

Mass Atrocities and the Strategic Logic of Non-State Actors

By Jameson Moore
International Relations – Security
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While non-state actors play a larger and larger role in modern international politics, our understanding of these actors lags behind their importance. In particular, our understanding of the most violent non-state actors—those that commit mass atrocities in the context of internal conflicts or weak/failed states—is minimal, and many of their actions are still conceptualized as mere barbarism. In this paper, I attempt to reverse that notion. I examine, through four case studies, the question of whether non-state actors commit mass atrocities with strategic intent. I find that, in all four cases, atrocities were committed by actors as strategic actions in the service of key interests, under the direction of group elites—just as states do. I also use my findings from these cases to create a short list of warning signs of impending atrocities.

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Chapter One Introduction

Although a significant body of scholarship exists regarding the theoretical causes—and warning signs—of genocide and other mass atrocities, much of this work is drawn from historical cases of atrocities committed by state actors (de jure and de facto alike), and therefore is geared to deliver predictive utility particular to state actors. Other important works on this topic—such as Ben Valentino’s *Final Solutions*—while not ignoring non-state actors as perpetrators of atrocities, devote little more than passing attention to the concept. Meanwhile, while there is a growing body of literature detailing why non-state actors engage in certain behaviors (terrorism or general political violence being areas of particularly numerous scholarship), there is little discussion of mass atrocities that significantly includes non-state actors. This, I feel, is an oversight. While state actors remain the principal agents of atrocity, non-state actors have been increasingly active agents in recent decades. Particularly in weak or failed state scenarios, there exists considerable potential for sub-state actors to commit atrocity crimes.

The question of why exactly non-state actors commit mass atrocities remains open. Simply assuming that non-state actors act precisely as states do is not possible. In some cases, state and non-state actors may have congruent sets of priorities and incentives impacting their behavior. In other cases, however, non-state actors may have differing sets of incentives relating to mass atrocities than states. To name a few:

- 1) Non-state actors generally have a lower capacity than state actors of any kind. A non-state actor committing a mass atrocity runs the risk of incurring international reprisal because their lower capacities generally represent a lower barrier to action for the international community.
- 2) Non-state actors are generally dependent on the support of local populations to successfully operate in contested or lawless regions. A non-state actor committing a

- genocide or mass atrocity runs the risk of alienating supporting populations, therefore being left out to dry against reprisals from international or state actors, or rival groups.
- 3) Non-state actors (particularly in lawless regions) are generally in a state of fierce competition for limited resources (including willing recruits) and for the favor of intra-state or international patrons. A non-state actor committing a genocide or mass atrocity runs the risk of alienating potential recruits or benefactors due to their actions, lowering their future capacity and putting their survival in danger.

There is, therefore, a distinct possibility that state and non-state actors make the decision to commit mass atrocities along differing dimensions. This, of course, begs three major questions, all of which I will attempt to answer as the primary goal of my thesis:

- What factors influence non-state actors to commit mass atrocities?
- Are mass atrocities committed by non-state actors as strategic acts specifically planned by the group's leadership, or is violence more likely to be committed for other reasons? -
- And what warning signs of impending atrocity can be deduced from the answers to these previous questions?

I propose that non-state actors, much like state actors, commit mass atrocities as part of rational, interest-oriented strategies. Although the capacity and territorial boundedness of actors may influence their strategies, these variables do not fundamentally change the nature of the decision to commit atrocities. Group elites order these acts, rather, as strategic responses to threats against fundamental group goals or interests when other, less costly options have been exhausted.

In order to answer these questions and test my above proposition, I begin with a theory chapter, which includes a literature review, methodology overview, answers to some definitional questions, my hypotheses, and a brief summary of strategies of atrocity and my set of proposed warning signs. I then conduct four case studies, all of them involving a non-state actor that has committed mass atrocities: UNITA in Angola, the GIA in Algeria, the Los Zetas cartel in North and Central America, and ISIS in Iraq and Syria. In each case, I establish a historical narrative, analyze the non-state actor in question and the atrocities they committed, and then evaluate the

case to determine whether the atrocities were strategic in nature, what strategies may have been employed, and whether or not the evidence of strategy outweighs the evidence supporting alternative explanations.

I answer my third major research question by generalizing the set of motivations for mass atrocity that I have derived from my various case studies to arrive at a limited, abstracted set of warning signs of impending mass atrocity by a non-state actor. I conclude the thesis by summarizing my findings and briefly attempting to look to the future of research on and prevention of mass atrocities.

Chapter Two

Theory: Review of Scholarly Literature, Condition-Setting, Hypotheses, and Methodology

Introduction

In this thesis, I seek to challenge the conventional wisdom relating to mass atrocities committed by non-state actors: that such acts are mere barbarism, violence committed for the sake of violence, or stem, somehow, from ancient, intractable societal flaws. Indeed, this characterization is common among popular media and even among prominent political figures; during the Bosnian War, for example, Western politicians and commentators hedged against sorely needed peacekeeping efforts by attributing ethnic cleansing efforts by Bosnian Serb forces to “age-old animosities,” rather than discernable (and therefore, preventable) strategic motivations.¹ I believe that this reading is overly simplistic (at times racist), and, as it did in Bosnia, hinders efforts to halt current atrocities or prevent future ones.

In order to better discern the motivations of particularly violent non-state actors, this paper attempts to answer three central, linked questions: *What factors influence some non-state actors to commit mass atrocities? Are mass atrocities committed by non-state actors as strategic acts specifically planned by the group’s leadership, or is violence more likely to be committed for other reasons? And what warning signs of impending atrocity can be deduced from the answers to these previous questions?* I believe that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, non-state actors, like states, commit mass atrocities in the service of discernable strategic ends, that they do so at the direction of group leaders or elites, and that they generally do so as a strategy of desperation or last resort.

¹ George Bush, quoted by Michael E. Brown in “Introduction,” in *International Dimensions of Internal Conflict*, ed. Michael E. Brown, CSIA Studies in International Security, no. 10, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 12.

In this chapter, I review the scholarly literature on mass atrocities and genocide, literature on civil wars or internal conflicts, and literature on non-state actors. Works in all three bodies of literature variously attempt to define important terms, identify, contextualize, and explain certain behaviors, or offer competing views on previously discussed questions. I also briefly discuss the international legal and scholarly theoretical literature that will help set scope conditions for my research. Later on, I discuss relevant issues pertaining to the primary or secondary information that will form the backbone of my case studies. Finally, I build on the discussion and review of literature to offer hypotheses to my research questions.

Review of Scholarly Literature

Literature Pertaining to Genocide and Mass Atrocities

The body of scholarly research and writing on genocide and mass atrocities is highly diverse. Even the foundational question of *what genocide is* has inspired a number of complementary or even competing definitions that draw on a number of disciplines. Beyond this fundamental question of genocide studies, there are numerous attempts to explain the phenomenon and craft solutions to end this unique type of violence. Maureen Hiebert reviews the literature offering explanations for the phenomenon of genocide and builds a useful typology of prominent theories, grouping them into three broad categories based on which types of variables they posit as being most important to the unfolding of genocidal violence: “agency-oriented” theories, “structural approaches,” and theories of “identity construction.”² Theories of identity construction tend to be “explicitly process-oriented approaches” and thus fall outside the scope of my research questions (as I am less interested in *how* genocides and mass atrocities

² Maureen S. Hiebert. “Theorizing Destruction: Reflections on the State of Comparative Genocide Theory.” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 3, no. 3 (2008): 309–39. doi:10.1353/gsp.2011.0071.

occur than *why*).³ Hiebert subdivides structural theories into groups focusing on culture, “divided societies,” “crisis, revolution, and war,” regime type, and modernization as being the key factors in genocide, while identifying elites, “frontline killers,” and societies as being the key actors in varying strands of agency-oriented theories.⁴ Hiebert introduces major works and scholars in each theory subgroup and offers brief summaries of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach in explaining genocide. In particular, Hiebert notes that agency-oriented theories offer a special advantage relative to other schools of thought in terms of providing explanation as to why a genocide occurred at the time it did—for example, the “genocide as a policy last resort” corollary offered by Valentino (see below).

Because of its explanatory strength and ease with which it lends itself to preventative efforts, my thesis draws heavily upon Ben Valentino’s “strategic” theory of mass killings and genocide.⁵ Although often mentioned alongside the rest of the literature on genocide, Valentino attempts to move away from that scholarly contested zone, shifting the definitional scope of his research to cover what he calls mass killing: “the intentional killing of a massive number of noncombatants.”⁶ The basis for the strategic view of mass killings is that, although structural factors like modernization stresses, divided societies, or national crises do occasionally lead to outbreaks of mass atrocity, these factors alone do not reliably correlate with mass killing; Valentino shows that deeply divided societies, for example, can and do persist for extended periods of time without experiencing episodes of mass killing.⁷ Conversely, though, mass killings usually occur under the direction of a highly motivated group of elites, or even powerful

³ “Theorizing Destruction,” 328.

⁴ “Theorizing Destruction.”

⁵ Benjamin A. Valentino. *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*. Cornell Studies in Security Affairs. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2004.

⁶ *Final Solutions*, 2.

⁷ Ibid.

individuals. It is, for example, impossible to imagine “the Great Terror without Stalin, the Holocaust without Hitler, or the Cultural Revolution without Mao.”⁸ Therefore, Valentino asserts that any particular episode of mass killing is best understood as an “instrumental policy calculated to achieve important political and military objectives with respect to other groups—a ‘final solution’ to its perpetrators’ most urgent problems.”⁹ Elaborated further, this strategic theory posits that mass killing is “rarely a policy of first resort,” a strategy that leaders only implement when highly valued objectives are perceived to be in significant danger, undertaken by actors reacting rationally to their perception of the world around them.¹⁰ To this end, the particular ideology of actors is important insofar as it informs their goals, their readings of strategic situations, and the scope of their ambitions.¹¹

With this distinction in mind, Valentino creates a typology of motives for strategic mass killings. “Communist” mass killings are undertaken when a newly empowered communist regime seeks to rapidly implement vast societal changes that will inevitably dispossess large numbers of people.¹² “Ethnic” mass killings are undertaken by leaders who see a particular ethnic group as a fundamental threat to society or to their power and control.¹³ “Territorial” mass killings occur when elites attempt to massively resettle a territory, against the will of its original inhabitants.¹⁴ “Counterguerilla” mass killings are undertaken in order to destroy the civilian base of support for guerilla fighters by either disincentivizing further collaboration or destroying the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Final Solutions*, 67.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Final Solutions*, 73.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Final Solutions*, 76.

¹⁴ *Final Solutions*, 77.

civilian population entirely.¹⁵ “Terrorist” mass killings are campaigns of coercive bombing against civilians that occur during wars of attrition, or by “sub-state insurgent groups... [attempting to] terrorize their enemies.”¹⁶ Finally, “imperialist” mass killings are undertaken by imperial or occupying powers to deter potentially rebellious subjects and intimidate conquered populations.¹⁷ These strategic archetypes, while originally formulated to cover the range of scenarios within which state actors commit mass killings, inform a great deal of the evaluations of non-state actor atrocities that I offer in my case studies.

Notably, Valentino’s theory was built and tested only using examples of states engaging in campaigns of mass killing. Apart from the brief mention of sub-state terror groups in his theory chapter (quoted above), he does not extend this theory to the realm of non-state actors, a task which I have folded into my research questions. In attempting to determine whether the non-state actors in my case studies committed atrocities toward strategic or non-strategic ends, as well as defining the motivating factors behind those atrocities, I am applying Valentino’s strategic theory of genocide to cases involving non-state actors, and then determining whether those findings offer the same predictive value as they do for cases involving state actors.

Literature Pertaining to Civil Wars

There are a variety of books and papers in the body of literature pertaining to civil wars that inform my research, albeit less significantly than Valentino’s theory. Kalyvas¹⁸ seeks to explain the pattern of anti-civilian violence in the context of internal conflict, identifying violence as being produced due to the particular structure of internal conflicts, specifically

¹⁵ *Final Solutions*, 82.

¹⁶ *Final Solutions*, 86.

¹⁷ *Final Solutions*, 89.

¹⁸ Stathis N. Kalyvas. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press. 2006.

irregular wars, which combine incomplete control of territory by rival actors with a need for the actors to encourage civilian collaboration with their side and defection against their rival. However, civilians will be unwilling to defect to one side or another in zones of contested control: absent the intelligence needed for selective violence, warring parties will be forced to turn to broad, indiscriminate violence as a cheaper means of punishing defectors; meanwhile, in zones of more consolidated control, where a warring party is more able to guarantee the safety of civilians who collaborate, selective violence will prevail.¹⁹ However, Kalyvas's treatment of indiscriminate violence²⁰ (by both state and non-state actors) presupposes the desire of the violent actor to control the civilian population they are enacting violence against.²¹ While this is one potential reason why an actor may use indiscriminate or mass violence, it omits a significant number of other potential reasons; indeed, the underlying logic that actors in a civil war environment need to win (or at least effectively coerce) the cooperation of civilian populations is a fundamental part of the conventional wisdom on mass atrocities committed by non-state actors that I seek to challenge.

Ultimately, though, Kalyvas does frame mass violence as being strategic (but short-sighted) in nature: information scarcity prevents actors from precisely targeting their efforts to deter civilian defection, which causes actors to resort to indiscriminate, coercive violence in contested zones, and he concludes that its use is counterproductive.²² While the decision to use indiscriminate violence is a strategic one, Kalyvas suggests that it is largely due to the tactic's relatively low cost (and, to varying extents, institutional distortions or pathologies working in its favor), coming to the conclusion that actors, over time, move from strategies of indiscriminate to

¹⁹ *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 12.

²⁰ It should be noted here that "indiscriminate killing," "discriminate killing," and "mass atrocity" are, while at times overlapping, not entirely congruent terms.

²¹ *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 146.

²² *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 161.

selective violence.²³ In this way, Kalyvas's theory differs from the strategic theory of mass killings: while Valentino includes scenarios wherein mass killing is the central point of a strategy (ethnic mass killing and terrorist mass killing immediately spring to mind), Kalyvas sees mass killing as a side effect. However, in addition to its potential applicability to a number of case studies (mass killing as a cheap way to deter defection is still mass killing), his line of argument also presents reasonable alternatives to my hypotheses, notably in the form of institutional pathologies and smaller-scale tactical myopia.

Other literature on violence in civil wars seems to indicate that violence is used non-strategically as well. In analyzing the Sierra Leone war, Humphreys and Weinstein argue that the strongest correlative predictor of violence against civilians by both major violent actors in the war was fighting group cohesion.²⁴ To some extent, the paper runs counter Kalyvas's findings in *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, finding little correlation between contested zones and zones where extreme abuse of civilians occurred. However, it should be noted that the authors of this paper did not distinguish between what Kalyvas would describe as "selective" or "indiscriminate" violence.²⁵ Rather, the authors find that the strongest correlation exists between areas where former fighters reported low levels of internal discipline amongst fighting groups, regardless of their formal affiliation with either side in the conflict: "Fighting units composed of individuals motivated by private goals, with high levels of ethnic diversity, and weak mechanisms to maintain internal discipline commit the highest levels of abuse."²⁶ This would seem to indicate that a group's tendency to abuse civilians (including through mass violence) stems from negative organizational pathologies rather than from strategic choices on the part of

²³ *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 171.

²⁴ Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein. "Handling and Manhandling Civilians in Civil War." *The American Political Science Review* 100, no. 3 (2006): 429–47.

²⁵ "Handling and Manhandling Civilians in Civil War," 444.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

the group's leaders. However, the authors themselves do say that they were aiming to test a general *way* of evaluating similar cases rather than trying to produce a broadly applicable theory of civilian abuse, and anticipate that the core assumptions they make in building their hypotheses may not apply in cases of genocide or mass killing.²⁷

Finally, some of the literature on civil wars addresses the fundamental structures of such wars, rather than focusing explicitly on violence. Although civil conflict structure is not a variable I will be testing for, it does inform other important elements of my thesis, most notably, my categorization and selection of cases to study. The taxonomic framework for civil conflicts that I have found most useful works along the lines of what Kalyvas and Balcells call “technologies of rebellion,” a term originally used in the context of evaluating the impact of the end of the Cold War on internal conflicts worldwide.²⁸ The framework's value to me lies in its classification of different types of civil war according to the “technologies of rebellion” in use: wars where both sides mobilize large, fairly professional armies and use advanced weaponry like armor, artillery, and air power are classified as “conventional wars;” wars where only one side possesses an advanced warfighting capacity and the other is forced to adopt the tactics of insurgency or terrorism in order to compensate are called “irregular wars;” and wars where both sides rely on poorly-organized militia forces and light weaponry, have little to no strategic cohesion, and often take place in a very weak or collapsed state are called “symmetric non-conventional wars.”²⁹ This taxonomy of civil war actor capacity—a relative evaluation of their power through the lens of their war-fighting capabilities—forms a crucial part of the taxonomy of non-state actors that I have created for this thesis, which I will explain in greater detail later.

²⁷ “Handling and Manhandling Civilians in Civil War,” 445.

²⁸ Stathis N. Kalyvas and Laia Balcells. “International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict.” *The American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 415–29.

²⁹ “International System and Technologies of Rebellion,” 419.

Literature Pertaining to Non-State Actors

Finally, there is the body of literature on non-state actors—which includes both general definitions of the term and taxonomies of different types of non-state actor, as well as specific inquiries into types of non-state actor behavior. In recent years, this body of literature has included a great deal of works investigating the particular phenomenon of suicide terrorism, a type of indiscriminate violence not entirely dissimilar from the type of violence we commonly refer to as mass killing or mass atrocity. One of the more important books on the phenomenon of suicide terror is Mia Bloom’s *Dying to Kill*,³⁰ which builds on Robert Pape’s earlier works on war and terrorist bombing, *Bombing to Win* and *Dying to Win*. Bloom asserts that suicide bombing, rather than being linked to any particular political or religious ideology (countervailing the pernicious narrative among certain media and political demagogues who say that the religion of Islam is to blame for the phenomenon of suicide terror)³¹, is instead a strategic choice made by groups as either a tactic of last resort, or in order to outcompete other groups for popular and financial support—in addition, the use of suicide terror is limited by public acceptance of the tactic.³² Often, these groups are resisting some kind of occupying force, with a significantly greater material capacity, and the use of suicide terror allows irregular combatants to level the playing field. This explanation of suicide bombing as a rational, strategic choice jibes with Valentino’s characterization of mass killings as being the result of strategic logic as well. In fact, Valentino himself (writing before Bloom) offhandedly includes terror bombing campaigns by

³⁰ Mia Bloom. *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

³¹ *Dying to Kill*, 3.

³² *Dying to Kill*, 1.

non-state actors in his taxonomy of mass killing strategies under the label of coercive terror bombing.³³

Bridging the gap between works dealing with specific tactics common to non-state actors and discussions of the characteristics of non-state actors themselves, there are works discussing the overlap between the two. De La Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca³⁴ characterize the phenomenon of terrorism in two senses: the “action” sense, which focuses on the particular aspects of terrorism as a kind of violent event that is coercive in nature and is not directed against the actual target of coercion, and the “actor” sense, which focuses on specific features of the groups engaging in violence, who tend to be underground, non-territory controlling groups.³⁵ De La Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca identify the commonly understood “core” of terrorism as occurring when both senses of the phenomenon “go in the same way,” i.e. when an underground group engages in coercive violence.³⁶ However, terrorism as a tactic is also defined by its use in the absence of territory control—that is, non-state actors who control some territory in the sense of a traditional insurgency also engage in terrorism in areas outside their zone of control.³⁷ This method of analysis—thinking about how capacity informs the strategies of non-state actors—is similar to Kalyvas and Balcells’s conceptualization of “technologies of rebellion,” and helps inform my decisions on the categorization of non-state actors.

However, it is important to account, in some way, for the aims of non-state actors when attempting to categorize them. Eran Zohar’s “A New Typology of Non-State-Actors: Interpreting

³³ *Final Solutions*, 86.

³⁴ Luis De La Calle and Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca. “In Search of the Core of Terrorism” in “Killing Civilians or Holding Territory? How to Think about Terrorism.” Ed. Victor Asal. *International Studies Review* 14 (2012), 475-497. Accessed September 22, 2016. http://fs2.american.edu/jyoung/www/documents/asal_et_al_isr_2012.pdf.

³⁵ “In Search of the Core of Terrorism,” 481.

³⁶ “In Search of the Core of Terrorism,” 483.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

the Diversity,”³⁸ does just that. Zohar attempts to place contemporary non-state actors in four categories: “secessionist organizations,” who fight for regional independence, are ethnically homogenous, and tend to wage conventional warfare, ideally functioning as a “state within a state”; “radical left revolutionary NSAs,” attempting to drastically rearrange the social and political order of a country, who often adopt the tactics of guerilla war and operate from hinterlands like jungles or mountains; “sectarian-based revolutionary NSAs,” who attempt regime change in order to stop state marginalization of their particular group; and “global revolutionary organizations,” which attempt to “impose Islamic rule in their own countries or worldwide through jihad,” and operate in a transnational manner, “specializing in suicide bombing and sophisticated martyrdom assaults.”³⁹

While this is an interesting method of classifying non-state actors, it has flaws. Notably, the ways that significant differences in capacity between non-state actors of the same category alter the descriptive value of the groupings are largely unaccounted for. Take, for example, “sons of the soil” conflicts, which originate when a state allows members of an ethno-national majority to settle in a region traditionally belonging to a minority group—the so-called “sons of the soil” (SoS).⁴⁰ Under these conditions, internal conflicts tend to spring up, with the native inhabitants of a contested region forming guerilla or insurgent groups, and the much more powerful state forces supporting the settlers. In these cases, the insurgents are fighting for autonomy or even secession, but because their capacity is low, their placement on Zohar’s analytical framework is questionable. Are they “secessionist organizations?” Are they “sectarian-based revolutionaries?”

