

Policy Challenge Brief

Implications of COVID-19 for Atrocity Prevention

Dr. James Waller, Director of Academic Programs

Introduction

Assessing preexisting risk conditions in a society helps us identify countries in which the “wood is stacked” for risk of mass atrocity. To recognize, though, the “matches” that may be struck to set that wood afire requires an analysis of accelerating factors that lead to a rapid escalation of crisis and the triggering factors that spark the onset of conflict itself. Accelerants and triggers help us understand the transformation of possibilities of mass atrocity into probabilities.

While many accelerating factors are identifiable and modifiable (for instance, regime transitions, gradual isolationism, marked increase in unemployment, failed peace agreements, an upsurge in hate speech, regional destabilization, etc.), triggering factors are single events typically difficult to predict or identify in advance. Triggers are discrete precipitating events, or a chain of events, that open “windows of atrocity risk.” They are the dynamic, real-time stressors that can push at-risk states over the brink; that can make the outbreak of violent or genocidal conflict likely or imminent. The range of triggers is broad and diverse, including natural disasters, terrorist attacks, political assassinations, coups, environmental crises, legal judgments, epidemics, and global pandemics.

Atrocity Prevention Policy Implications of COVID-19

While COVID-19’s impact continues on a global scale – economically, socially, politically, and existentially – it will be particularly felt in deeply divided, fragile, conflict-prone, or at-risk societies. In such societies, it is absolutely vital that policy measures be taken for preventive action before risk escalates to the point of mass atrocity. The following policy considerations related to governance, economic conditions, and social fragmentation can help state actors think preventively in the face of the environmental stressors posed by this pandemic:

Governance

- Many countries have large populations of refugees and internally displaced persons. These populations likely have compromised health status and live in overcrowded conditions with poor infrastructure and hygiene. With social distancing an impossibility, they are at significant risk of contagion and transmission. Policymakers must place a renewed focus on the protection of these most vulnerable and high-risk populations.
- The uptick in border closings to contain the pandemic means that vulnerable populations fleeing conflict will now be caught between conflict and the pandemic. Policymakers must prioritize working with civil society, multilateral, and regional institutions to support humanitarian relief efforts for the safety and welfare of these populations.
- Some political leaders are using this crisis to scapegoat and stigmatize political opponents, refugees, and other vulnerable and marginalized populations. Such identity-based factionalism, often conveyed in a populist and politicized discourse built on historical revisionism, may manifest itself in systematic state-led discrimination. Policymakers must respond with a clear reiteration of fundamental human rights, the promotion of civil liberties, and the protection of civilian populations.

Economic Conditions

- Many countries will have to shut down economically for an extended period of time, leading to national recessions or, even, economic depressions. Such impacts are seldom distributed evenly across a population and can lead to an increase in conflict and destabilization as deprived groups resort to violence to redress the inequality or privileged groups mobilize with violence to preserve their status. Policymakers must focus on horizontal equality strategies to increase actual and perceived economic equity.
- Escalations in unemployment, particularly among young males, will increase the possibility of militia involvement and group violence. Economic desperation will lead to more victims of human trafficking and enslavement as well as an increased likelihood of black market activity by non-state actors. Policymakers must be prepared to take immediate relief action (for example, tax cuts, social pensions, unemployment insurance, job creation, microcredit, relief or social welfare plans, etc.) to slow or halt economic deterioration.
- The provision of basic services (for example, water, food, and financial support) and access to social services and healthcare will be disrupted during this crisis. Particularly problematic is the unequal access to these services that has been exacerbated by the pandemic and the ways in which corruption incentives for state actors have risen. Policymakers must work to increase, rather than decrease, the level of transparency and accountability for state institutions and processes during this unsettled time.

Social Fragmentation

- The poor and elderly will be particularly impacted by COVID-19. Poor children, for instance, will suffer disproportionately from the effect of school closings. The elderly in care institutions also will feel the disproportionate effects of social distancing. Policymakers must think creatively about the use of technology to mitigate some of these isolating impacts.
- Political, social, media, and religious leaders are polarizing the pandemic in ways that increase xenophobia as well as heightened violence against foreigners or migrants living in country. Policymakers must present coherent strategies to responsibly harness these voices in the pursuit of healing, rather than deepening, the divisions within societies.
- Gender-based violence and a lack of physical security for women (for example, domestic violence, rape, marital rape, and murder) often correlate with social and political fragility and instability. Policymakers must recognize, and affirm, the important role women play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding, particularly during times of crisis.

Conclusion

Even with the pressing concern that the pandemic poses to societies around the globe, now is not the time for state actors to turn attention and funding away from atrocity prevention. Now is the time, in fact, to prioritize legal and societal frameworks for civilian protection. The risk factors described above, if left unchecked, can start an escalatory process that may lead to mass atrocities. The pandemic, and its potential to serve as a trigger for mass violence, makes our shared work of atrocity prevention more urgent than ever.

Further Reading: James Waller, *Confronting Evil: Engaging Our Responsibility to Prevent Genocide* (Oxford University Press, 2016).