder to anticipate, and thus pose added challenges to prevention communities.
- Atrocity prevention is still most effective when directed at the main underlying drivers and causes of conflict, rather than focusing on short-term events. The leverage for prevention is significantly reduced once these events have occurred.

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Recommended Reading:

1. Mayersen, Deborah. "Predicting Genocide and Mass Killing." *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 1 (2021), 81-104. Nyseth
2. Brehm, Hollie, Amanda Lea Robinson, and Mini Saraswati. "Triggers of Escalations in Violence Against Civilians by Non-State Actors in Africa." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2021), DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2021.1967935. Office of the UN Special
3. Advisers on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect. "Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention." New York: United Nations, 2014.
4. Straus, Scott. "Triggers of Mass Atrocities." *Cogitatio* 3, no. 3 (2015), 5-15.
5. Valentino, Benjamin. "Triggers for Mass Killings: Report on a Research Project for the Political Instability Task Force." 2016. Accessed January 4, 2022. Available at: <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.dartmouth.edu/dist/b/1324/files/2019/05/PITF-triggers-report-2-1-2016-web-version.pdf>.
6. Verdeja, Ernesto. "Predicting Genocide and Mass Atrocities." *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 9, no. 3 (2016), 13-32.