³⁸ Eran Zohar. “A New Typology of Contemporary Armed Non-State-Actors: Interpreting The Diversity.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39, no. 5 (May 2016): 423–50.

doi:<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1099996>.

³⁹ “A New Typology of Contemporary Armed Non-State-Actors.”

⁴⁰ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin. “Sons of the Soil, Migrants, and Civil War.” *World Development*, Ethnicity and Ethnic Strife, 39, no. 2 (February 2011): 199–211. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2009.11.031.

Although SoS tend to place secession among their goals, they do not operate along the lines of conventional warfare, and certainly do not have the capacity to run a “state within a state,” as Zohar’s secessionists tend to. Zohar also notes that while sectarian revolutionaries start out with low capacities, they tend to develop over time into conventional forces.⁴¹ However, SoS conflicts tend to run exceedingly long, with insurgents gaining victory not by building capacity and overwhelming the state, but by either lasting long enough such that the state decides to cut its losses and negotiate, or through a peace forced by international intervention; on average, SoS conflicts last 15 years, double the average duration of all internal conflicts, but have a much smaller average and median casualty count.⁴²

Summary of Literature Review

In conducting this literature review, I reviewed scholarship pertaining to three specific topics: genocide and mass atrocities, civil/internal conflicts, and non-state actors. I found that, while all three bodies of literature offer important contributions to understanding the problem of mass atrocities committed by non-state actors, none offer complete and satisfying answers to my research questions: *What factors influence some non-state actors to commit mass atrocities? Are mass atrocities committed by non-state actors as strategic acts specifically planned by the group’s leadership, or is violence more likely to be committed for other reasons? And what warning signs of impending atrocity can be deduced from the answers to these previous questions?*

My niche lies somewhere in between the literature on genocide (particularly the theories focusing on elite actors and Ben Valentino’s strategic theory of genocide), the literature on

⁴¹ “A New Typology of Contemporary Armed Non-State-Actors.”

⁴² “Sons of the Soil, Migrants, and Civil War.”

internal conflicts focusing both on the structure of conflicts as well as their conduct, and the literature on the classification and conduct of non-state actors. As such, I feel that there is ample cause to undertake this research.

Condition-Setting

Defining “Mass Atrocities”

Defining “mass atrocity” is difficult and inherently subjective. While “genocide” and “crimes against humanity” are definitionally distinct, I will adapt Valentino’s approach in grouping them as a single category: “mass atrocities.”⁴³ For my purposes, the distinct categories of “genocide,” “crimes against humanity,” (which would encompass most of Valentino’s conception of mass killing) and even certain “war crimes” that I am including under the label of “mass atrocities” follow the definitions outlined by the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court Articles 7 and 8, respectively.⁴⁴

Defining the precise level of human suffering that elevates a “mere” atrocity up to the mass level is not as simple as merely working off of existing legal standards. I define a “mass atrocity” as the infliction of atrocity violence (as defined above; it is important to note that this definition is not limited to killing) upon a group of ten or more noncombatants in a single instance, a noncombatant being defined as a person who regardless of training or previous affiliation has no means of defending themselves at the instance of the atrocity. In order to

⁴³ Because one of the key precepts of the strategic view of mass atrocities is that genocide and other types of mass killing are functionally identical (being differing means of achieving similar end goals) it makes sense to follow this basic construction in attempting to evaluate this strategic view in the realm of non-state actors.

⁴⁴ “Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes.” *United Nations* (2014).
http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/pdf/framework%20of%20analysis%20for%20atrocity%20crimes_en.pdf

include cases where atrocity violence is committed as a steady stream of individual acts rather than in large bursts of killing, an “instance” of mass atrocity may take place over a period as long as a week. A repeated “campaign” of atrocity consists of three or more instances in a single month, with no upper limit to the number of campaigns of atrocity an actor may engage in over the course of a conflict.⁴⁵

Categorizing Non-State Actors, and Application to Case Studies

Clearly, in order to effectively classify non-state actors for the purposes of selecting case studies, some combination of material capacity and strategic aims will have to be considered. As such, I have created a working taxonomy of non-state actors using two key variables: relative material capacity and territorial boundedness. Relative material capacity is an adaptation of Kalyvas and Balcells’ technologies of rebellion concept. Instead of explicitly lifting their categorization of conventional, irregular, or symmetric non-conventional wars, I have adapted it into a binary classification of a non-state actor’s ability to shift political outcomes (conflict or diplomatic) in their favor through the threat or use of physical violence, relative to their region and the state(s) they are in conflict with.

A high capacity non-state actor uses conventional technologies of conflict including organized armies, armor, artillery, and even air power, and is capable of engaging with and beating state forces in open battles; they are capable of taking, holding, and administering captured territory. A low capacity non-state actor uses technologies of irregular warfare, including guerilla attacks, ambushes, terror bombing, and plunder; while they may informally

⁴⁵ I do not wish to use the word “campaign” to imply or presuppose a strategic end to the atrocities it refers to. I merely use it to refer to the scope conditions of my case studies—as I want to focus on atrocities committed by one actor over a relatively short period of time, “campaign” feels an appropriate term.

hold territory in hinterlands or historical strongholds, they rely on their ability to disappear into the civilian population as their primary means of defense, and are unable to field organized armies or engage in conventional warfare with foes.

Territorial boundedness, in context, is a way to account for the aims and operating principles of non-state actors without explicitly having to consider ideology. I classify non-state actors as being either territorially bounded or territorially revisionist. Territorially bounded actors do not seek the drastic revision of state boundaries, and while they may engage with states or actors outside their regions of activity, they do not actively attempt to redraw the map, so to speak. Secessionist groups seeking territorial independence either in a new state or autonomy within existing borders are territorially bounded, as the only care about their particular area—the same goes for sons of the soil. Similarly, groups like Zohar’s “radical leftist revolutionaries” who attempt to overthrow the government of a given state without drastically reforming its borders would be considered to be territorially bounded. Territorially revisionist groups, meanwhile, seek either to dramatically reform national boundaries in their operating region (by taking territory from a number of states to form a new state entirely, or by combining a number of existing states), or simply ignore national borders entirely. A group like the Islamic State, which seeks to establish a caliphate on the territory of a number of existing states would be considered territorially revisionist;⁴⁶ meanwhile, a transnational terrorist group like Al Qaeda, or an international drug cartel, both of which operate in multiple countries and essentially disregard national borders, could also be coded as territorially revisionist.

⁴⁶ Graeme Wood. “What ISIS Really Wants.” *The Atlantic*, March 2015.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

Coupling these two variables yields a typology with four archetypes of non-state actor:

	Territorially bounded	Territorially revisionist
High capacity	<p>Classic rebels: conventional rebel army, territorially bounded.</p> <p>Example: UNITA (Angola), Confederate States of America</p>	<p>Transnational reformer: high capacity actor that seeks drastic revision of a number of existing boundaries</p> <p>Examples: ISIS (and affiliates), PKK (and affiliates)</p>
Low capacity	<p>Insurgent: classic guerilla fighter/insurgent, territorially limited</p> <p>Examples Shining Path (Peru), Algerian Liberation Front</p>	<p>Transnational irregular: international terrorists, revolutionaries, criminal groups</p> <p>Examples: Al Qaeda, Sinaloa Cartel</p>

Figure 1: Typology of Non-state actors

Although these groupings can place superficially dissimilar groups in similar categories, I feel that the internal logic of this typology is both more consistent than Zohar's and more easily applicable to my research than the "technologies of conflict" concept. This typology will be used to structure my case studies; while the dependent variable of mass atrocities stays constant between the cases, I will change the independent variable of non-state actor type in each case, and trace exactly how the strategies or non-strategies of atrocity may differ across types. Furthermore, articulating case studies within the context of broader non-state actor archetypes will make the task of generalizing the findings of each case study easier.

Methodology:

Case Studies and Selection Criteria

I will use a method of structured, focused comparison of four cases to answer my first two research questions: *What factors influence some non-state actors to commit mass atrocities?*

And, are mass atrocities committed by non-state actors as strategic acts specifically planned by the group's leadership, or is violence more likely to be committed for other reasons? The typology of violent non-state actors outlined above allows me to make structured comparisons between my four case studies, with each one corresponding to a different type of VNSA. In choosing case studies, I am attempting to meet several goals which I consider critical to the success of the paper. First, my case studies must be documented extensively enough for me to draw meaningful conclusions. Second, to maximize scope and applicability (and external validity), the cases are spread out over a variety of geographical and cultural contexts. Third, while I want to study cases that comport with my typology of VNSAs, I want to avoid the intrusion of confirmation biases into my case selection; as such, I have made a concentrated and intentional effort to pick cases that (with the exception of ISIS) fall outside my previous research experience. With these goals in mind, my tentative case studies are:

1. Classic rebels: UNITA, Angola (1998-2002).
2. Classic insurgency: GIA, Algeria (1996-1998)
3. Transnational revisionists: ISIS, Iraq/Syria/elsewhere (2014-2015)
4. Transnational irregulars: Los Zetas, Mexico/US/elsewhere (2010-2012)

As noted above, these groups all share the characteristic of having committed mass atrocities; instead of changing the variable of group type in order to discern why a dependent variable changes, I am changing the group type variable to help identify the commonalities among them that all lead to one outcome—mass atrocity.

Case Evaluation

For each case study, I will use a variety of primary and secondary sources to construct a brief historical account of the case, focusing specifically on what I call “campaigns” of atrocity. As my mission is not historical, I will give equal weight to primary and secondary sources, provided, of course, that they are reliable in nature. As I have noted earlier, although the word “campaign” may imply a strategic end to the atrocities it refers to, I merely use it to refer a set of atrocities committed by one actor over a set period of time in a limited geographical area. Using the historical account of each actor and their campaigns, I will determine whether the atrocities can be characterized as strategic or non-strategic to answer my first research question. With this characterization in mind, I will then make a qualitative determination as to what factors or strategies may have lead the group in question to commit atrocities.

In answering these questions, I will attempt to borrow some elements of the “process tracing” method of historical analysis by prefacing my analysis for each case with a discussion of the types of evidence that I could expect to see that would either confirm or deny my hypothesis of instrumentalism in the atrocity crimes of non-state actors.⁴⁷ Smoking gun evidence indicative of strategic logic behind atrocities would include testimony by demobilized combatants that specifically discusses repeated orders from group leaders to commit atrocities, outright discussions of group strategy that include atrocities, or standard operating procedures that include the committing of atrocities or actions could be reliably assumed to lead to atrocities.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, smoking gun evidence demonstrating that a given group’s atrocities are non-strategic in nature would include testimony from former combatants indicating that atrocities

⁴⁷ The process tracing method of analysis is from Stephen Van Evera’s *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*.

⁴⁸ I.e. a standard operating procedure, upon capturing a town, of forcing large numbers of noncombatants into harsh environments with no guaranteed means of survival would count, by my standards, as being tantamount to killing them outright; it inflicts upon the victims conditions of life that could be reasonably assumed to lead to mass death.

were driven by organizational dysfunction and individual motives (revenge, pillage, bloodlust, etc.), rather than a coherent strategy. I will also test each strategic inference against alternative explanations—that the atrocities committed by each state actor were not, in fact, carried out with any strategic logic in mind, and were instead the products of individually aberrant behavior or organizational dysfunction.

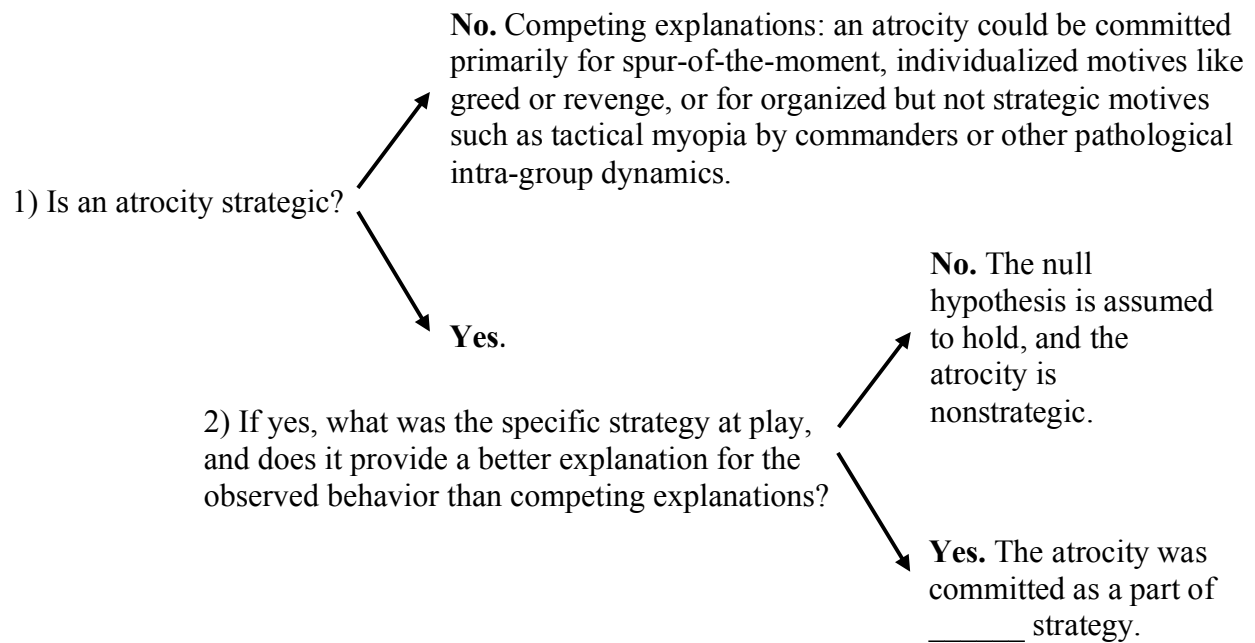


Figure 2: Case Evaluation and Competing Explanations

Creation and Evaluation of Warning Signs

For my third question, *what warning signs of impending atrocity can be deduced from the answers to these previous questions*, I will attempt to generalize warning signs from factors or key elements that appeared across the case studies, and then subject them to basic tests of validity and plausibility. In this case, these tests seek to interrogate the basic usefulness of my conclusions: can I state a reasonable causal connection between the warning signs and the actual

committing of atrocities? Do these warning signs have predictive value? Are they too narrow? Too broad? By asking these questions of my conclusions and by upholding good research practices in general, I hope to provide adequate answers to this final question, in lieu of awkwardly forcing a more rigid analytical structure into a research space for which it does not fit.

Summary of Methodology

I will attempt to provide answers for my research questions through the evaluation and structured comparison of four case studies, each one corresponding to a category in my taxonomy of non-state actors. My case studies are as follows: GIA (Algeria), UNITA (Angola), the Los Zetas cartel (Mexico), and ISIS (Iraq/Syria). For each case study, I will construct a historical narrative of pertinent mass atrocities committed by each group over a given time frame, and analyze the potential strategic logic undergirding those atrocities. I will then compare this analysis with potential alternative explanations (that mass atrocities are committed for reasons other than strategy) and decide which analysis better explains the empirical evidence.

Taking the conclusions from each of my case studies, I will then distill a set of generalizable warning signs of mass atrocity, which should provide predictive value in determining conflicts or actors at risk in the future. I will subject these warning signs to tests of logical rigor and predictive usefulness.

Hypotheses, Coding of Strategies, and Warning Signs:

Hypotheses

H1: I hypothesize that mass atrocities are committed by non-state actors for strategic reasons. Although material capacity or territorial boundedness can influence the strategic calculus of a non-state actor, these variables, beyond the simple delineation between state and non-state actors, do not fundamentally change the nature of the atrocities they commit.

H2a: Rather than being primarily motivated by individuals within the groups,⁴⁹ atrocities are committed under the express orders, or, at best, willful and knowing negligence, of group elites for strategic ends, and when they perceive an overriding interest in doing so.⁵⁰

H2b: Group elites will order their groups to commit atrocities when they have generally exhausted less costly options⁵¹ for protecting that interest.

Coding

If atrocities are committed strategically, what may some of those strategies be? While the particular end that group elites/leadership may desire will likely be specific to that group and therefore lacking in predictive value, the strategies which necessitate mass atrocities in pursuit of that end are generalizable to a good degree.⁵² Furthermore, some strategies of atrocity are not mutually exclusive, and often overlap. For example, a group that is attempting to coerce a foe

⁴⁹ Primarily individual sample motives could include revenge, looting and/or pillaging, etc.

⁵⁰ Such as protecting key territories, continuing highly valuable external relationships, maintaining core group cohesion, deterring dangerous foes, etc.

⁵¹ I.e., diplomatic efforts, coercive threats, targeted or selective use of force, etc.

⁵² For example: the end goal in service of which the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) commits mass atrocities is the establishment of a religiously pure “Islamic state” and, some contend, the bringing of the apocalypse. This goal is particular to the group and has no predictive value outside that one case. However, the strategies they use to bring about this goal (to “protect” their land) are fairly typical ones of ethnic cleansing and territorial mass violence (see Ben Valentino’s categorizations above). This strategy is generalizable and therefore holds predictive value.

may also be enacting a strategy of plunder at the same time. The most common broad strategies of atrocity include, but may not be limited to:

- 1) Coercion: an actor may use atrocity as a means of inflicting coercive violence against a target. Coercive efforts can be either deterrent (convincing a target not to proceed with a certain course of action) or compellent (convincing a target to reverse a course of action they have already begun).
 - a. Coercion by punishment: in a strategy of coercion by punishment, an actor of any capacity inflicts atrocities upon a victim group that is distinct from the actual target in order to coerce them.⁵³ The coercing actor is imposing both moral and strategic costs on its target; moral costs in the sense that the onus to stop the bloodshed (by acquiescing to the coercer) is put on the target, and strategic costs in the sense that the punishment may drive a wedge between the victim group and the target of coercion. Terror bombing is a kind of coercion by punishment.
 - b. Coercion by terror: conceptually similar to coercion by denial, but operationally distinct, coercion by terror are strategies wherein a coercer imposes costs upon a third party in order to demonstrate the depth of their commitment to the fight relative to their opponents, with the intent of convincing their target that their probability of victory in a conflict with the coercer is dramatically lower than initial appearances may suggest.
- 2) Perceived insecurity: an actor may seek to ethnically cleanse an area or eliminate a certain target group for the purposes of increasing security; they may view a particular

⁵³ I.e. the civilian population of a country, rather than its government or military.

ethnic/national/religious group as being an inherent security threat for a number of reasons, and will seek to address the security risk they pose by violently removing them.

- 3) Plunder: a weak or isolated actor may seek to materially support itself through the repeated and violent theft of: arms, food, fuel, capital, and even people. Even if the theft itself is not violent, dispossessive measures may lead to the mass death of the targets of plunder.
- 4) Recruitment: an actor in a competitive environment, where public support for mass violence exists, may commit atrocities in an attempt to “outbid” rivals for the favor of potential recruits.
- 5) Internal cohesion: an actor with declining levels of intra-group cohesion may seek to bolster their constituents’ senses of unity by designating a particular “enemy” as the target of their focused wrath.
- 6) Deterring civilian defection: an actor may seek to use violence to coerce civilian populations into cooperation. In areas of tight control, this coercion may take the form of threats and targeted killings. In areas of looser or contested control, actors lack the intelligence and capacity necessary to commit targeted killings, and instead use mass killing as a less-effective but cheap means of coercion.
- 7) Strategic engineered migration: actors may seek to engineer mass migrations of civilians for a number of strategic ends.⁵⁴
 - a. Militarized engineered migration: migrations engineered, usually during a conflict, to gain some sort of advantage over an enemy (disruption of command and control, logistics, and freedom of movement).

⁵⁴ 7 a, b, c, and d are all from: Kelly M. Greenhill. *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy*. Cornell University Press, 2011.

- b. Exportive engineered migration: migrations engineered for the purposes of either shoring up a domestic political position (by expelling dissidents or domestic opponents) or disrupting foreign adversaries.
 - c. Dispossession engineered migration: migrations engineered primarily for the purposes of acquiring territory or property originally belonging to another group, or for the purposes of eliminating a group perceived to pose a challenge to the social, political, or economic dominance of those engineering the migration (commonly known as ethnic cleansing).
 - d. Coercive engineered migration: migrations engineered for the purposes of imposing costs on a target (either by inducing domestic discontent or capacity swamping) such that they capitulate to a coercive demand by the engineer of the migration.
- 8) “Paradoxical peace”: a committed actor that has been locked in stalemate with an enemy for a long period of time may drastically ramp up the scale and scope of violence in hopes of bringing the conflict to a conclusion, either by forcing their enemy to capitulate, or by forcing an advantageous, brokered peace.

Warning signs

Based on these strategies of atrocity, a number of generalized warning signs of impending atrocity can be deduced:

1. *Significant losses*: Non-state actors that perceive themselves as having suffered significant losses in terms of manpower, territory, or societal cache will be more likely to commit mass atrocities.

2. *Territorial control*: Non-state actors that place an overriding importance on territorial control will often respond to the threat of territorial loss or the degradation of territorial integrity with extreme force, up to and including mass atrocities.
3. *Challenges to social order as enforced*: Non-state actors that place an overriding importance on the creation and enforcement of a particular social order in controlled or contested territory will often respond to challenges to that social order (from within) with extreme force, and may commit mass atrocities in doing so.
4. *Lengthy conflicts*: As conflicts drag on, actors may find themselves desperate to end a conflict. In this desperation, and having exhausted other options, actors may take extreme steps, including committing mass atrocities, with the goal of either forcing the enemy to capitulate or by forcing international intervention and then acquiescing to a brokered peace.
5. *Crowded battlefields*: In conflicts with a significant number of competing actors (both state and non-state), and especially in conflicts where alliances between said actors are fluid, armed groups may commit mass atrocities as a means of differentiating themselves or as part of coercive strategies.
6. *Highly committed actors*: for a number of reasons (ideology, intra-group cohesion, desperation) a group may be highly committed to a particular conflict or strategy. Regardless of their relative material capacity or the commitment level of their adversaries, they may attempt a number of potential strategies of atrocity.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Potential strategic mechanisms exist for a highly committed actor to commit atrocities regardless of the commitment level or capacity of their adversaries:

	Committed adversary:	Uncommitted adversary:
Higher capacity adversary:	Militarized engineered migration	Coercion by terror
Lower or equal-capacity adversary:	Counter-insurgency/punishing civilian defection	Coercion by punishment

Summary of Hypotheses

I hypothesize that non-state actors commit mass atrocities in the service of strategic ends, at the discretion of group elites, and generally as a policy of last resort. Common strategies of atrocity include coercion, insecurity, recruitment, plunder, internal cohesion, strategic engineered migration, and paradoxical peace. Warning signs of impending atrocity include: significant losses, territorial control, challenges to social order as enforced, lengthy conflicts, crowded battlefields, highly committed actors.

Plan of Study

Proceeding from here, I examine my case studies in this order: Chapter 3: UNITA, Chapter 4: GIA, Chapter 5: Los Zetas, and Chapter 6: ISIS. Each case study chapter will include a short introduction, historical summary, description of group ideology, description of atrocities, description of potential strategic logic, comparison with the null hypothesis, and a conclusion. In Chapter 7, I will generalize and evaluate potential warning signs with brief tests of logical rigor and predictive value. Finally, I will conclude the paper by looking to the future utility of my conclusions, and the future of conflicts involving non-state actors.

Chapter Three UNITA, Angola, 1998-2002

Introduction

For decades, all Angola knew was war: John Prendergast, writing for the US Institute of Peace in 1999, pointed out that at the time, with the average age of the country being seventeen and the country's civil conflict having gone on nearly four decades, "over 80 percent of the population had never experienced an Angola at peace."⁵⁶ In addition to its remarkable length, the Angolan conflict was famous for its scale—at the height of US and Soviet involvement, it featured the second-largest battle in Africa since World War II, and, contra the general American image of internal conflicts being fought by small rebel bands, featured massive conventional battles, featuring armor, artillery, and air support. However, by the time of Prendergast's writing, the period of the war featuring conventional, pitched battles had mostly passed. In the absence of continued US and Soviet support, the war became a grinding, highly violent conflict between the sitting Angolan government (the left-leaning MPLA), and its Ovimbundu nationalist, reactionary challenger, UNITA, led by Jonas Savimbi. By the time the war finally ended in 2002, over half a million people had been killed, with well over a million internally displaced.⁵⁷

In this chapter, I analyze the 1998-2002 period of the Angolan conflict in order to determine whether atrocities committed during this period were strategic in intent. I also determine, per my secondary hypothesis, whether the atrocities were committed at the behest of group elites and as strategies of last resort. To this end, I provide a brief history of modern

⁵⁶ John Prendergast. "Special Report: Angola's Deadly War." *United States Institute of Peace*. October 12, 1999. Accessed January 12, 2017. <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/sr991012.pdf>.

⁵⁷ "Angola." *Armed Conflict Database*. Accessed February 13, 2017. <https://acd-iiss-org.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/en/conflicts/angola--archived-2006-659a?as=C95D09E674FA44B2A4989D0ADEC7908D>.

Angola, focusing specifically on the 1961-2002 conflict. I also describe and analyze the ideology of UNITA and Savimbi in particular, which informs my later strategic evaluation. I will then examine the atrocities committed by UNITA in the final, most violent period of the war, between the failure of the Lusaka Peace Accord in 1998, and Savimbi's death at the hands of government forces in 2002. During this time, UNITA committed a large number of atrocities, including the forced displacement of civilians, indiscriminate shelling of civilian population centers, and the abduction, mutilation, rape, torture, and killing of a large number of civilians.⁵⁸

I have selected this time period because it features the greatest number of civilian casualties of any of the popularly delineated periods of the war, and the greatest number of instances of UNITA violence against civilians. In addition, although this period of the conflict comes after the cessation of large-scale foreign aid to UNITA, it was still able to maintain a relatively high capacity (fielding artillery and armor, at times) due to its trade in diamonds.

In examining these atrocities, I evaluate whether they were committed with strategic intent, and, if so, make inferences as to what the strategic logic or logics may have been. I also weigh my interpretation against alternative explanations—that all or some of the given atrocities were committed primarily because of individual-level factors, dysfunctional group dynamics, or other non-strategic causes, rather than being strategic in nature. I conclude by summarizing my findings and briefly delineating how they may impact the formulation of potential warning signs of future atrocities.

⁵⁸ While falling outside the scope of my argument due to the difficulty of determining precise casualty numbers and times, both the Angolan government and UNITA in particular engaged in the heavy mining of contested areas, resulting in an untold number of civilian maimings and deaths. The de-mining process continues to this day.

The Angolan Conflict

In this section, I first provide a brief history of Angola from its colonization by the Portuguese through its decolonization in 1975. I then describe, in slightly greater detail, the period of internationalized conflict lasting from 1976 to 1991, ending with the Bicesse Peace Accords, and the post-Bicesse Accords period of the conflict, ending in 1994 with the Lusaka Peace Process. The fourth, post-Lusaka period of the war began in 1997 when Savimbi rejected a diminished role for UNITA in a unity government, leading a refreshed UNITA in an extremely violent campaign that lasted until his death at the hands of government forces in 2002, after which succeeding UNITA leaders quickly sued for peace. Because I focus on atrocities committed by UNITA during this period, I do not describe it in detail here, and instead give a brief summary before I delve into the detail of UNITA atrocities. This summary is meant not only to contextualize the atrocities I address in later sections, but to ground my analysis of UNITA strategies within the group's history and the larger history of the Angolan conflict.

Angola's Colonial History and Decolonization

The war in Angola is inextricably linked to the country's history of Portuguese colonial rule. Portuguese explorers first landed in the country in the 1400s, and the modern capital of Luanda was founded as a Portuguese enclave in 1575.⁵⁹ Angola, therefore, experienced direct settler colonialism much earlier than much of the rest of Africa. Between the late 16th century and roughly 1878, the slave trade was the major force shaping Angola, with over eight million people—more than the population of the country when it achieved independence in 1975—captured by raiders and sent abroad as cargo, to serve as labor in Brazil, the Caribbean, and

⁵⁹ Jennifer J. Ziemke. "From Battles to Massacres." Ph.D., The University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2008. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/docview/304448633/abstract/968669AA4E4D4D70PQ/1>.

North America.⁶⁰ Throughout the period of colonization, Angolans periodically resisted Portuguese rule through revolts, protests, and minor wars. However, the modern struggle for independence can most firmly be stated to have become a mobilized, violent conflict on February 4, 1961, when a peasant uprising stormed a prison in Luanda in an attempt to free political prisoners.⁶¹ Armed rebels began attacking white settlers and their families; in response, white settlers formed militias.⁶²

It was around this time that the *Frente Nacional para a Libertação de Angola* (FNLA) formed, led by Holden Roberto, who had originally commanded the militias attacking white settlers.⁶³ Originally operating out of Congo-Leopoldville, and supported primarily by Bakongo peoples living near the northern border of Angola, the FNLA had an early edge in the war for independence due to support from the Leopoldville government, as well as American and Chinese financial backing.⁶⁴ The other early actor in the decolonization conflict was the *Movimento Popular da Libertação de Angola* (MPLA). Primarily arising from the coastal and urban regions of Angola, and supported by mestiços and Umbundu peoples, the MPLA established a foothold in Congo-Brazzaville in the late 1950s as a primarily nationalist force with socialist leanings.⁶⁵ When the war for independence began in full, they, with Soviet support, reestablished a presence in Luanda and other coastal cities.⁶⁶ The MPLA was led during this period by Aghostino Neto, a Luandan intellectual and poet who had studied medicine in Lisbon, making connections in activist and communist social circles before being arrested by the

⁶⁰ “From Battles to Massacres,” 69.

⁶¹ “From Battles to Massacres,” 70.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ David Birmingham. *A Short History of Modern Angola*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 74.

⁶⁵ “From Battles to Massacres,” 73.

⁶⁶ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 74-75.

Portuguese secret police; after his release, he returned to Angola and joined with the MPLA, quickly becoming the group's leader and primary public face.⁶⁷

As the war continued, Angolans in the south and east of the country, particularly the Ovimbundu ethnic group (the country's largest), began to lose interest in fighting; the two independence movements were mostly seen as being exclusionary of their interests.⁶⁸

Capitalizing on such sentiment, Jonas Savimbi, a European-educated southerner, founded the *União Nacional para a Independencia Total de Angola* (UNITA) in 1966.⁶⁹ Characterizing the movement as representing the Ovimbundu as well as being rural and anti-elite,⁷⁰ Savimbi captured some support in the south of the country, but was never truly successful in this first phase of the war. By the time of the peace settlement, he commanded, at best, a few hundred fighters, making UNITA's inclusion in the post-colonial government somewhat of a mystery.⁷¹ Notably, by the early 1970s, Savimbi had entered into secret negotiations with the Portuguese military in the hopes of securing power in a "neo-colonial settlement," but it is unknown if these negotiations had any impact on the power structure installed in Angola, given the change in the Portuguese government that led to the end of the colonial conflict.⁷²

The colonial phase of the conflict in Angola ended abruptly. The so-called "Carnation Revolution" of 1974, named for the flowers military officers supposedly stuck in the barrels of their rifles as they moved to overthrow the government, toppled the dictatorship that had ruled Portugal for over four decades, and afterwards, the new government quickly sued for peace.⁷³

⁶⁷ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 75.

⁶⁸ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 75.

⁶⁹ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 76.

⁷⁰ "From Battle to Massacres," 74.

⁷¹ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 76.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ "From Battles to Massacres," 71.

The end of the war could not have come quickly enough for the three Angolan armed factions, particularly MPLA—the group had lost official Soviet support in the early 1970s and was on the verge of disintegrating altogether.⁷⁴ The coup, however, abruptly reversed MPLA's fortunes: as a part of the peace agreement (the Alvor Accords, drafted in January of 1975), they were officially installed in the post-colonial government alongside FNLA and UNITA, and received renewed Soviet support (including financing, military aid, and the promise of Cuban expeditionary troops as backup, if necessary).⁷⁵ UNITA received a similar dividend: after the signing of the Accords, its army increased to at least 3,000 and possibly as many as 8,000 men, a number rivaling that of MPLA's regular fighting force.⁷⁶

The Proxy Conflict: 1975-1991

The next phase of the Angolan war was heavily internationalized and was, short of the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan, perhaps the most significant proxy conflict of the Cold War period. Its primary Angolan combatants were MPLA and UNITA; also directly involved in the conflict were Cuba (fighting on the side of MPLA), Congo (fighting against MPLA on behalf of FNLA), and South Africa (cooperating loosely with UNITA while conducting operations at and across the border between Angola and South West Africa).⁷⁷ The Soviet Union continued to supply MPLA and Cuban troops, while the US shifted its support to UNITA relatively early in the war. The influx of money and arms from the two superpowers drastically escalated the scale

⁷⁴ "From Battles to Massacres," 71.

⁷⁵ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 80.

⁷⁶ Stephen L. Weigert. *Angola: A Modern Military History, 1961-2002*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

⁷⁷ What is now Namibia.

of the war and boosted the material capacity of the combatants; tellingly, this period of the war saw some of the largest armor battles ever conducted in Africa.⁷⁸

The Alvor Accords collapsed before they could even truly be implemented, and the conflict became fully internationalized as soon as Portugal withdrew. Having installed all three parties to the independence conflict in power in the Alvor Accords but having neglected to provide any real institutional support for the post-independence government, Portugal left the country completely unprepared for independence. Even before Portugal withdrew, MPLA troops seized Luanda with the help of irregular militias in June of 1975, while UNITA and FNLA retreated, leaving the capital under the control of Neto's faction in every way but name—Portugal was, officially, still in power.⁷⁹ Savimbi decided to form an alliance with FNLA; Daniel Chipenda, an FNLA officer who had defected from MPLA, used his ties to the South African government to secure their support.⁸⁰ The FNLA continued to receive covert American support, funneled through Mobutu's government in Zaire; the Zairan army often fought alongside them.⁸¹

Portugal officially withdrew on November 11, 1975; the night before, as supporters of MPLA celebrated, "excited but apprehensive citizens could hear Congolese guns pounding the northern city suburbs in support of the FNLA."⁸² MPLA declared itself to be the government of the People's Republic of Angola the following day.⁸³ Shortly thereafter, FNLA and UNITA declared war against MPLA (with the help of 6,000 South African troops) basing their rival government in the city of Huambo and calling it the "Democratic Republic of Angola."⁸⁴ Soon,

⁷⁸ "Battle of Cuito Cuanavale." *Wikipedia*, February 5, 2017.
https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Battle_of_Cuito_Cuanavale&oldid=763895157.

⁷⁹ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 81.

⁸⁰ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 82.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 83.

⁸³ "From Battles to Massacres," 76.

⁸⁴ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 84.

the size of the Cuban contingent increased to 10,000, with artillery and armor.⁸⁵ The Cuban troops proved highly effective; without the assistance of South Africa, UNITA likely would have been wholly defeated before 1976.⁸⁶ Indeed, when South African troops largely withdrew to the South West African border in March 1976 (facing widespread international condemnation), “both UNITA and the FNLA collapsed.”⁸⁷

Throughout the rest of the 1970s, the MPLA continued to consolidate support, destroying FNLA almost completely as a fighting force, and by 1977 had reduced UNITA to “roving bands of dissidents,” albeit ones with ties to Pretoria and Washington.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, Cuban troops remained in Angola, acting as military trainers, infrastructure builders, and guards for the oil wells that provided the vast majority of the government’s cash flow.⁸⁹ The war with Zaire ended in 1978.⁹⁰ As the 1970s came to a close, the MPLA government saw both a major coup attempt in 1977 (leading to a harsh crackdown) and the death of Neto in 1979.⁹¹ He was replaced shortly thereafter by Jose Eduardo dos Santos. During this time, although UNITA was not materially powerful, Savimbi retained some ideological influence in the “disaffected” south of Angola, playing on racial tensions between the Ovimbundu periphery and the white/*mestiço*/*assimilado*/Creole-friendly MPLA government and accusing them of being in the pocket of foreign interests.⁹² He also used his ties with friendly leaders in the region to expand his network of support, with the goal of eventually diminishing UNITA’s reliance on South

⁸⁵ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 84.

⁸⁶ “From Battles to Massacres,” 79.

⁸⁷ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 84.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 87.

⁹⁰ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 91.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 87.

Africa.⁹³ At the same time, South Africa continued to conduct cross-border raids in Angola (often in conjunction with UNITA, to whom they often sent military trainers and materiel), even after their official withdrawal in 1976.⁹⁴

As the 1970s ended and 1980s began, however, UNITA's fortunes were reversed. Due to growing international sentiment against Soviet military adventurism, UNITA began to receive significant amounts of aid: in 1979, China shipped about 600 tons of weapons to UNITA through Zambia; France, Iran, and Saudi Arabia established a joint fund of US \$18 million, along with other backers like Zaire and Morocco; South Africa funneled millions in black market weapons to the group through South West Africa.⁹⁵ UNITA's newfound wealth allowed Savimbi to expand the organization, adopting an elaborate command structure in order to better mobilize the civilian population under UNITA control—the “hundreds of thousands of civilians [who] followed UNITA into the bush voluntarily in the face of MPLA/Cuban advances in the 1970s”—and by 1981, Savimbi claimed to command 8,000 regular troops supported by mortars, rocket launchers, and artillery, as well as upwards of 20,000 irregular militias.⁹⁶ Increased UNITA capacity allowed for the emergence of a territory war—by late 1980, UNITA was engaging with MPLA troops in open battle for strategically valuable towns, and winning.⁹⁷ Notably, even at this time, Savimbi expressed realistic goals for his faction, saying in 1979, “if UNITA does not succeed in forcing the MPLA to negotiate by 1990 it has no chance to succeed at all,” and two years later claiming that “there is no military victory to be won here. We believe the MPLA will

⁹³ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 71.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 72.

⁹⁶ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 73.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

eventually enter into negotiations with us. It is a question of forcing their hand—although it will take a lot of fighting.”⁹⁸

The latter half of the 1980s was marked by large, semiconventional battles between the MPLA/Cuban and UNITA/SADF coalitions, particularly in the Cuanda Cubango province. In particular, the strategically-situation town of Mavinga saw repeated battles, in 1985, 1986, and then again in late 1987: MPLA, refreshed by a Soviet arms shipment that included jet attack aircraft, helicopter gunships, and BMP armored personnel carriers, attacked the town in 1987 in the hopes of disrupting UNITA operations in the vicinity and menacing Savimbi’s headquarters at Jamba.⁹⁹ MPLA troops met with UNITA and SADF forces in a conventional battle for Mavinga, lasting over a month, which concluded upon the MPLA troops’ retreat in the face of mounting casualties. UNITA and SADF troops followed them, making a push on the heavily defended city of Cuito Cuanavale, forcing MPLA defenders to within a few kilometers of the city before disengaging after several months of laying siege. All told, MPLA forces saw nearly 5000 men killed, and over one hundred armored vehicles and twelve aircraft captured or destroyed; UNITA, while suffering heavy losses in terms of manpower (over 3000 killed), did not sustain nearly as much loss in terms of materiel, while South African forces sustained relatively minimal losses.¹⁰⁰ It was the second-largest battle in African history.

As South African forces pulled back to the South West African border, the Cuban troop presence in southern Angola increased drastically, with Castro deploying around 12,000 troops along a four-hundred kilometer front, which moved slowly southwards to the border.¹⁰¹ This seeming escalation was, in fact, an attempt to force a brokered peace while still providing Cuba

⁹⁸ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 73.

⁹⁹ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 86.

¹⁰⁰ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 88.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

with an “honorable” exit from the war.¹⁰² While South Africa too chose to escalate in response, both sides ultimately agreed to withdraw South African forces from Angola by September 1988 and South West Africa the following year, to grant South West Africa independence as Namibia, and for Cuban forces to leave Angola by 1991.¹⁰³ MPLA forces staged one final attempt at capturing Mavinga in 1990, attacking the town with 12,000 troops and large numbers of armored vehicles.¹⁰⁴ Although they initially succeed in capturing the town, UNITA sabotage had left its airfield unusable, preventing MPLA from using the town as a staging area to assault Jamba, and UNITA troops managed to encircle Mavinga soon afterward; under round-the-clock bombardment and unable to be reinforced, MPLA withdrew after suffering heavy losses of men and materiel.¹⁰⁵

This, seemingly, was the evidence MPLA needed that the war was not winnable with the current balance of forces between the two sides; Savimbi concurred, and peace talks soon began, first hosted by the Portuguese, and later co-sponsored by the US and USSR.¹⁰⁶ At around the same time, the Angola’s government structure saw a radical shakeup, with the December 1990 MPLA Party Congress rejecting Marxism-Leninism, removing several “hardline” members of the Central Committee, and renouncing the one-party system of government.¹⁰⁷ With the prospect of multiparty elections and shared rule on the table, the two sides finally agreed to the Bicesse Accord on May 31, 1991, ending the internationalized phase of the conflict.

¹⁰² And an interesting side example of the paradoxical peace strategy. Ibid.

¹⁰³ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 90.

¹⁰⁴ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 95.

¹⁰⁵ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 91.

¹⁰⁶ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 100.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

The Post-Bicesse Conflict: 1992-1994

The Bicesse Accords were marked by misplaced optimism and underwhelming international support. The Accords, which were intended to end almost two decades of civil war (which, of course, had come after fifteen years of low-intensity anti-colonial struggle), called for the large-scale (nearly 150,000 total, between both sides) cantonment and demobilization of UNITA and MPLA troops and the integration of other, remaining forces into a new Angolan police force and military.¹⁰⁸ However, both sides had trouble committing to demobilization: the government sent 15,000 soldiers to Cabinda, saying they were designated to combat FLEC (a Cabindan separatist group) and therefore could not be demobilized or contributed to the new Angolan army, and claimed that thousands of other soldiers had deserted before Bicesse took effect; Savimbi, meanwhile, claimed that he had less than 40,000 total fighters for the purposes of demobilization *and* integration into the army, and that roughly 12,000 UNITA fighters had demobilized before Bicesse took effect and therefore did not count towards the Accord's limits.¹⁰⁹ Savimbi took pains to stash UNITA's most sophisticated and deadly materiel around the country to avoid seizure by the UN monitoring force.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, the new Angolan police force faced similar problems, as the government refused to allow thousands of UNITA fighters entrance, while at the same time reorganizing 1,000 former MPLA commandos into an elite anti-riot police unit (colloquially called the "Ninjas"), arming them with weapons purchased, according to Savimibi, in violation of the Accord.¹¹¹ All these issues, of course, were

¹⁰⁸ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 106.

¹⁰⁹ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 106-7.

¹¹⁰ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 97.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

compounded by thousands of displaced civilians returning to their places of origin, in a country still filled with “several million” landmines.¹¹²

Complicating all this was an egregiously small UN monitoring force (UNAVEM II) that was utterly incapable of properly monitoring the fulfillment of the treaty, or of taking positive steps to enforce it. UNAVEM II consisted of 350 unarmed military observers, 126 police observers, and 200 civilian election supervisors, with a budget of only \$132 million for a 17-month mission in a large and heavily populated country.¹¹³ UN Representative Margaret Anstee “flew everywhere in decrepit aircraft, parsimoniously funded by the United States.”¹¹⁴ Throughout the entire operation, UNAVEM personnel were “chronically short of food, transport, and equipment,” and tactically, the mission’s mandate “greatly limited UNAVEM II’s room for maneuver.”¹¹⁵ For the purposes of comparison, the 1989 UN mission to Namibia to assist with its transition to independence (UNTAG) deployed close to 5,000 troops, 1,500 police monitors, and 900 election supervisors—in a country with one-tenth of Angola’s population.¹¹⁶

It all fell apart in 1992, after Angola’s first free election. UNITA was soundly defeated in parliamentary elections, and Savimbi lost a relatively close presidential race. Tensions quickly mounted. Savimbi sent conflicting messages, “denouncing preliminary vote tallies as fraudulent,” but nevertheless making public statements against the resumption of conflict; after a UN announcement characterizing the elections as “generally free and fair,” Savimbi rejected that characterization, but also made a statement calling for unity with MPLA officials and a

¹¹² *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 97.

¹¹³ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 106.

¹¹⁴ *A Short History of Modern Angola*, 110.

¹¹⁵ Kelly M. Greenhill and Solomon Major. “The Perils of Profiling Civil War Spoilers and the Collapse of Intrastate Peace Accords.” *International Security* 31, no. 3 (2006): 7–40.

¹¹⁶ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 106.

continuing process of reconciliation in government.¹¹⁷ However, violence quickly resumed: armed UNITA forces occupied the town of Caconda, a car bomb hit a Luanda hotel housing high-ranking UNITA members, “Ninja” police and UNITA members clashed regularly and, on October 31, 1992, fighting broke out between UNITA protestors and “Ninja” police at the Luanda airport, which quickly escalated into combat throughout the entire city, ending the next day with nearly 1,200 UNITA supporters killed.¹¹⁸ UNITA quickly remobilized, seizing control of nearly a third of the country’s provinces, and within a month, the country was once more at war.

The new conflict had a decidedly different tenor than that of the 1975-1991 war: ten thousand Angolans died in only the first two months of fighting and, in addition to the October 31 killings in Luanda, government forces killed hundreds of Zairean expatriates living in northwest Angola in January 1993, perhaps as a reprisal for Zaire’s suspected role in UNITA’s resurgence.¹¹⁹ Later, when UNITA troops captured the city of Huambo after several months of siege warfare, they killed nearly 15,000 government soldiers and civilians as they attempted to flee; while besieging the city of Kuito, UNITA utilized indiscriminate bombardments and attempted to prevent any supplies from reaching the city, leading to large-scale shortages of food and medical supplies for the city’s inhabitants.¹²⁰ Meanwhile, both UNITA and the government continued to play diplomacy with an eye towards a more favorable settlement, rather than outright victory, with Dos Santos openly stating that the Angolan military was pursuing tactics that would “bring about a draw” and presumably another round of negotiation.¹²¹ Even at the

¹¹⁷ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 111.

¹¹⁸ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 111-12.

¹¹⁹ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 113.

¹²⁰ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 114.

¹²¹ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 116.

height of UNITA control in October 1993 (they controlled an estimated 70% of the country, although much of the Angolan population and economy was clustered along the coast), the group continued to communicate “its commitment to the Bicesse Accord and its acceptance of the September 1992 election results.”¹²² All the while, the government supported itself with international aid and copious oil revenues, while UNITA used the value extracted by diamond mines in its territory to purchase black market arms from the former Soviet bloc.

The fighting came to a halt in 1994 with the signing of the Lusaka Accord. It was more advantageous for UNITA than the Bicesse Accord had been, in no small part because of the significant gains UNITA had made militarily before its signing—because UNITA had controlled so much of the country by 1993, it had been able to give up territory it could not have realistically controlled to government forces in exchange for more time to negotiate a favorable peace deal on the diplomatic front.¹²³ The Lusaka Accord, while keeping some of the key provisions of the Bicesse Accord, also afforded UNITA a significantly stronger stake in the Angolan police and military and, in a later addition to the deal, offered Savimbi a position as one of two vice presidents of Angola, with the other seat held by the president of Angola’s National Assembly. Although the Accord was signed by government and UNITA representatives in November 1994 (reportedly against the wishes of Savimbi, who had initially recalled UNITA’s representative before relenting at the last moment), issues with pacification and lack of access to certain areas of the country delayed the arrival of UNAVEM III until February 1995.¹²⁴ Finally, after a series of meetings between Dos Santos and Savimbi in May and June 1995 (at

¹²² *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 116.

¹²³ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 199.

¹²⁴ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 121-22.

which point he was offered the vice presidential position), Savimbi declared the war over.¹²⁵ The peace would be short-lived.

The Ideology of UNITA and Savimbi

Drawing a distinction between the actions of UNITA and the beliefs of Savimbi is difficult. UNITA was, like any faction of reasonable size, not an entirely unitary actor, and despite Savimbi's lifelong control of the group, he often faced significant intragroup divisions. While Savimbi, at times, explicitly stated a belief in Maoist warfighting doctrine, UNITA's political goals often were less than revolutionary: he agreed to peace accords in 1991 and 1994 that, while giving himself and UNITA considerable power, fell far short of the radical political goals that accompany revolutionary guerilla warfare under Maoism.¹²⁶ Savimbi, in fact, consistently expressed a desire to see a negotiated end to the war, viewing it as a means to gain greater power within roughly the same sociopolitical framework (albeit with a more even balance of power between Angola's coast and central highlands), rather than a revolutionary struggle a la Mao.¹²⁷

Savimbi was also highly opportunistic in terms of alliance-making, perhaps most notably during the decolonization conflict when he attempted to make a secret deal with the Portuguese to elevate himself to power in a neo-colonial reorientation of the country's power structure. During the internationalized portion of the conflict, Savimbi aligned himself on the one hand with the anti-colonial Mobutu Sese-Seko of Zaire, but relied heavily on apartheid South Africa for military assistance on the other. Particularly when viewed in terms of his opposition to

¹²⁵ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 122.

¹²⁶ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 7.

¹²⁷ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 9.

Aghostino Neto's Marxist-Leninist MPLA—which formed alliances with Cuba and the Soviet Union, explicitly opposed Western imperialism in Africa, and resolutely opposed South Africa—Savimbi and UNITA's ideology was, put very generously, one of reactionary Ovimbundu nationalism.¹²⁸

In terms of warfighting, too, Savimbi and UNITA were less than exacting in terms of applying Maoist principles of guerilla warfare. While Mao's famous conception of revolutionary guerilla warfare imagined guerillas as fish in a civilian sea, moving freely in order to strike and hiding among the population to avoid reprisal, UNITA partially abandoned the guerilla warfare mode of operation as its capabilities grew in the late 70s and 80s, marrying a fairly sophisticated command-and-control structure and conventional military forces with guerilla warfare. Savimbi claimed that, despite his mentor in guerilla warfare being Mao, he was also careful to fit strategy to circumstance, saying in 1988 that "we could not come back here and apply what we learned [from Mao] in indiscriminate fashion."¹²⁹ In that light, his decision to cast UNITA as an Ovimbundu nationalist movement against Soviet adventurism makes some sense as a means of facilitating support for UNITA among the civilian "sea," although it is difficult to know for certain: the results of the 1992 national elections demonstrated significantly more support for MPLA than UNITA, albeit in a context that lacked the heavy Soviet and Cuban presences of the 1970s and 80s. Notably, though, much of the Cold War era of the Angolan conflict was fought in rural areas, on battlefields largely devoid of civilians (hence the relatively low civilian casualties during that period).

UNITA's decisions to pursue peace, too, deserve analysis. In 1991, Savimbi pushed rather hard for peace, even after resounding victories over government forces at Mavinga in

¹²⁸ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 7.

¹²⁹ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 11.

1989-90 after which UNITA could have credibly taken the fight to Angola's cities.¹³⁰ Savimbi's initial insistence on a negotiated peace reads as being a truer reflection of UNITA's capabilities than we can know in retrospect (government forces outnumbered UNITA by a ratio of 2.7:1 in 1991, despite major military success for UNITA as the 80s came to a close) and perhaps as a true belief that he could win a democratic election.¹³¹ Savimbi and UNITA's increasing role as a spoiler during the implementation of the Bicesse Accords affirms this notion: as implementation of the Accords began, UNAVEM II was unable to disarm and demobilize UNITA at the same rate as the government, and by 1992, the balance of forces was roughly equal.¹³² After unexpectedly losing the winner-take-all presidential election, Savimbi almost certainly would have preferred to relitigate the election on the battlefield, rather than accepting the results.

Savimbi's embrace of peace once more in 1994 reads as being similarly opportunistic. While ignoring pleas for peace before reaching a territorial nadir in 1993, UNITA switched gears, slowly giving back newly captured territory to government forces to buy time for negotiators.¹³³ Whether this tactic had been planned out in advance or was formulated on the fly, as UNITA ran into problems of exceedingly long supply chains and sustained defeats at the hands of government forces and foreign mercenaries, it resulted in the 1994 Lusaka Protocol, an improvement (from UNITA's point of view) on the 1992 Bicesse Accords. The breakdown of the Lusaka Protocol, however, is harder to parse. Major issues with the agreement—leaving Savimbi's position in the country unsettled, neglecting to eliminate UNITA's ability to trade diamonds for weapons, and leaving enforcement duties to the local parties rather than the UNAVEM III mission—created significant incentive to spoil the peace agreement, especially as

¹³⁰ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 5.

¹³¹ "The Perils of Profiling," 19.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ See above section: "The Post-Bicesse Conflict."

Savimbi and other UNITA leaders saw the government take continued steps to limit the group's power during the implementation of the Protocol.¹³⁴ At the time, Savimbi was also struggling to retain control of UNITA in the face of hardliners within the group who had opposed negotiations with the government.¹³⁵ In that light, the decision to return to war in 1997-98 may be read as an attempt to placate hardliners within the group who may have been threatening Savimbi's power on a personal level. The truth is likely some combination of these two motivations: Savimbi, threatened within his own group and worried that UNITA (and himself, personally) would be victimized by the Angolan government as it implemented the Lusaka Protocol, saw the resumption of hostilities as a preferable option.

What does this tell us about Savimbi? His most consistent behavior was that of opportunistic power-seeking. However, while his goal was consistently to accrue greater power, he was not “crazy” or irrational, tended not to frame the conflict in life-or-death terms, and (for the most part) avoided framing the conflict in terms of ingroup vs. outgroup in a way that would necessarily contribute to exterminatory violence. Rather, he (and UNITA) were relatively strategically flexible and nondogmatic. While there were individuals within UNITA who saw the war against the government as an unending struggle, Savimbi seemed to view it in a Clausewitzian sense—as the continuation of politics by other means. This intellectual comfort with politics and war existing on the same continuum of behavior may explain why Savimbi was willing to lead UNITA repeatedly into peace and back out to war again.

¹³⁴ “The Perils of Profiling,” 21.

¹³⁵ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 125.

Atrocities: 1998-2002

In this section, I review a number of atrocities committed by UNITA (or affiliated fighters) between the resumption of hostilities in 1998 (because there is no clear date on when the war restarted in earnest, I am looking at all atrocities recorded after January 1, 1998) and Savimbi's death in February 2002. Before examining atrocities in detail, I provide a brief summary of the larger political and military events of this period.

The Lusaka Protocol was signed in late 1994, and the peace began to fail as soon as it began. From the beginning, both parties were suspicious of each other, with each taking steps to better its position in the event that the treaty was abrogated. Issues of Savimbi's place in the new Angolan government (the offer of the vice presidency extended in 1995 was later withdrawn and replaced with a potential position as "leader of the opposition"),¹³⁶ problems of enforcement of the treaty by the government, and the unresolved issue of UNITA's diamond mines left strategic space for both sides to cheat on their responsibilities. Even before the complete breakdown of the Lusaka Protocol, large swaths of the Angolan countryside experienced violence at the hands of UNITA soldiers. The group's leadership categorically denied responsibility, claiming that "uncontrolled bandits" were behind much of the violence.¹³⁷ Later, as UNITA expanded its control over the country, atrocities increased, particularly in terms of indiscriminate violence against civilians that occurred while attacking or laying siege to major cities. As time went on, tensions continually mounted, and by 1998 the UN assessed "a dangerous deterioration of the security situation in various parts of the country."¹³⁸ By September 1998, the Angolan

¹³⁶ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 127.

¹³⁷ "Angola Unravels." *Human Rights Watch*. Accessed February 12, 2017.
https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/angola/Angl998-06.htm#P709_108791.

¹³⁸ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 134.

government had suspended a number of UNITA officials in the government, and in December, officially began military operations to seize UNITA bases around the country.¹³⁹

This final phase of the Angolan conflict was its deadliest: in 1998 alone, over 300,000 civilians were internally displaced; that total climbed to over 600,000 in the first four months of 1999.¹⁴⁰ Rather than attempting to take and hold regional capitals, UNITA, in a shift from the tactics of the 1992 war, decided to control the bush, using it as a tactically advantageous platform for city sieges and attacks on government forces.¹⁴¹ UNITA retained a fairly significant conventional warfare capacity, with a sophisticated regional logistical structure, tens of thousands of fighters, and a number of tanks, self-propelled artillery guns, and armored vehicles.¹⁴² However, by late 1999, major government offensives largely degraded UNITA's conventional capacity, forcing the group to reorganize itself as a guerilla army.¹⁴³

From 2000-2002, the Angolan government fought a broad campaign of counterinsurgency against UNITA, resulting in millions of IDPs. Finally, on February 22, Savimbi was caught and killed by government forces; surviving UNITA members, acting on one of Savimbi's last orders, began peace talks with the government shortly thereafter.¹⁴⁴

Below, I discuss atrocities committed during the 1998-2002 period in detail. Before beginning, I should note that, if UNITA atrocities were committed strategically, they would reflect this in a number of ways, including the presence of a consistent operating procedure among those carrying out the atrocities, or more direct evidence of targeting of victims or the carrying out of specific orders (the direct presence of group elites, etc.). The violence itself,

¹³⁹ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 138.

¹⁴⁰ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 137.

¹⁴¹ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 139.

¹⁴² *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 144.

¹⁴³ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 153.

¹⁴⁴ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 172.

likewise, would be relatively consistent from incident to incident, as wild inconsistencies would be more indicative of random, dysfunctional violence than strategic atrocities.

I attempt to organize these atrocities by type, noting the time they took place, if available. This list is necessarily incomplete, given the scale of the conflict and sheer number of specific atrocities committed by UNITA. Instead of listing any of the hundreds of recorded incidents, I have selected these examples to illustrate how UNITA tended to operate; many of the specific atrocities described here are indicative of a general tactic employed by UNITA across the entire country.¹⁴⁵

UNITA forces, upon entering a village, often killed or kidnapped civilians who had not evacuated beforehand: in December 1998, UNITA forces, attacking the town of Cunje, encountered a group of civilians sheltering inside a derelict building who, upon discovery, were attacked by UNITA soldiers, who threw grenades into a pit where they had been hiding and shot at them, killing twenty-five.¹⁴⁶ In other villages, UNITA entered with the purpose of recruiting, killing those who resisted (often with hand-axes or machetes). The village of Maconda was cleared by UNITA troops in June 1998; when a group of villagers returned in April 1999 to claim food they had left behind, UNITA troops caught them, beating and then executing twenty-five.¹⁴⁷ On July 19, 1999, villagers in Chipeta discovered two mass graves “containing more than 90 bodies,” attributed to UNITA, which had occupied the village until April of that year.¹⁴⁸ Attacks on villagers continued even as UNITA transitioned to guerilla combat after 1999: the Armed Conflict Database reports that, in September 2001, UNITA attacked and killed civilians in groups of ten or more on four occasions (September 7, 8, 11, and 20, totaling sixty-two dead);

¹⁴⁵ A more conclusive list of all incidents of violence in the war (with separate datasets for violence against civilians versus between armed combatants) can be found on the ACLED website.

¹⁴⁶ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 172.

¹⁴⁷ “Angola Unravels.”

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

the next month, another thirty-five were killed in two attacks.¹⁴⁹ In addition to villages and towns, UNITA attacked a number of civilian targets as well: on August 10, 2001, UNITA forces attacked a train they claimed was carrying government soldiers and material, killing 252, but the majority of the passengers were, in fact, civilians.¹⁵⁰

In contrast with earlier phases of the war, mutilations became a common practice in the 1998-2002 period.¹⁵¹ On July 4, 1998, a convoy of vehicles was ambushed near Caxiaria by a group of armed men who appeared to be UNITA fighters, despite wearing Angolan army uniforms. Seventeen of the passengers in the convoy were killed, and another seventeen wounded; one executed Angolan army soldier had his head smashed in, one woman was cut open from crotch to stomach, and a man and a woman had their ears chopped off and were told to spread the word of what had happened.¹⁵² The technique of cutting off the ears of prisoners before letting them go was also reported on two other occasions in 1998.

UNITA also engaged in a number of other atrocities beyond killing and maiming. UNITA made heavy use of kidnapping and forced recruitment, particularly of women and children. Women were taken as “wives” and used as sexual slaves in UNITA camps; men were used for forced labor, and children were often indoctrinated as soldiers. On November 8, 1998, UNITA attacked the Yetwene diamond mine, killing eight and abducting ten people.¹⁵³ In 2001, UNITA attacked the town of Coxito, abducted 120 and killing another 100 during the attack.¹⁵⁴ One fifteen-year-old boy kidnapped by UNITA near Lubango reported that he was taken in a truck to Huambo and then Bailundo with sixty other captives, and was told that he was going to

¹⁴⁹ Armed Conflict Database.

¹⁵⁰ Armed Conflict Database.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² “Angola Unravels.”

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Armed Conflict Database.

be trained as a soldier; when he and three other boys attempted to escape, his companions were killed.¹⁵⁵ Human Rights watch also recorded “many accounts” of other atrocities against children.¹⁵⁶

Countless women were abducted by UNITA fighters, some even from refugee camps: one Burundian refugee in a UNHCR camp in Angola reported to Human Rights Watch that UNITA fighters regularly “taxed” the camp, taking women for sexual services; even for captives who were not expressly taken as sexual slaves, “there were several accounts of women and girls being brutally raped as an immediate punishment for refusing to follow instructions or in retaliation for the acts of others held in captivity.”¹⁵⁷ Although exact numbers are hard to come by, “testimonies from survivors confirm that sexual violence [was] widespread.”¹⁵⁸ Forced laborers were often subjected to beatings or torture, were forced to learn the Mbundu language (and were beaten if caught speaking another language), and were housed in “appalling” conditions.¹⁵⁹

UNITA relied heavily upon pillaged food and property as well, with fighters often ending raids by burning anything they could not carry away. In March 1998, the town of Tchilata was attacked, with one inhabitant killed and forty-eight head of cattle stolen; that same month, a village near Chongoroi was raided, with one person killed, two others abducted, and thirty-five homes (as well as an unspecified amount of cultivated land) burned.¹⁶⁰ Another village saw 400 head of cattle stolen.¹⁶¹ On September 5, 2001, UNITA soldiers attacked a central highlands

¹⁵⁵ Armed Conflict Database.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ “Angola Unravels.”

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

village, killing 24 and forcing the rest of the inhabitants to flee before plundering the town and setting fire to two houses.¹⁶²

UNITA's city sieges featured heavy use of indiscriminate shelling. According to Human Rights Watch, "there [was] no sign that in any of these artillery barrages UNITA was just targeting military positions, but rather the shelling appeared intended to sow fear and to demoralize in addition to closing the airports and the access they provided for relief aid."¹⁶³ During two disjoint periods of besieging Huambo between December 1998 and June 1999, UNITA bombarded the city indiscriminately, killing at least eleven civilians and shutting down the airport for several days.¹⁶⁴ While besieging Kuito between December 8, 1998 and January 1, 1999, UNITA artillery killed at least 150 civilians and wounded hundreds more; on December 26, UNITA shelled a church in a Kuito suburb, killing thirty-one and injuring thirty-six.¹⁶⁵ On January 4, 1999, UNITA started shelling the city of Malanje, killing over 1000 over a period of four months—one BBC journalist present in the city said that "UNITA knows where the civilians are and targets them."¹⁶⁶ In addition, UNITA sieges created significant shortages of food, medicine, and drinking water; on more than one occasion, UNITA shot down World Food Program supply planes, claiming that they were actually carrying enemy soldiers and military equipment.¹⁶⁷

Finally, UNITA caused tremendous loss of life by forcibly displacing the inhabitants of rural areas. Concrete estimates of displacement are hard to come by, because so many of the displaced remained unregistered by either the Angolan government or the UN. However, it is

¹⁶² Armed Conflict Database.

¹⁶³ "Angola Unravels."

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ "UN Warns of Angolan Catastrophe." *BBC News*. Accessed February 13, 2017. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1396633.stm>.

estimated that 270,000 people were displaced in the first half of 2001; in September of that year alone, 60,000 were displaced by UNITA attacks.¹⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch estimated that that one million people were internally displaced in 1998.¹⁶⁹ It is worth noting that both the Angolan government and UNITA were involved in forcible displacement and, as such, it is difficult to assign concrete numbers of civilian deaths to either actor.

Evaluation

In this section, I evaluate whether the atrocities committed by UNITA during the 1998-2002 period of the Angolan conflict were strategic in nature, and attempt to deduce the particular logic that may have been behind them. I then weigh the evidence in favor of my evaluations against the evidence supporting the null hypothesis (that the atrocities committed by UNITA were not strategic in nature).

I find that available evidence strongly indicates that the vast majority of atrocities committed by UNITA in the 1998-2002 period were strategic in nature. Repeated patterns of civilian abuse (particularly civilian abuse during acts of pillage) are a strong indicator of strategy, especially given the fact that these same patterns occurred in different regions, where different UNITA fighters and unit commanders would be active—therefore casting doubt on the possibility that a few repeat offenders (greedy commanders, poorly disciplined or exceptionally bloodthirsty fighting units) were responsible.¹⁷⁰ Likewise, the pattern of attacks on aid workers, religious leaders, and *sobas* (traditional chiefs) also suggests the playing out of strategy, rather

¹⁶⁸ Armed Conflict Database.

¹⁶⁹ “Angola Unravels.”

¹⁷⁰ An FAA report quoted in Weigert identifies UNITA as having a fairly complex command structure, with fighting units in various parts of the country under the control of regional commanders. *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 144.

than violence of accident or organizational dysfunction.¹⁷¹ Zeimke finds that the patterns of civilian abuse in the Angolan conflict were most closely correlated to military loss; that is, as UNITA suffered defeats, it abused civilian populations at a higher rate.¹⁷² This, too, suggests that UNITA was implementing a strategy when conducting massacres, perhaps attempting to use indiscriminate violence to coerce civilians into cooperation, as suggested by Kalyvas. Also telling is that mutilations became an increasingly reported feature of the 1998-2002 conflict, despite not having been commonplace in Angola before that time; Human Rights Watch reported that “all mutilations have a clear political message: these practices were not gratuitous or the result of intoxication or poor discipline.”¹⁷³

Meanwhile, activities like kidnapping and the use of child soldiers, when conducted on a scale reminiscent of that of UNITA during the 1998-2002 period of the conflict, are inherently strategic. Greed by individuals or dysfunction among fighting units¹⁷⁴ cannot fully explain the number of civilians abducted by UNITA; the use of child soldiers on any meaningful scale, meanwhile, is inherently strategic, even if the strategy is that of basic and desperate need for fresh fighters.

Bombardments of civilian targets and attempts to halt the delivery of aid during city sieges were also likely strategic. Reporting from besieged cities indicated that “the shelling appeared intended to sow fear and demoralize in addition to closing the airports and the access they provided for relief aid.”¹⁷⁵ In Malanje, shelling “appeared to be aimed at the city’s heavily

¹⁷¹ “Angola Unravels.”

¹⁷² “From Battles to Massacres,” 161.

¹⁷³ “Angola Unravels.”

¹⁷⁴ In the vein of Humphries and Weinstein.

¹⁷⁵ “Angola Unravels.”

populated market places in an attempt to force civilians to flee.”¹⁷⁶ As noted above, a BBC journalist present in Malanje claimed that UNITA purposefully targeted civilians when bombarding the city.¹⁷⁷ Other observers claimed that UNITA bombardment avoided targeting the city’s infrastructure, focusing instead on heavily residential areas.¹⁷⁸

What, then, were the strategies of atrocity that UNITA was implementing during the 1998-2002 period of the Angolan war? I believe that there were several intersecting strategies: strategic engineered migration (dispossessive, exportive, and militarized engineered migration)¹⁷⁹ and coercion by punishment, all of which would provide ample strategic justification for the atrocities committed by the group during this time. Moreover, I believe that these strategies were conceived of and executed with the overall goal of forcing the Angolan government to agree once more to peace talks—as indicated by multiple attempts by Savimbi to reenter negotiations with the Angolan government in 2001 and just before his death in 2002¹⁸⁰—as part of an overall strategy of paradoxical peace.

Dispossessive Engineered Migration

I believe that strategic engineered migration was a major UNITA strategy during the 1998-2002 period. “Strategic engineered migration” refers to migrations that are deliberately created, augmented, or manipulated by a state or non-state actor in order to change the population composition in a territory (either the place of origin or a destination for the migrants)

¹⁷⁶ “Angola Unravels.”

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ In this case, dispossessive engineered migration and plunder are one and the same, although that is not true for strategies of plunder that may be implemented in other cases.

¹⁸⁰ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 165-172.

for political or military ends.¹⁸¹ Specifically, I believe that UNITA engaged in heavily overlapping campaigns of dispossessive, exportive and militarized engineered migration.

Dispossessive engineered migrations are those “in which the principal objective is the appropriation of the territory and/or property of another group or groups, and/or the elimination of this group or groups as a threat to the ethno-political or economic dominance of the perpetrators.”¹⁸² In the case of Angola, dispossessive engineered migration was conducted primarily for the purposes of plunder: rather than using low-level, repeated violence to extract wealth from villages and towns over a period of time, UNITA used extreme violence to clear villages, allowing the one-time removal of wealth.¹⁸³ By 1998, UNITA was nearly a decade removed from its peak (measured in terms of manpower and conventional warfare capacity) and had gone without any major international assistance for six years. Even with substantial revenues from diamond mines under its control, UNITA was in a precarious position in terms of resources. A strategy of dispossessive plunder, therefore, held considerable upside for the group, especially as its conventional warfighting capacity diminished in the face of successful government campaigns in 1999. Plunder, here, also includes abduction of noncombatants and their use as fighters, sexual slaves, or forced labor

Dispossessive engineered migration as a form of plunder explains the particular violence of UNITA towards the populations it stole from during the 1998-2002 war. While plunder is a common enough behavior, it carries a high opportunity cost: if a plunderer is too violent, the target may opt to flee, removing the source of wealth that is the point of such a strategy in the first place. Plunder, therefore, tends to be obtained through long-term, low-level violence, rather

¹⁸¹ Kelly M. Greenhill. “Strategic Engineered Migration as a Weapon of War.” *Civil Wars* 10, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 6–21. doi:10.1080/13698240701835425.

¹⁸² “Strategic Engineered Migration as a Weapon of War,” 8.

¹⁸³ I distinguish between pillage, the single-instance violent removal of wealth from a community, and plunder, the systematic, large-scale extraction of wealth from a community or set of communities.

than explosive outbursts of single-instance violence. Ta-Nehisi Coates (from whom I borrow this sense of word as a particular strategy of theft, rather than a synonym for “pillage”) used the word, in fact, to refer to the treatment of African-Americans in the United States: “I am sure the average African-American in 1963 could empathize with the dream of little white boys and little black girls holding hands. But he likely would have settled for a day when white people would no longer see him and his family as a field for plunder.”¹⁸⁴

If plunder is usually a process of slow bleeding, why would UNITA enact it in such a violent manner?¹⁸⁵ Because it overlapped with the goal of depopulating the countryside and forcing its inhabitants to the cities, UNITA saw none of the normal opportunity cost to violent plunder; it was, in fact, part of the point. Although I contend that the aim of depopulating the countryside was of such profound importance to UNITA that mass violence of this type would have likely taken place regardless of the value that could be extracted in the process (given that a number of massacres did, in fact, take place without any accompanying plunder), the side benefit of wealth extraction through plunder while also displacing Angolans in the countryside was still undeniably a factor in the decision.

What differentiates this instance of dispossessive engineered migration/plunder from spur-of-the-moment looting? The scale of wealth extraction and the areas affected are major indicators that UNITA was enacting a cohesive strategy. Most indicative of a broad dispossessive strategy is the fact that UNITA troops specifically tried to keep people from returning to their homes: in many cases, dwellings were burned; in others, UNITA soldiers

¹⁸⁴ Ta-Nehisi Coates. “When Plunder Becomes a System of Governance.” *The Atlantic*, October 25, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/10/when-plunder-becomes-a-system-of-governance/280885/>.

¹⁸⁵ In other chapters, I may organize alternative explanations to a proposed strategy of atrocity under their own subsection; I decline to do so in this chapter because the number of strategies I describe would make the lumping together of several alternative explanations under one subsection awkward and unwieldy.

attacked civilians who tried to return to their homes long after fleeing. Some villages were even booby-trapped or mined to prevent return.¹⁸⁶ These steps—far more complex than simple looting—suggest that UNITA was carrying out a strategy of dispossessive engineered migration through plunder.

Exportive/militarized engineered migration

The above strategy of dispossession was linked to a broader strategy of exportive/militarized engineered migration, designed to empty the much of the countryside in order to facilitate greater UNITA mobility and to ensure safety from what Savimbi and other UNITA leaders perceived to be a disloyal and potentially traitorous populace. “Exportive engineered migration” generally refers to engineered migrations designed to either expel domestic political adversaries or dissidents, or to destabilize foreign governments receiving the outflows.¹⁸⁷ While it usually occurs in peacetime or in the immediate aftermath to wars or revolutions, UNITA was, in driving large numbers of Angolan civilians from the countryside, attempting to export a population they viewed as disloyal. “Militarized” migrations, meanwhile, “are those conducted either to gain military advantage, through disruption or destruction of an opponent’s command and control, logistics, or movement capabilities.”¹⁸⁸ I contend that the population outflows from the countryside (UNITA territory) to the cities (government territory) were also militarized in the sense that they constituted an attempt, by UNITA, at capacity swamping: overwhelming government forces with displaced people they lacked the resources to effectively provide for and keep secure in an attempt to limit the government’s ability to combat

¹⁸⁶ “Angola Unravels.”

¹⁸⁷ “Strategic Engineered Migration as a Weapon of War,” 8.

¹⁸⁸ “Strategic Engineered Migration as a Weapon of War,” 9.

UNITA. These were the twin aims of UNITA's population control strategy: depopulate the disloyal countryside while simultaneously overwhelming the government.

After the 1992 elections conclusively established that UNITA lacked broad support even in the Ovimbundu-dense central highlands and eastern regions of the country that were ostensibly the group's "home turf," Savimbi and other UNITA leaders began to perceive much of the civilian population in those regions as being disloyal or even traitorous subjects, rather than, in the Maoist view, a friendly sea in which their guerilla fish could swim. The defeat suffered at the hands of government forces in the period of conflict immediately following those elections only confirmed this notion: Savimbi, in 1996, claimed that signing the Bicesse Accords was "a major error," and throughout the entire implementation period of the Lusaka Protocol, he regularly made claims that his life was in danger, not just from the Angolan government, but from his "own people."¹⁸⁹ The hardliners among UNITA shared this view as well. While UNITA still had the capacity to enforce harsh order in territory it firmly controlled—Human Rights Watch noted, in 1999, that UNITA had shut off humanitarian access to much of its territory, and was preventing roughly 4000 civilians from leaving—it would have needed to expend significant resources to buy cooperation from a civilian populace it already viewed as intransigent.¹⁹⁰ Instead, UNITA chose to take a cheaper route to free and safe movement in the contested countryside: empty it.

This interpretation of strategy stands in opposition to other views of UNITA's actions during this period of the war. Ziemke interprets UNITA massacres in the vein of Kalyvas' theory of indiscriminate violence in civil wars: a weak actor attempting to buy compliance from a civilian population through indiscriminate use of force as an intimidating tactic, absent the option

¹⁸⁹ *Angola: A Modern Military History*, 124.

¹⁹⁰ "Angola Unravels."

to use more discriminate means of earning civilian compliance.¹⁹¹ I, however, see little attempt by UNITA to buy compliance of any kind. In addition to the extremely violent campaign of plunder I address above, UNITA actions seem more geared toward depopulating the countryside than obtaining even grudging cooperation from its inhabitants. In many villages, UNITA forces openly ordered the inhabitants to leave, attacking them if they refused; in others, UNITA fighters killed civilians in numbers large enough to more readily suggest depopulation than coercion. Finally, mass abductions perpetrated by UNITA suggest less of an attempt to control a population in place than a form of plunder as population control, as noted above. While the killing of traditional *sobas* might suggest some attempt at violent coercion in the sense proposed by Kalyvas were they occurring in a vacuum, in the fuller context of UNITA atrocities, those killings appear to be more a means of destabilization than coercion.

The militarized side to UNITA's population control strategy, meanwhile, was a useful side benefit to depopulating the countryside: those displaced people would naturally move to the government-controlled cities in large numbers, overwhelming the government's capacity to adequately provide for them and forcing the diversion of resources that could otherwise be used to fight UNITA, therefore weakening the government overall as an adversary and hopefully leading them to pursue a diplomatic end to the conflict, rather than conducting a costly counterinsurgency while at the same time dealing with millions of IDPs. Viewing these two policies as linked—depopulating the countryside and overwhelming the cities—eliminates, to a certain extent, the inherent costs of pursuing either of them individually. Engineering a mass exodus of the civilian population from Angola's countryside, while benefitting UNITA in the

¹⁹¹ "From Battles to Massacres," 161.

short term (resources gained through plunder, free movement, no threat of betrayal from the civilian population) would eventually come back around to harm them.

“Draining the sea” is a classic counterinsurgency tactic; eventually, the government would be able to freely operate against UNITA in the depopulated countryside, knowing that anyone who remained there was a member of the group. However, because UNITA already viewed the civilian population of the countryside as dangerous and disloyal, there was little downside to attempting to engineer their exodus. Because depopulation also held the upside of weakening the Angolan government’s capacity, it was doubly-effective as a short-term weapon that could eventually induce the government to another settlement—as part of the aforementioned overall strategy of paradoxical peace.

Coercion by punishment

Finally, a strategy of coercion by punishment explains UNITA atrocities committed during the siege of government-held cities, and fits with the population control strategies described above. Coercion by punishment is a type of coercion where one imposes costs or risks on a target’s civilian population in order to spur capitulation by the target.¹⁹² UNITA, having driven large numbers of displaced people into government-held cities—for example, in 1999 the city of Malanje had nearly doubled in size due to IDP inflows—then attacked the civilian populations of those cities indiscriminately, leading to massive numbers of casualties.¹⁹³ Furthermore, UNITA took specific actions designed to make life in the cities as unbearable as possible, such as preventing the delivery of humanitarian aid by either shooting down supply

¹⁹² “Strategic Engineered Migration as a Weapon of War,” 10.

¹⁹³ “Angola Unravels.”

planes or damaging airports so as to be unusable.¹⁹⁴ With this strategy of coercion by punishment, UNITA hoped to make civilian populations in government-held territory so miserable that they would demand an end to the war at any cost, forcing the government into diplomacy with UNITA once more. This was the logical endpoint of UNITA's population control strategies: force the population of the countryside into the cities with mass violence, plundering them, obtaining free and safe movement through those areas, and overwhelming government capacity in the process; then, attack that captive population in order to coerce the government.

Furthermore, because UNITA had already enacted such drastic violence against the Angolan civilian population, there was little downside to attempting to coerce the Angolan government by punishment. While coercion by punishment can sometimes have the perverse effect of causing the targeted civilian population to "rally around the flag" and become more loyal to their government, UNITA, having already abandoned the prospect of gaining any real civilian support, was free to attempt to coerce the Angolan government by any means. There was no longer any worry of civilians defecting to the government side of the conflict; rather, UNITA's only concern was imposing costs on the government as cheaply and quickly as possible.

Could UNITA bombardments have been accidental, or have resulted from non-strategic factors like tactical myopia on the part of artillery unit commanders? While this is possible, I find it rather unlikely. While large numbers of civilian deaths due to mistargeted bombardments are certainly not impossible, the sheer level of civilian death created by UNITA's indiscriminate bombardments (in a number of different cities) makes this explanation rather implausible—

¹⁹⁴ "Angola Unravels."

repeated “accidents” of the same nature committed by the same actor are usually not accidents at all. Furthermore, eyewitness accounts from besieged cities indicate that UNITA was, at best, making no effort to distinguish between civilian and military targets and, at worst, was deliberately bombarding areas with dense civilian populations.¹⁹⁵ Likewise, while indiscriminateness in bombardment can stem from nonstrategic, non-incidental factors—tactically myopic commanders ordering bombardments without discrimination because they are the easiest and cheapest way to look active without actually doing much of anything—the widespread use of this tactic casts doubt on the idea that it stems from dysfunction, rather than strategy. Furthermore, the specific targeting of airstrips and aid delivery planes—targets that require effort and discrimination to hit—in conjunction with the bombardment of civilians seems to preclude non-strategic explanations; it is unlikely that UNITA bombarded massive numbers of civilians out of myopia or by accident while at the same time precisely targeting the airstrips and vehicles by which those same civilians might be brought relief.

Conclusion

I find that, during the 1998-2002 period of the Angolan conflict, committed a large number of atrocities for strategic purposes, much as states do. Moreover, I find that the strategies of atrocity used by UNITA are highly similar to those often employed by state actors: strategic engineered migration, plunder, and coercion by punishment have all been conceptualized and firmly identified in the historical record as common state strategies. These specific strategies stemmed from the direction of Savimbi and other UNITA elites and were based on their particular perception of the conditions facing them at the time.

¹⁹⁵ “Angola Unravels.”

There is also good evidence supporting the use of these strategies as last resorts, as postulated in part B of my second hypothesis: “Group elites will order their groups to commit atrocities when they have generally exhausted less costly options¹⁹⁶ for protecting that interest.” By 1998, UNITA was in dire straits. While the evidence that their strategy of forcing a paradoxical peace through strategic engineered migrations and coercion by punishment came only after exhausting other methods of warfare is circumstantial, it is strongly suggestive of such a conclusion. The significant change in UNITA tactics and strategy over the course of four decades of war cannot be ignored, and cannot be adequately explained as stemming from changes in UNITA capacity, given that MPLA’s and UNITA’s relative capacities remained fairly steady during the transition from the proxy conflict of the 1980s to the civil war of the 1990s. The decision to adopt costly, risky strategies of engineered migration in the 1998-2002 portion of the conflict (relative to the conventional strategies of previous periods) plainly reads as stemming from UNITA perception of the 1998 period as the group’s last chance to achieve key aims or even, simply, to continue to exist.

What do these findings mean in terms of generalizable warning signs? As in the case of state actors, protracted conflicts can create incentives for actors to commit mass atrocities in order to bring about a conclusion to the conflict. The case of UNITA also presents an interesting inversion of common counterinsurgency strategies of population control, wherein a state actor fighting insurgents attempts to relocate the civilian population they rely upon in order to isolate the insurgents, often leading to great loss of life in the process; UNITA, as insurgents, attempted to “drain the sea” around them, viewing it to be fundamentally disloyal to them, and therefore dangerous; the side benefits of destabilizing the government and obtaining plunder while doing

¹⁹⁶ I.e., diplomatic efforts, coercive threats, targeted or selective use of force, etc.

so were added inducements. While the particular circumstances that brought UNITA to adopt this precise strategy may not be common, weaker, highly committed actors still may present a high risk to adopt risky, asymmetric (and highly violent) strategies of strategic engineered migration.

Chapter Four

GIA, Algeria, 1996-1998

Introduction

Between 1992 and 2002, Algeria was host to a brutal civil conflict that resulted in well over 100,000 deaths.¹⁹⁷ Initially waged between the country's military dictatorship and the military forces of the country's Islamist political party, it morphed into a three-sided conflict when a hardline Islamist group, the *Groupeement Islamique Armé* (GIA), emerged and began attacking both the government and the weakened moderates. As the GIA—unlike the more moderate and popular *Armée Islamique du Salut* (AIS)—had no hope of winning an electoral victory or of overtaking the petrodollar-fueled government militarily, it turned to increasingly asymmetric and brutal means of waging the war. At its height in 1997-98, the war took a particularly bloody form: the country was wracked by a series of vicious massacres of civilians—the culpability for which is remains disputed. Soon afterwards, however, things began to turn around: in 1999, the newly-elected prime minister offered limited amnesty to any former Islamist fighters who “repented” and ceased fighting, and by 2000, the war was mostly over, although the GIA was not completely defeated until 2002. Algeria did not lift its state of emergency protocol until 2011 and remains illiberal at best.

In this chapter, I evaluate atrocities committed by the GIA between 1996 and 1998 in order to determine whether or not they were committed with strategic intent, seeking also to determine if the atrocities were committed at the direction of group elites and as last resorts, per my second hypothesis. In order to do so, I first provide a brief history of modern Algeria, starting with its independence from France and moving forward to its 1991 elections and subsequent

¹⁹⁷ Luis Martínez, *The Algerian Civil War, 1990-1998*. CERI Series in Comparative Politics and International Studies. New York: Columbia University Press in association with the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Paris, 2000.

military coup. I then provide a more detailed account of the proceedings of the civil war from 1992-1996, when the GIA began its campaign of massacre (the AIS unilaterally declared a ceasefire in 1997). I also provide a description of GIA ideology. I then examine the atrocities committed by the GIA in the 1996-98 period, when the majority of massacres took place. During this time, GIA committed a number of mass atrocities, including repeated massacres of large numbers of civilians, and the kidnapping and sexual enslavement of women (through the practice of forced “marriage” to GIA fighters).

During this period, the GIA was a low-capacity, territorially bounded non-state actor: it had only a few thousand fighters and lacked the capacity to engage in open combat with government forces (notably, it made no meaningful attempt to attack government-held oil/gas infrastructure in the country’s interior, despite that being the government’s most important source of revenue). While the group had ideological links to like-minded *mujahideen* groups that had fought in Afghanistan, it did not attempt to fundamentally rearrange the geopolitical landscape in North Africa, instead focusing on the establishment of an Islamic state in Algeria.¹⁹⁸

Finally, I evaluate whether GIA atrocities during this period appear to have been committed with strategic intent, and make further inferences as to what the strategic logic (or logics) may have been. I also weigh evidence supporting my interpretation against the alternative explanations—that all or some of the given atrocities were committed primarily because of individual-level factors, dysfunctional group dynamics, or other non-strategic causes. I conclude by summarizing my findings and briefly explaining what they suggest regarding potential warning signs for future atrocities.

¹⁹⁸ As the conflict ran on, GIA communications indicated a desire to establish an international caliphate, but the group never acted in ways that suggest these statements were more than idle rhetoric.

The Algerian Civil War

In this section, I briefly detail the history of Algeria, starting with the French invasion of 1830 through the riots and reform efforts of 1988. I then describe, in greater detail, the lead-up to the abortive elections of 1991 and the subsequent military coup, before moving to the proceedings of the civil war between 1992 and 1996, when massacres began in earnest. Because I focus on atrocities committed by the GIA in the 1996-98 period in a later section, I will not describe it here, although I later summarize the important events of that period. This summary is meant not only to contextualize the atrocities I address in later sections, but to ground my analysis of GIA strategies within the group's history.

Colonial and Postcolonial Algeria

France invaded Algeria, then an Ottoman province, in 1830, and formally took control over the area in 1847, after seventeen years of fighting.¹⁹⁹ Algeria quickly became a part of France itself: its three provinces were administered as a part of France, and the French *pied-noirs* settlers ("black feet," denoting their peasant status in France proper) made up one-ninth of the total population of Algeria by the time of independence in 1962.²⁰⁰ This "quasi-colonial" system began to implode in 1954, when the first attacks on the French state were perpetrated by the *Front Libération Nationale* (FLN).²⁰¹ The French responded with a brutal counter-insurgency (over two million villagers had been moved to concentration camps by the war's end);²⁰² such tactics only swayed public sentiment towards the initially-tiny FLN.²⁰³ At the same time, the

¹⁹⁹ James D. Le Sueur. *Algeria since 1989: Between Terror and Democracy*. Global History of the Present. Black Point, N.S: Fernwood Pub, 2010.

²⁰⁰ *Algeria since 1989*, 12.

²⁰¹ *Algeria since 1989*, 14.

²⁰² *Algeria since 1989*, 17.

²⁰³ Irwin M. Wall. *France, the United States, and the Algerian War*. University of California Press, 2001.

FLN practiced selective killings of Muslims accused of collaborating with the occupiers as a cheap means of ensuring loyalty amongst the divided population.²⁰⁴ Finally, amidst mounting internal and international pressure, France settled the conflict in 1962 with the signing of the Evian Accord.²⁰⁵ However, as the French government prepared to withdraw, many of the *pieds-noirs* took matters into their own hands, forming paramilitaries and armed gangs engaged in a terrific campaign of violence in 1961 and 1962, murdering large numbers of both Algerians and European settlers and destroying much of the French-built infrastructure of the country before finally fleeing.²⁰⁶

Postcolonial Algeria found itself under the rule of the FLN and its leader, Ahmed Ben Bella, for a brief but tumultuous three years. Ben Bella, facing a country in ruins and over 70 percent unemployment, haltingly attempted to merge the Arab and Berber elements of Algerian national identity into a one-party state with himself solely at the head.²⁰⁷ In 1965, he was deposed in a coup, with Houari Boumediene, a Ben Bella government insider, taking the reins of power.²⁰⁸ Boumediene ruled from 1965 to 1978 in an authoritarian manner, drastically curbing civil and political liberties, but transforming the country's economy through aggressive industrial development (particularly in oil/gas extraction, with Algeria joining OPEC in 1969).²⁰⁹ Facing dire problems of rapid urbanization,²¹⁰ Boumediene hoped to accrue oil wealth that could then be

²⁰⁴ In line with Kalyvas' theory of civilian abuse in internal conflict. *France, the United States, and the Algerian War*, 13.

²⁰⁵ *France, the United States, and the Algerian War*, 14.

²⁰⁶ *Algeria since 1989*, 14.

²⁰⁷ *Algeria since 1989*, 19.

²⁰⁸ *Algeria since 1989*, 20.

²⁰⁹ *Algeria since 1989*, 23.

²¹⁰ French concentration camps were mostly clustered around the edges of major urban areas; at the end of the war, many of the transplanted Algerians opted to remain in the cities. The cumulative effect was that Algeria's urban population increased from 500,000 to two million between 1930 and 1960, and that the once-thriving Algerian countryside was drained of population and subsequently agricultural output. *Algeria since 1989*, 21-22.

used to overcome the country's postcolonial deficiencies.²¹¹ Before his death in 1979, Boumediene used the rents from Algeria's oil fields to create an urbanized, socialist state—the country's 1976 constitution officially enshrined the socialist model in Algerian politics, alongside guaranteeing the right of women to vote and affirming Islam as the state religion.²¹²

Boumediene's successor, Chadli Benjedid (formerly the minister of defense), continued this pattern of development, but ran into disaster when world oil prices cratered in June 1986, nearly halving the Algerian government's income.²¹³ In October 1988, large anti-government demonstrations broke out, spearheaded by labor and youth groups, which quickly turned into riots.²¹⁴ Benjedid, scrambling to save the FLN regime, announced a major program of political opening and reform—an “Algerian *glasnost*.”²¹⁵

Leadup to Elections: 1989-1992

Benjedid's reforms were ambitious: the program included an unprecedented opening up of civil and political rights. When the new constitution was ratified in early 1989, civil society exploded, with dozens of new parties forming around issues like women's rights, recognition of the Berber language and culture, and political Islam.²¹⁶ At this time, the FLN sought to reinvent itself in the context of a multiparty democracy.²¹⁷ It failed in the face of a unified Islamist

²¹¹ *Algeria since 1989*, 23.

²¹² *Algeria since 1989*, 25.

²¹³ *Algeria since 1989*, 27.

²¹⁴ At the same time, Islamist groups, which had been operating in (occasionally violent) opposition to the government for most of the 1980s, began to assert themselves, demonstrating in large numbers. Benjedid met with Islamist leaders in an attempt to curb their growing influence; the move backfired, painting the Islamists as more influential and integral to later changes than the mostly secular groups who had started the wave of anti-government resistance. Their status as the first targets of government reprisal also won the Islamists significant sympathy from the public at large. *Algeria since 1989*, 35-36.

²¹⁵ *Algeria since 1989*, 36.

²¹⁶ Entelis, “Preface,” *The Algerian Civil War*, xii.

²¹⁷ *Algeria since 1989*, 42.

political party—the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS)—which harnessed widespread anti-FLN sentiment to propel itself to massive victories in the 1990 municipal and provincial elections.²¹⁸ Areas won by the FIS quickly began to implement their social program: banning cigarettes, magazines,²¹⁹ and the sale of alcohol; separating schoolchildren by sex; and requiring the wearing of *kamis* and the veil for men and women, respectively.²²⁰ Ali Belhadj, a young FIS leader, responded to electoral success by hardening his rhetoric, publically questioning the democratic process itself and making increasingly frequent allusions to the establishment of a caliphate.²²¹

Alarmed by these developments, the military forced its way towards a tighter grip on the levers of power, and the government scheduled parliamentary and presidential elections for June 1991, tweaking election rules in order to favor FLN candidates. FIS supporters protested in response, and the government subsequently declared a “state of siege,” curtailing civil liberties and postponing the elections until December 1991.²²² Under the guise of restoring order, the military arrested Belhadj and thousands of other FIS supporters and shipped them to concentration camps set up in the Saharan interior of the country. Allegations of torture and disappearances committed by the government also surfaced.²²³ Many of the military’s targets were fairly moderate Islamists, who were replaced by hardliners; the military hoped that the newly-empowered hardliners would alienate the electorate and turn the FIS into a fringe party. This tactic backfired, prompting the drift of many politically-focused Islamists towards militant

²¹⁸ *Algeria since 1989*, 43.

²¹⁹ Fouad Ajami, “The Furrows of Algeria.” *New Republic*, January 27, 2010.
<https://newrepublic.com/article/72807/the-furrows-algeria>.

²²⁰ *Algeria since 1989*, 44.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² *Algeria since 1989*, 47.

²²³ *Algeria since 1989*, 48.

groups.²²⁴ When the promised elections finally occurred on December 26, 1991, the FIS secured a massive victory, winning 188 of 231 open parliamentary seats—the FLN won only 15.²²⁵

The 1992 Coup and the Beginning of Civil War

The military acted two weeks later, forcing Benjedid to resign on January 11, 1992, dissolving the parliament, and creating a five-person ruling body called the *Haut Comité d'Etat* (HCE).²²⁶ The HCE soon declared a state of emergency, and outlawed the FIS outright on March 4.²²⁷ Shortly after ousting Benjedid, the HCE installed a new leader, Mohamed Boudiaf, a veteran of the war for independence who had been living in exile in Morocco.²²⁸ Attempting to rebuild trust in the state, Boudiaf created a new political party, the *Rassemblement Patriotique National* (RPN) and promised publically to go after “nepotism” and profiteering within the government.²²⁹ He did not last long: after arresting one high-ranking general for embezzlement and making moves to liberalize Algeria’s state oil/gas company, Sonatrach, Boudiaf was assassinated under suspicious circumstances on June 29, 1992. A later inquiry established that Boudiaf’s killer did not act alone, and in 2007 an exile group with links to the Algerian military claimed that Boudiaf was killed before he could bring highly-ranking government officials to

²²⁴ *Algeria since 1989*, 48-49.

²²⁵ *Algeria since 1989*, 51.

²²⁶ Hereafter, I will refer to the Algerian government as the regime, the military, or the government interchangeably. Although there were a number of nominal heads of state of Algeria between 1992 and the election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, actual control of the Algerian government lay in the hands of a relatively small number of generals and government ministers known colloquially as “*le pouvoir*” (“the power”). Much of Algerian government policy from this point forward can be read simultaneously as being aimed externally *and* as the result of struggles for power within the regime.

²²⁷ *Algeria since 1989*, 51.

²²⁸ “The Furrows of Algeria.”

²²⁹ Martin Evans and John Phillips. *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*. Yale University Press, 2007. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/stable/j.ctt1nprt6>.

trial for corruption. Even today, Boudiaf's killing remains the "Algerian equivalent of the killing of President Kennedy."²³⁰ He was replaced by Ali Kafi, an "uncharismatic" army loyalist.²³¹

As the Algerian government became increasingly unsettled, Algerian society as a whole crept towards war. FIS-friendly religious leaders delivered fatwas against the regime, and the youth began to organize into armed bands led by local "emirs" and based primarily in the lower-class "communes" (suburbs) on the outskirts of Algiers.²³² In rural areas, the more traditional guerilla group *Mouvement Islamique Armé* (MIA), which had been active since the summer of 1991, began to grow in size; by 1993, armed Islamist groups across the country had a total of 22,000 fighters.²³³ These numbers, however, were small relative to the potential level of mobilization—roughly 3 million potential "FIS voter-sympathizers"—against the regime.²³⁴ Instead of trying to mobilize these former FIS voters, the MIA, which had the experience and societal cachet to potentially lead a mass uprising, preferred to dig in in the mountains and engage the regime in a long guerilla war on their own terms. Engaging the regime directly was dangerous, and attempting to recruit on a large scale carried the possibility of introducing government infiltrators to MIA ranks.²³⁵

In 1993, however, the situation began to boil over. MIA fighters, sick of the group's strategy of rural guerilla war, took control of the youth gangs operating in pro-FIS urban areas like Les Eucalyptes, Baraki, Bachdjarah, and El Harrach, and began a brutal campaign of urban terrorism against the regime; they became the GIA.²³⁶ Their tactics included car bombings,

²³⁰ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 178-79.

²³¹ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 184.

²³² *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 182.

²³³ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 183.

²³⁴ *The Algerian Civil War*, 57.

²³⁵ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 183-84.

²³⁶ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 186.

targeted assassinations, and larger-scale attacks. Killings were often gruesome: beheadings and disembowelments, along with other forms of mutilation, were common, and their victims included not only government and security personnel, but also any civilians suspected of collaborating with the regime.²³⁷ By mid-1993, up to ten uniformed police officers were being assassinated every night; alongside killings, the GIA destroyed property on a massive scale, burning down over five hundred schools in September 1994, just before the start of the year's school term.²³⁸

At the same time as they waged war on the government, the GIA set to work “liberating” the urban areas in which they had the most support. In these areas, guerilla fighters operated openly and enforced Islamic law, banning alcohol and satellite dishes, and mandating the wearing of the veil for women. The GIA groups forced a certain insecurity on the civilians in the areas under their control: civilians could be executed for even speaking to a soldier or police officer during the course of their daily business; young men being called up for service in the national army were told to join the GIA instead, upon pain of death.²³⁹ In addition, the GIA bands primarily financed themselves through plunder: bank robberies, hijacking of shipments of goods, and, in their own territories, protection rackets, all provided the GIA with the means to wage war.²⁴⁰

In response, the regime formed an elite, counter-terror police unit—nicknamed the “ninjas” for the black balaclavas they wore—with an expansive, extra-legal mandate to combat the growing GIA presence, particularly in the so-called “Triangle of Death” region between

²³⁷ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 187.

²³⁸ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 187.

²³⁹ *The Algerian Civil War*, 79.

²⁴⁰ *The Algerian Civil War*, 202-3.

Algiers, Blida, and Médéa, where the Islamists enjoyed the strongest support.²⁴¹ The “ninjas,” like the GIA, were brutal, torturing arrested victims and threatening others into compliance.²⁴² Notably, the military did not attempt to pacify or retake Islamist-heavy areas, instead preferring to isolate them and conduct occasional raids while mostly leaving the civilians there profoundly insecure.²⁴³ In these districts, criminality became the norm: because neither the government nor the Islamists could completely enforce their versions of the law, criminals (especially petty thieves) could operate almost entirely free of consequence.²⁴⁴ In areas of stronger Islamist control, the “emirs” of armed bands often coopted criminals, giving them the choice between joining the group or death.²⁴⁵ Often, the soldiers themselves were the criminals, extorting plunder from local traders; if the traders resisted, the soldiers would stage a public confrontation, painting them as informers for the regime and marking them for death at the hands of GIA bands.²⁴⁶

The purposeful imposition of insecurity on the civilian populace in Greater Algiers (by both the regime and the GIA), paradoxically, was meant to make the lines of allegiance as clear as possible; if the position of neutrality was insecure, civilians would flock to one side or the other.²⁴⁷ Both the government and the GIA assumed that the erosion of neutrality would ultimately send greater numbers to their own side. Instead, the guerilla war continued to escalate: French intelligence estimated that by 1994, fifteen people were being killed per day.²⁴⁸ In 1995, the newspaper *Le Matin*, purposefully keeping figures low so as not to panic the population,

²⁴¹ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 188.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *The Algerian Civil War*, 73.

²⁴⁴ *The Algerian Civil War*, 74.

²⁴⁵ *The Algerian Civil War*, 75.

²⁴⁶ *The Algerian Civil War*, 73.

²⁴⁷ This strategy of imposed insecurity can be read as a response to the dynamics of fragmented control and incomplete information that Kalyvas describes as being inherent to internal conflict—by imposing insecurity on “neutral” civilians, the opposing violent actors make the task of deterring civilian defection easier, albeit at the cost of losing some potential support. *The Algerian Civil War*, 78.

²⁴⁸ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 205.

estimated the level of violence for the previous year at 6,388 civilians killed and 2,289 wounded, with 13,000 armed robberies; over well over one thousand schools, universities, research labs, or town halls were damaged or destroyed by bombs or arson.²⁴⁹

As the war continued, divides among the Islamists grew. In July 1994, the AIS was formed, claiming to be the “official” military wing of the FIS; it aimed to draw away moderate Islamist support from the GIA, and, unlike the MIA, was active in the Greater Algiers area.²⁵⁰ Martínez offers a further distinction, describing the AIS as being “political guerillas,” waging a “‘militarily correct’ jihad.”²⁵¹ Aiming to emulate the ALN who had successfully driven the French from Algeria decades before, the AIS, strengthened by the gradual release of the former AIS activists being held in government camps and by military deserters, quickly became the largest Islamist armed group in the country.²⁵² Although precise estimates are difficult to come by, the total number of guerillas in the country swelled from roughly 22,000 in 1993 (mostly GIA bands and a handful of MIA) to 40,000 (AIS, GIA, and MIA) in 1995.²⁵³ AIS leadership, aware that the “total war” strategy of the GIA would likely turn the civilian population against them over time, framed their struggle as being political, which therefore set strict limits on the military tactics they would use: an AIS publication in 1994 called GIA tactics “abominable” and claimed that the group would never “attack a woman” or “burn a school or hospital.”²⁵⁴ These proclamations were aimed, in particular, at former supporters of the FIS, who, having witnessed

²⁴⁹ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 205.

²⁵⁰ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 190.

²⁵¹ *The Algerian Civil War*, 201.

²⁵² *The Algerian Civil War*, 202.

²⁵³ *The Algerian Civil War*, 215.

²⁵⁴ *The Algerian Civil War*, 203.

atrocities committed by the GIA in the name of *jihad*, were vulnerable to recruitment by the regime.²⁵⁵

The GIA and regime also saw fairly significant internal reorganization. As time went on, the regime became better and better at combating the GIA, which was hemorrhaging support to the AIS; by the end of 1994, the group had lost significant ground. Meanwhile, earlier that year, the HCE had conferred the presidency to General Liamin Zeroual, at the time the sitting defense minister. Zeroual soon came into conflict with others in the regime over how to end the ongoing conflict: while he favored some sort of dialogue and ultimately a political settlement, hardliners, led by General Mohammed Lamari, favored complete eradication of Islamist groups. The regime's waffling between dialogue (the release of the FIS leaders Madani and Belhadj from prison in September 1994 and the subsequent opening of communications between Islamists and the government; the promise of presidential elections in November 1995) and policies of eradication (the minister of the interior publically calling for the elimination of the insurgents and the arming of civilian militias) around this time is indicative of that internal polarization.²⁵⁶

As the war continued, though, the regime's position strengthened: although the economy continued to worsen, and Zeroual saw a reduction in French aid in 1996, the regime still was able to sustain itself through oil revenues, and over time had become significantly more effective (and brutal) in prosecuting its counter-insurgency.²⁵⁷ At the same time, the AIS and GIA were losing steam, and both groups had shrunk significantly after Zeroual began offering clemency to former guerilla fighters who surrendered to the government in 1995. An Algerian living in the Mitidja area compared the GIA of the beginning of the conflict to "fish in water," drawing support from

²⁵⁵ *The Algerian Civil War*, 203

²⁵⁶ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 201.

²⁵⁷ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 218.

the local population and embodying a sort of collective resistance to the regime.²⁵⁸ By 1996, that dynamic had changed, and much of the ordinary people who had once supported the GIA now viewed them as excessively brutal, particularly when viewed in comparison to the relatively tame AIS (against whom they formally declared war at the start of 1996); the plunder with which the GIA supported itself likely contributed to this shift in perception as well.²⁵⁹ In the face of regime advances, the GIA found itself pushed out of its “home turf” in the city and into the countryside—the Mitidja hinterlands about forty miles south of Algiers. There, the GIA faced greater AIS competition, poor living conditions, lack of supplies, a steady stream of desertions, and, of course, constant attacks from the regime.²⁶⁰

In 1996, the GIA’s leader, Djamel Zitouni, became increasingly isolated, issuing a stream of communiques sentencing larger and larger classes of people to death.²⁶¹ He himself was killed in a bout of GIA infighting at some point between May and June 1996 after he sentenced to death any members of the group with an “Algerianist perspective” (essentially, viewing the war as a local matter, rather than a worldwide struggle), which sparked massive backlash among the GIA’s membership.²⁶² He was replaced by Antar Zouabri, who assumed control of the group at the age of twenty-six and was possibly even more brutal than Zitouni.²⁶³ He allied himself with the infamous extremist preacher Abu Hamza, based in London, who became the ideological lodestar of the organization; by 1997, some journalists following the conflict began to suspect that he, not Zouabri, was the author of many of the GIA’s communiques. By 1997, the group’s

²⁵⁸ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 218.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 219.

²⁶¹ Including the families of police and army officers, the “wives of apostates,” army conscripts, and anyone involved in the hydrocarbon sector. *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 219.

²⁶² *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 221-22.

²⁶³ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 222.

violent ideology reached its zenith when Zouabri declared that anyone who did not support the GIA was an apostate and therefore marked for death.²⁶⁴

The Ideology of the GIA

The GIA was an insurgent group that, similar to other, more well-known organizations like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, followed an ideology of totalitarian theocracy based on a particular, violent reading of Salafism, a fundamentalist branch of Sunni Islam.²⁶⁵ It advocated for the creation of an “Islamic state” in Algeria; at times, GIA leadership made allusions to some kind of grander international struggle, but took few, if any, steps to initiate such a struggle. Operationally, the group was almost entirely constrained to Algeria. Similarly to the modern Islamic State, the GIA made common practice of declaring its enemies to be *takfir* (infidels or apostates), which therefore made them legitimate targets for extreme violence. Unlike the Islamic state, however, the GIA did not exist in an area with mixed Sunni and Shia populations; as such, its declarations of *takfir* worked along less of an ethnic dimension.

Unlike other Islamist groups like the MIA and AIS, the GIA pursued a policy of “total war” against the regime; the group’s motto was “No dialogue, no reconciliation, no truce,”²⁶⁶ and individuals in Algeria were classified as either “enemies of Islam” or “supporters of the *jihad*.”²⁶⁷ To this end, the GIA attacked “all the social groups which, involuntarily or deliberately, ensured that the regime continued in power,” a list of targets that included civil society organizations, any and all government departments (including healthcare and education),

²⁶⁴ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 223.

²⁶⁵ See Chapter Six for a more detailed description of this particular strain of Salafist ideology.

²⁶⁶ *The Algerian Civil War*, 209.

²⁶⁷ *The Algerian Civil War*, 208.

and foreigners, who were viewed as being crucial to the continued survival of the regime.²⁶⁸ The GIA also systemically destroyed railroads, highways, bridges, and telephone lines.²⁶⁹ Total war also included the destruction of Algeria's economy, which was perceived to be one of the means by which the regime, "totally dependent on the Crusader countries," kept the people in check, although, strangely, the GIA made no real attempt to attack Algeria's oil infrastructure.²⁷⁰ In addition, the GIA made special use of "the feeling, very strong in Algeria, of being persecuted by the world community," and a number of their communications made reference to Algeria's mistreatment at the hands of the French and "the Jew," which spurred special efforts to attack foreigners.²⁷¹ In addition to lending them anticolonial legitimacy, such attacks also drew outsized media attention to the group, "securing a wide audience for its claim to be at the head of the *jiḥād* in Algeria."²⁷²

Due to the "total war" policy, the GIA attracted a different type of recruit than the MIA (and later, AIS). "Fanatics, impelled by hatred of the regime," dispossessed urban youth, and opportunistic criminals all found a home among the disparate armed bands that made up the GIA; particularly in the early years of the conflict, previously existing armed groups would pledge allegiance to the GIA in order to take advantage of their institutional legitimacy.²⁷³ Furthermore, legitimacy within the GIA itself was based explicitly on one's level of violence; a 1994 communique by the group's head at the time claimed that, to be suitable for leadership, one must have "killed a sufficient number of the enemies of God."²⁷⁴ Martínez contends that this

²⁶⁸ *The Algerian Civil War*, 208.

²⁶⁹ *The Algerian Civil War*, 213.

²⁷⁰ *The Algerian Civil War*, 210.

²⁷¹ *The Algerian Civil War*, 209.

²⁷² *The Algerian Civil War*, 209.

²⁷³ *The Algerian Civil War*, 208.

²⁷⁴ *The Algerian Civil War*, 211.

combination of factors created, at times, a perverse set of incentives for local “*emirs*” to ratchet up the level of violence their group committed in order to accrue greater status within the national organization. Similarly, in places where different “*emirs*” coexisted or had overlapping zones of control, competitions broke out between leaders who increased their activity in order to stand out from the competition.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁵ *The Algerian Civil War*, 211.

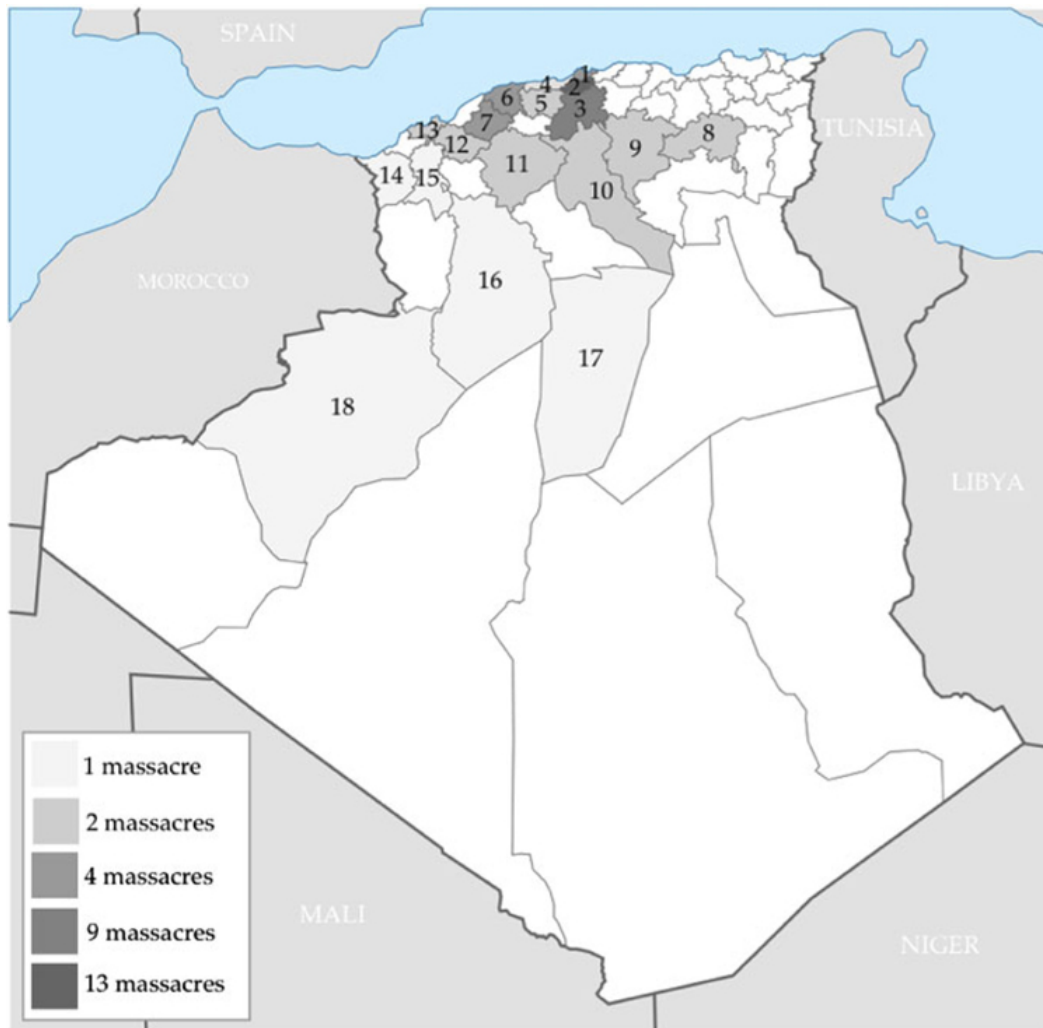


Figure 3: Distribution of massacre events by prefecture (from "'Wanton and Senseless' Revisited.")

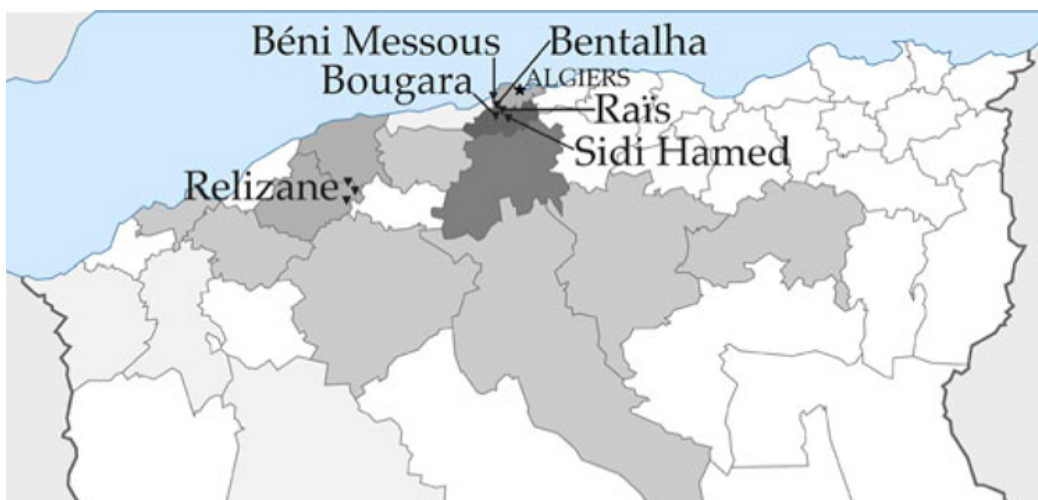


Figure 4: Detail of most active areas and locations of deadliest massacres (from "'Wanton and Senseless' Revisited.")

Atrocities: 1996-1998

In this section, I review atrocities committed by the GIA between 1996 and 1998, the period during which the vast majority of the GIA's infamous civilian massacres took place. If GIA atrocities were committed strategically, they would reflect this in a number of ways, most importantly in the presence of a consistent operating procedure among those carrying out the atrocities, as well as other, more direct evidence of specific targeting of victims or the carrying out of orders (the direct presence of group elites, etc.). The violence itself, likewise, would be relatively consistent from incident to incident, as wild inconsistencies would be more indicative of random, dysfunctional violence than strategic atrocities.

Although some massacres are alleged to have taken place before 1996, most reliable reporting establishes the massacres as beginning in the summer of that year (after Antar Zouabri became the group's national *emir*) and ending in late 1998 when the GIA disintegrated.²⁷⁶ During this time, as many as 300 massacres were reported, with more than 6,500 civilians killed.²⁷⁷ Although mass atrocities committed by the GIA during this time mostly took the form of massacres, the kidnapping of women and high-casualty car bombings were also fairly common. Due to the number of massacres and other atrocities committed, it is impossible to summarize all of them; instead, I select examples illustrative of their general "type" as perpetrated by the GIA on a broader scale. I have selected these examples primarily according to the availability of reliable (and English-language)²⁷⁸ evidence. It is also important to note that I

²⁷⁶ Although massacres did continue until 2002, they occurred far less frequently than between 1996 and 1998; furthermore, as this chapter is explicitly focused on massacres committed by the GIA, such actions would fall outside the scope of my argument. Jacob Mundy, "'Wanton and Senseless' Revisited: The Study of Warfare in Civil Conflicts and the Historiography of the Algerian Massacres." *African Studies Review* 56, no. 3 (December 3, 2013): 25–55.

²⁷⁷ "'Wanton and Senseless' Revisited," 28.

²⁷⁸ I have used one French-language source, translated through Google Translate.

selected these incidents *before* performing my analysis, in order to avoid any confirmation bias in their selection.

It is also important to note that, even now, the GIA's culpability in the massacres is contested. Many contend that by 1996, the group had been infiltrated by the regime; some even claim that the GIA was acting on government orders in committing massacres.²⁷⁹ Others accuse the regime of committing its own massacres. While the massacres did have the effect of driving civilians closer to the government and of discrediting the Islamist movement as a whole, the idea that the GIA was a "hand puppet" for the Algerian government is fairly outlandish. It is also fairly unlikely that government troops would have carried out their own (ostensibly deniable) massacres "dressed as paratroopers," as one massacre survivor put it, or while wearing the uniforms of the national police.²⁸⁰ Kalyvas also points out that most journalists and European foreign ministries identified the GIA as being responsible for the massacres.²⁸¹ While it is likely that the regime's security services did have some degree of complicity in the massacres,²⁸² was capable of manipulating the GIA (although testimony from Algerian defectors varies as to the extent of manipulation), and perhaps even committed some massacres themselves, I treat the GIA as an independent actor with primary responsibility for the atrocities described herein.²⁸³

Large-scale massacre of civilians was the most common atrocity perpetrated by the GIA between 1996-98. Massacres started in mid-1996. Though many scholars identify the massacre at Msila on August 17, 1996 as the first, this interpretation is highly disputed; some accounts

²⁷⁹ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 223.

²⁸⁰ "'Wanton and Senseless' Revisited," 41.

²⁸¹ Stathis N. Kalyvas. "Wanton and Senseless?: The Logic of Massacres in Algeria." *Rationality and Society* 11, no. 3 (August 1, 1999): 243–85. doi:10.1177/104346399011003001.

²⁸² At the very least, there were a number of instances when the army or police refused to halt massacres in progress; while this *is* monstrous, it is not necessarily the same as actually planning and perpetrating a massacre. "Wanton and Senseless," 253.

²⁸³ For greater detail on the debate surrounding the regime's complicity in the massacres, see "The Elimination of Confounding Narratives" in Mundy and Section 3.1: "Who Kills?" in Kalyvas.

describe the “massacre” as an indiscriminate daytime bus attack (a significant difference from other massacres attributed to the GIA) by anti-Islamist militants, and the Algerian government completely denies its occurrence, claiming that it has likely been confused with another bus that occurred attack in Djelfa prefecture two days prior.²⁸⁴ However, at least three other widely reported massacres occurred before the end of 1996 (Kalyvas identifies six), and by 1997, massacres were a common occurrence, with multiple killings per week during some periods.²⁸⁵

The basic pattern was as follows: attacks were “systematically committed at night, by large groups of men who attacked village inhabitants, often in their sleep, killing entire populations and pursuing and killing anyone who attempted to escape.”²⁸⁶ Any and all people were targeted, including children, the elderly, babies, and pregnant women, and killings were often extremely brutal. Attackers often used hand weapons (machetes, knives, and even chainsaws)²⁸⁷ and decapitations and mutilations were common; corpses were often left out in the streets, a violation of Islamic law.²⁸⁸ In other cases, victims were burned alive in their homes.²⁸⁹ Attacks often took “several hours” to complete.²⁹⁰ As they withdrew, attackers would loot, set fires, and kidnap women.²⁹¹ There is ample evidence that the attacks targeted specific towns, neighborhoods, families, and even individuals; the survivor of an attack at Raïs testified that he heard guerilla members and local informers going over a list of targets and their addresses.²⁹² In many cases, survivors admitted to recognizing local people among the attackers: after the

²⁸⁴ “‘Wanton and Senseless’ Revisited,” 38.

²⁸⁵ “Wanton and Senseless,” 247.

²⁸⁶ Amnesty International, “Civilian Population Caught in a Spiral of Violence.”

²⁸⁷ “The Furrows of Algeria.”

²⁸⁸ Amnesty International.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ “Algeria: Violations of Civil and Political Rights.” *Human Rights Watch*, July 1998. Accessed March 16, 2017. https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports98/algeria/ALGER988-02.htm#P85_19320.

²⁹¹ “Wanton and Senseless,” 247.

²⁹² “Wanton and Senseless,” 254.

massacre at Raïs (estimated at up to 300 dead), a survivor recognized the voice of one of his attackers, a local man; others identified the attackers' leaders as being former FIS activists.²⁹³ Some survivors testified that attackers avoided the houses of civilian sympathizers, and the sister of a GIA leader, captured after the Benthala massacre, claimed that during the massacre she had assisted GIA fighters by going house-to-house, indicating which should be attacked and which should be spared.²⁹⁴

The largest massacres often claimed hundreds of lives. At Sidi Raïs, mentioned above, an estimated 300 civilians were killed and over 100 injured in an attack that took hours. A massacre at Benthala committed less than a month later, on September 22, 1997, resulted in 250 deaths. On December 31, 1997, joint attacks on three villages in the area of Souk El Had resulted in 412 deaths, the largest single confirmed death toll of the war; an Amnesty International report on the massacre noted the shocking viciousness of the attackers, who dismembered men, women, and children, and even killed babies by smashing them against the walls of their houses.²⁹⁵ At Sidi Hamed on January 11, 1998, a confirmed 103 (up to 400) were killed; in the area of Had Chekala, a confirmed 153 (up to 500) were massacred a few days earlier, on January 4.²⁹⁶ These three areas, notably, had become AIS strongholds when the group emerged midway through the war.²⁹⁷

In addition to the fairly uniformly-executed nighttime massacres, large numbers of civilians were killed by other means: government officials or suspected collaborators were killed

²⁹³ "Wanton and Senseless," 256.

²⁹⁴ "Wanton and Senseless," 254.

²⁹⁵ "Further information on UA 362/97 (MDE 28/39/97, 19 November 1997) - Massacres / Killings / "Disappearances" / Abductions / Torture," *Amnesty International*.

²⁹⁶ All of the above figures are from "'Wanton and Senseless' Revisited," "Table 1: Widely Reported Massacre Episodes in Algeria."

²⁹⁷ *The Algerian Civil War*, 203.

in assassinations or daytime attacks;²⁹⁸ the tactic of “*faux barrages*” (false barricades) was used to ferret out targeted individuals in more densely-populated zones. The GIA also perpetrated a large number of bombings. Bombs were set in areas frequented by civilians, including mosques, cafes, offices, railroads, markets, and town centers (for example, on August 29, 1997, a bomb set off in the popular Casbah district of Algiers killed twelve and wounded over 60); in 1997 alone, Algeria Watch catalogued a total of 75 different bombings.²⁹⁹

Finally, large numbers of women were kidnapped by the GIA and forced into “*zawaj al motaa*” (so-called “marriages of convenience”) for the purposes of sexual slavery, and often murdered shortly thereafter.³⁰⁰

Evaluation

In this section, I evaluate whether or not the atrocities committed by the GIA in Algeria between 1996 and 1998 were strategic in nature and attempt to deduce the particular operating logic behind them. I then weigh the evidence in favor of my model against evidence supporting alternative explanations (that GIA atrocities were not primarily strategic in nature).

I find that available evidence suggests that the majority of atrocities committed by the GIA between 1996 and 1998 were strategic. Survivors repeatedly testified that their attackers, although “indiscriminate” in the sense of slaughtering large numbers of people, were also careful to select their targets from the available population of potential victims. Attackers moved carefully from house to house consulting pre-made lists of targets, often with the aid of local sympathizers, and were observed to have avoided attacking the houses of GIA supporters; in

²⁹⁸ In some cases, the perpetrators are unclear.

²⁹⁹ “Chronologie Des Massacres En Algérie (1992 - 2004) - 1992-1997.” Accessed March 16, 2017. http://www.algeria-watch.de/mrv/2002/bilan_massacres.htm.

³⁰⁰ “The Furrows of Algeria.”

other cases, the attackers themselves were locals.³⁰¹ As noted above, a person close to the GIA captured after the Benthala massacre indicated that she participated in the attack by leading GIA fighters through the village and indicating target houses.³⁰² In some cases, massacre victims had already received death threats from the GIA.³⁰³ This operating procedure was consistent over the entire geographical area in which massacres occurred (which was, it should be noted, a relatively small portion of the country), and over time as well.

Furthermore, victims of massacres were not randomly chosen; instead, they were primarily “local opponents” of the GIA (including government employees or members of the regime’s security apparatus), supporters of competing groups, or former GIA sympathizers who had defected to the government side (or were perceived as being on the verge of doing so).³⁰⁴ This target set fits with Zouabri’s mid-1996 decree that “those who are not with us are against us,”³⁰⁵ which formally expanded the GIA’s total war to include neutral or even moderate Islamist civilians as supporters of the regime and *takfir*, therefore making them legitimate targets for extreme violence. These characteristics of the massacres (consistent operating procedure; evidence of targeting; consistency with top-level rhetoric) are all strong indicators of strategic intent.

Meanwhile, other atrocities are harder to parse. There is some evidence that GIA-orchestrated bombings were strategic: bombs were placed to ensure civilian casualties in areas where the GIA had limited access,³⁰⁶ implying a concerted effort to target civilians unreachable

³⁰¹ “Wanton and Senseless,” 254.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ “Wanton and Senseless,” 254-55.

³⁰⁵ “Wanton and Senseless,” 255.

³⁰⁶ I.e., more densely-populated areas with stronger security presences.

by other means.³⁰⁷ This, in turn, rules out possible explanations of laziness or tactical myopia on the part of GIA commanders responsible for bombing.³⁰⁸ It is harder to identify strategic intent in the kidnapping and sexual abuse of women by GIA forces. Such abuse was widespread, and kidnapping generally implies strategic intent; the kidnappings could have been a form of plunder (coming primarily as a side benefit to the massacre strategy), or as a further means of terrorizing the GIA's target population. However, this is not enough to conclusively overrule the null hypothesis, which is that the kidnapping of women during massacres and their subsequent sexual abuse was primarily spur-of-the-moment looting.³⁰⁹

What, then, were the strategies of atrocity being pursued by the GIA between 1996 and 1998? Evidence suggests the massacres are best explained as being designed (as Kalyvas contends) to be a cheap, effective means of deterring civilian "defection" in areas that once were strongholds of Islamist support, in the absence of any GIA capacity to be more discriminate in their killings. Bombings, meanwhile, can be conceptualized as a further extension of the strategy of deterring civilian defection to the government through terrorism.

Deterring Defection

In "Wanton and Senseless" and *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Kalyvas conceptualizes violence against civilians by either the rebel or regime sides as being driven by the twin dynamics of the need for civilian cooperation and the fact of incomplete territorial control in a conflict environment. In areas of more consolidated control, a warring party can more completely guarantee the security of collaborators and more selectively punish defectors; in

³⁰⁷ "Chronologie Des Massacres En Algérie (1992 - 2004) - 1992-1997."

³⁰⁸ For example, carrying out indiscriminate bombing campaigns in order to look productive and impress higher-ups; Kalyvas identifies this as a possible explanation for instances of indiscriminate artillery bombardments carried out by US forces in Vietnam.

³⁰⁹ People can, of course, be stolen.

areas of incomplete control, less discriminate violence becomes a more desirable option, due to its relative cheapness.³¹⁰ Kalyvas's theory cannot fully explain the phenomena of civilian abuse: civil war violence can be driven by strategic scenarios wherein violent actors do not view the civilian population as a "neutral" resource to be controlled through benefits or violence, but rather as an enemy in itself or a means of coercing or inflicting violence on a third party.³¹¹ For example, most cases of territorial mass killing, ethnic cleansing, or genocide are driven by actors who view the target population as an enemy to be removed; in cases of coercion by punishment or coercion by terror,³¹² the punishing of civilians is merely a means of coercing a third party. Even "population control" strategies, broadly defined, can be conceptualized as treating civilians more as a means than an end.

However, in this case, Kalyvas's characterization of the dynamics of the conflict appears to be accurate. I contend that civilians were the intended end of the massacres, as the mass killings were conceived of by the GIA as a low-cost method of coercing the population into allegiance. By killing perceived "defectors" brutally and in large numbers, the GIA hoped to deter future defections by its civilian supporters. Having lost so much territory and public support between its heyday in 1993-94 and 1996, GIA leadership had significant incentive to prevent any further losses in public support by any means necessary.³¹³ However, because of the losses the group had sustained, it lacked the capacity to kill selectively, even in its former Mitidja strongholds. Therefore, massacres—conducted with the limited intelligence that local sympathizers could provide—broadly targeting the "disloyal" became the cheapest way to deter further disloyalty.

³¹⁰ See Chapter 2 for more on Kalyvas's theory of civil war violence.

³¹¹ See my case studies on ISIS and UNITA for examples of this dynamic.

³¹² A strategy distinct from coercion by punishment; see Chapter 2.

³¹³ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 218.

There is significant evidence to support this conclusion. When carrying out massacres, GIA attackers were careful to only target defectors. On the other side of the coin, villagers in Raïs told journalists that, after they had refused to aid the GIA, they “expected” an attack.³¹⁴ Meanwhile, survivors of a massacre in Boughalef testified that they heard attackers say that “the villagers had to pay for their treason, for having ceased to support them.”³¹⁵ The GIA’s public statements also lend credence to this theory: in addition to the 1996 declaration that any civilians who did not ally themselves with the GIA were enemies of the group, the GIA bulletin *Al Ansar* (published by Abu Hamza) claimed in late 1997 that the GIA “will attack and kill the partisans of the tyrants in the villages,” and in February of that year, Zouabri characterized the massacres of “apostates” as “a new stage in the struggle against the government.”³¹⁶

The change in type of GIA killings over the course of the war is also indicative of such a strategy. The GIA was highly violent from its conception; in its heyday in 1993, killings of security service members or perceived “collaborators” were common.³¹⁷ However, it also exercised control over what Kalyvas calls “liberated zones,” where the GIA operated safely and openly, exercising some degree of monopoly over the legitimate use of violence.³¹⁸ Particularly in areas that had voted strongly in favor of the FIS, GIA rebels were well-known and received significant support from the community; while they did use coercive violence to reinforce their control of the area’s civilian population, it was highly selective, with those who did not cooperate or who had aided the government “singled out for brutal and visible punishment.”³¹⁹ A resident living in Benthala, comparing the selective violence of insurgent rule to the later

³¹⁴ “Wanton and Senseless,” 258.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ “Wanton and Senseless,” 259.

³¹⁷ See, under “The Algerian Civil War,” the subsection titled “The 1992 Coup and the Beginning of Civil War.”

³¹⁸ “Wanton and Senseless,” 259.

³¹⁹ “Wanton and Senseless,” 261.

massacres, said, “there was violence, but it was a different thing.”³²⁰ The government, meanwhile, having effectively ceded pro-FIS suburbs to the Islamists early in the conflict, lacked the means of selectively punishing civilians in “liberated zones” who colluded with the GIA, and instead resorted to indiscriminate raids by the “ninjas.”³²¹ However, by 1996, when the massacres began, the GIA had largely ceded control of those areas to the government, which in turn was unable to completely drive the GIA out of its bases in the nearby mountains (. The government also provided resources to anti-rebel civilian militias, which presented a credible incentive for defection.³²² This led to a situation of what Kalyvas calls “fragmented rule,” wherein the government maintained enough control to encourage defection to their side, but not enough to prevent the GIA from attempting to punish defectors; the GIA, meanwhile, lacked the capacity to selectively target defectors and so had to use massacre violence instead.³²³

Bombings perpetrated by the GIA fit strategic model as well. Covertly-placed bombs in areas that were under more complete government control were a means of punishing the perceived defection of those civilians to the government side. Notably, this is *not* a case of coercion by punishment, as is often the case of terror bombings. The GIA had no interest in coercing the government; they viewed the struggle as a “total war” that had to end with the destruction of the regime and the complete remaking of Algerian society.³²⁴ Instead of coercing the Algerian government through punishment of the civilian population, the GIA aimed for its bombings to reinforce the lack of safety that civilians enjoyed under the regime and punish those who had cooperated with the government.

³²⁰ “Wanton and Senseless,” 263.

³²¹ Which, of course, further reinforced civilian support for the insurgents; see “The 1992 Coup and the Beginning of Civil War.” “Wanton and Senseless,” 261.

³²² *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 219.

³²³ “Wanton and Senseless,” 264.

³²⁴ See “The Ideology of the GIA.”

Alternative Explanations

What evidence is there that the massacre campaign was nonstrategic? Some evidence exists that the massacre campaign was driven primarily by dysfunctional intra-GIA dynamics, rather than strategic concerns. As Martínez notes, a dynamic existed within the group wherein local “*emirs*” would increase their level of violence in order to accrue greater status within the national organization, and in places where different “*emirs*” had overlapping zones of control, competitions broke out between them.³²⁵ On a broader level, having “killed a sufficient number of the enemies of God” was an organizational prerequisite for advancement within the GIA.³²⁶ Throughout the war, (and particularly during its early years) local *emirs* presided over a social economy of violence; the most feared *emirs* were also the most famous, reaching the status of cult figures among the disaffected urban youth that formed the core of the GIA.³²⁷ By 1996, however, the infamy once associated with *emirs* had vanished as the population began to turn against them; forced into uncomfortable fallback positions in the mountains, massacres may have been a way for some *emirs* to regain lost respect.³²⁸ Furthermore, the bouts of infighting that occurred around time of Djamel Zitouni’s death may have led some *emirs* to order massacres in the hope of advancing within the organization, given how significantly violence was incentivized. And, of course, when some *emirs* began to order massacres, those in competition with them for power and prestige needed to keep up, sparking a chain reaction of mass-level civilian abuse that continued until the group finally disintegrated in 1998.

While this explanation is sound, it is still less convincing than the strategic alternative for several reasons. First, evidence in the form of how and where the massacres were committed

³²⁵ *The Algerian Civil War*, 211.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

³²⁷ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 190.

³²⁸ *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*, 219.

lends credence to the notion of such violence as being strategically conceived to deter defection, not as a means of accruing intra-group capital. Second, accepting the theory of the commodification of violence within the GIA as being the driving force behind the massacres is logically problematic. If the massacres were a bottom-up phenomenon within the GIA, why would the group's leadership allow such behavior to continue for multiple years, and go so far as to explicitly endorse it in their public-facing communications? Third, if the group's cohesion was truly so weak that the GIA's core leadership had no ability to control the behavior of local *emirs* committing massacres, why would they bother committing massacres to earn the recognition and respect of GIA leadership in the first place? While the social economy of violence within the GIA (and, for a time, the swaths of Algerian society that they controlled) likely did play a role in motivating foot soldiers and lower-level *emirs* to commit massacres, it was not the primary cause of the massacres.

Conclusion

I find that, during the 1996-1998 period of the Algerian civil war, the non-state GIA committed massacres and engaged in a bombing campaign against primarily civilian targets for strategic reasons, much as states do. Moreover, I find that the strategies of atrocity used by the GIA are highly similar to those historically employed by state actors: the strategy of deterring civilian defection in a civil conflict environment through varying discriminate violence (depending on the level of control an actor has in the area in question) is commonly-observed behavior among states—it may have even been employed by the Algerian regime early in the war in the form of indiscriminate “ninja” raids into insurgent-held neighborhoods. This specific

strategy stemmed from the direction of Antar Zouabri and other GIA elites and were based on their particular perception of the conditions facing them at the time.

There is some evidence to support the use of this strategy as a last resort, as postulated in part B of my second hypothesis: “Group elites will order their groups to commit atrocities when they have generally exhausted less costly options³²⁹ for protecting that interest.” By 1996, the GIA was in dire straits, having lost significant amounts of territory and manpower to both the government and competing Islamist groups (particularly the AIS) since its height in 1993. Importantly, as they lost control of their core territories, the group’s use of violence to encourage civilian collaboration and to prevent defection did move from being more discriminate (targeted, individual killings in 1993-94) to less discriminate (large massacres in 1996-98) over time. The massacres also came after a bout of infighting that nearly broke apart the GIA. Although there is no smoking gun evidence suggesting that the massacres were a true strategy of last resort, there is significant circumstantial evidence to indicate so.

What do these findings mean in terms of generalizable warning signs? As with state actors, actors that have suffered significant losses are more likely to take extreme measures to protect core interests they perceive as being threatened. More specifically, the dynamic of the loss of territorial control leading to ever-more-violent behavior in order to maintain some civilian collaboration could be a recurring phenomenon in conflicts where civilian complicity is necessary for an armed group to survive. Finally, violent ideologies, particularly ones that frame conflicts in terms of total war, while not necessarily driving actors to commit atrocities (as we see in the UNITA case study), can impact the likelihood of atrocities being committed if the

³²⁹ I.e., diplomatic efforts, coercive threats, targeted or selective use of force, etc.

actors following such ideologies perceive conflicts as being intractable or existential in nature, thereby justifying extreme measures.

Chapter Five

Los Zetas, Mexico, 2010-2012

Introduction

The “Drug War,” as it is sometimes called, is the result of a complex interplay between the American and Mexican governments, markets for illegal drugs throughout North America and even Europe, supply chains reaching through Central and South America, and, of course, the patchwork of armed groups in violent competition to control the aforementioned morass.

The primary costs for the above, sadly, fall to the people of Mexico: between 2006 and 2012, the country saw about 60,000 drug-related murders (some estimates range as high as 130,000)³³⁰ and tens of thousands of people disappeared, primarily by various armed criminal groups but also by the Mexican government.³³¹ The violence stems primarily from conflicts between the government and various criminal groups: the now-infamous Sinaloa Cartel, the Gulf Cartel, Los Zetas, and, in more recent years, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, which all compete for territory, goods, and illicit access to the extremely lucrative US markets.³³² Conflict between the groups began in the 1990s, when the powerful Medellín and Cali cartels, operating out of Colombia, collapsed, and it escalated in the mid-2000s as larger cartel federations collapsed and as the Mexican government began to crack down. By 2010, groups like the Zetas, made up of former Mexican special forces operators, were using extreme violence in the form of bombings, targeted killings, and massacres to expand their territory.³³³

³³⁰ Molly Molloy. “The Mexican Undead: Toward a New History of the ‘Drug War’ Killing Fields,” *Small Wars Journal*. Accessed March 21, 2017. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-mexican-undead-toward-a-new-history-of-the-%E2%80%9Cdrug-war%E2%80%9D-killing-fields%20>.

³³¹ “Mexico (cartels),” *Armed Conflict Database*. Accessed March 21, 2017. <https://acd-iiss-org.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/conflicts/mexico--cartels-cc7f?as=1834448FADF040B683D6C80076CEA8E5>.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

In this chapter, I evaluate atrocities committed by the Zetas between 2010 and 2012 in order to determine whether or not they were committed with strategic intent, seeking also to determine if the atrocities were committed at the direction of group elites and as last resorts, per my second hypothesis. To this end, I provide a brief history of the “Drug War,” starting with the rise of Mexican cartels in the 1990s. I then provide a more detailed account of the cartel organization I am focusing on in this case study, the Zetas, from their foundation in 2003 through 2010. I also devote a short section to analysis of the Zetas organization and ideology. I then examine the atrocities committed by the Zetas in the 2010-2012 period, from the group’s height through its dissolution and collapse. During this time, the Zetas committed a number of actions that fit my working definition of mass atrocities, including kidnappings, bombings, and the targeted killing and massacre of civilians, law enforcement officers, and enemy cartel members.

This time period was not only the most violent of the Drug War, but was also the one during which the Zetas were most active. During this time, the Zetas were a low-capacity, territorially revisionist non-state actor: the group was roughly 4,000 strong, with varying levels of dedication to and affiliation with the group.³³⁴ While it often engaged in combat with other cartels, it avoided open confrontations with the Mexican and U.S. militaries and law enforcement. However, the scope of its direct operations (not to mention its influence network) spread throughout Mexico, Central America, and the southern United States—for example, in 2013, three men were convicted by a federal jury of laundering money for the cartel in Austin, Texas.³³⁵ In addition to operations and partnerships stretching throughout the Americas, the group also had robust connections to various Italian criminal syndicates.³³⁶

³³⁴ Ed Vulliamy, “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.” *The Guardian*, November 14, 2009, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/15/zetas-drugs-mexico-us-gangs>.

³³⁵ Evelyn Krache Morris, “Think Again: Mexican Drug Cartels,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 203 (2013): 30–33.

³³⁶ “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

Finally, in examining these atrocities, I demonstrate that they appear to have been committed strategically and infer what the strategic logic (or logics) behind them may have been. For each strategy articulated, I weigh evidence supporting my interpretation against the alternative explanations—that all or some of the given atrocities were committed primarily because of individual-level factors, dysfunctional group dynamics, or other non-strategic causes. I conclude by summarizing my findings and briefly explaining the ways they may inform identification of potential warning signs for future atrocities.

History of the Drug War

In this section, I very briefly detail the history of the Drug War, beginning with the demise of the Colombian Medellín and Cali cartels, which allowed for a number of Mexican criminal organizations to their place. I then describe, in more detail, the formation of the Zetas, their break from the Gulf Cartel, and the escalation of conflict between them and other cartels, as well as the Mexican and American governments. Because I focus on atrocities committed by the Zetas in the 2010-2012 period in a later section, I do not describe them in detail here. This summary is meant not only to contextualize the atrocities I address in later sections, but to ground my later analysis of Zeta strategies within the group's history.

Rise of the Mexican Cartels

In the early 1990s, the Colombian Medellín and Cali cartels, which controlled the vast majority of illegal drug production and trafficking in the Americas, were destroyed under pressure from the United States and Colombian governments, rival criminal organizations, and

paramilitary groups.³³⁷ Although new organizations quickly arose to take their place, this momentary power vacuum allowed cartels operating in Mexico to expand. Previously, these organizations had been role-players in the drug trade specializing in trafficking, having arisen to meet the needs of the Colombian cartels after a crackdown on trade routes in the Caribbean forced Medellín and Cali to move their products through Mexico.³³⁸ In the absence of the major Colombian cartels, however, the Mexican organizations—at the time the Juarez, Tijuana, and Sinaloa cartels, which had formed from the breakup of the larger Guadalajara cartel, as well as the older Gulf cartel—began to expand, vertically integrating to include both coca growth in Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru (alongside Mexican production of marijuana and heroin, which they had controlled for decades) as well as sales in the United States in their scope of operations.³³⁹

For most of the 1990s, however, violence was limited: Amada Carillo Fuentes, who led the Juarez cartel, organized the various factions into a loose federation, each with their own set territories, smuggling routes, and target markets. When he died in 1997, the federation dissolved, and his cartel broke up into a number of smaller organizations, all of which began to violently jockey for control of his former territory.³⁴⁰ Those groups included the Beltran Leyva family, as well as gangs led by Ismael Zambada Garcia and Juan Jose Esparragoza Moreno, many of which aligned themselves, in time, with the Sinaloa cartel, which controlled extremely productive marijuana and poppy-cultivating areas in Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Durango.³⁴¹ By 2002, the Sinaloa cartel organized these affiliates into another federation, centered around the Arizona-Mexico border area, which began to come into conflict with the Tijuana cartel to the west and the

³³⁷ “Colombia.” *InSight Crime*. Accessed March 22, 2017. <http://www.insightcrime.org/colombia-organized-crime-news/colombia>.

³³⁸ “Mexico.” *InSight Crime*. Accessed March 21, 2017. <http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/mexico>.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

Gulf cartel to the east, which controlled Tamaulipas as well as most of the Texas-Mexico border.³⁴² In particular, the conflict between Sinaloa and the Gulf cartel for control of the highly lucrative Nuevo Laredo-Laredo border crossing sparked extreme violence in that area in 2003-2004.³⁴³ It was at around this time that the Zetas, formally an enforcer group for the Gulf Cartel, began to work on their own.

The Zetas

The Zetas were formed in 1997 by a group of 31 special operators from Mexico's *Grupo Aeromovil de Fuerzas Especiales* (GAFES, Airborne Special Forces Group) who defected from the army and began working for Osiel Cardenas Guillen, then the leader of the Gulf cartel, as an elite protection and assassination unit.³⁴⁴ Between 1997 and 2004, the Zetas, led by Arturo Guzman, Rogelio Gonzalez Pizana, and Heriberto Lazcano (known as Z-1, Z-2, and Z-3, respectively) led a number of secret operations to remove opposition to the Gulf cartel in and around the Tamaulipas region, killing the organization's enemies in highly public and gruesome ways, thus adding a heretofore unseen component of psychological warfare to the fighting between cartels.³⁴⁵ The group, ironically, had worked in counter-narcotics when with the Mexican government, and so was trained in rapid mobilization and counter-guerilla tactics, as well as being familiar with more advanced weaponry and technology than was common for cartels at the time; this gave them a significant advantage over opposing cartels they dealt

³⁴² *Armed Conflict Database*.

³⁴³ "Mexico," *InSight Crime*.

³⁴⁴ "Zetas." *InSight Crime*. Accessed March 21, 2017. <http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/zetas-profile>.

³⁴⁵ "A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico's Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Accessed March 21, 2017. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-profile-of-los-zetas-mexicos-second-most-powerful-drug-cartel>.

with.³⁴⁶ In these ways, the Zetas were instrumental to the changing nature of the Drug War; they “raised the bar on both professionalism and violence.”³⁴⁷

Starting in 2002, the Zetas and the Gulf cartel in general saw significant setbacks. Guillen’s accountant, Ruben Saucedo Rivera, was captured by the Mexican military, and in November of that year, Guzman (Z-1) was killed in a shootout with the military near Matamoros.³⁴⁸ Finally, on March 14, 2003, Guillen himself was arrested in Matamoros;³⁴⁹ although his brother and other high-ranking Gulf cartel members took over the day-to-day business of running his operation, Guillen still exercised a great deal of control from within prison.³⁵⁰ In October 2004, Z-2, who had taken command of the Zetas after Guzman’s death, was captured, and control of the group fell to Lazcano, Z-3.³⁵¹

When Lazcano took control of the Zetas in late 2004, he began the process of splitting off from the weakened Gulf cartel. He began recruiting new members, including Guatemalan and Mexican special operators, and established training camps in Tamaulipas; here, the Zetas’ previous experience as military trainers came in handy.³⁵² The group placed special importance on tactical expertise and sound logistics, and, as it grew, established a “clandestine radio network” as well as a complex, efficient accounting system.³⁵³ Numbering about 300,³⁵⁴ the group began to set up its own illicit networks: starting with the extortion of smaller trafficking

³⁴⁶ *Armed Conflict Database*.

³⁴⁷ “A Profile of Los Zetas.”

³⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁴⁹ By this point, the US State Department bounty on him had reached two million US dollars. “Zetas,” *InSight Crime*.

³⁵⁰ “A Profile of Los Zetas.”

³⁵¹ *Ibid*.

³⁵² *Ibid*.

³⁵³ *Ibid*.

³⁵⁴ “Zetas,” *InSight Crime*.

groups, it gradually moved into the trafficking of arms, people, and, of course, drugs.³⁵⁵ With their control of the high-volume Nuevo Laredo border crossing, the Zetas were able to expand their distribution network through Houston—what the FBI called a “hub city”³⁵⁶ for connecting with American gangs—northward along I-35 to Chicago, and east along I-10 to Atlanta.³⁵⁷ Notably, the group preferred to take and hold territory in the style of an army, therefore gaining a share of any illegal profits being made in an area.³⁵⁸ This led to a strange sort of *pax Zetas* in their territory, which, while lacking the chaotic violence that characterized Ciudad Juarez in its deadliest years, was nevertheless under the brutal, repressive thumb of the Zetas.³⁵⁹

Around this time, the bigger picture began to change amongst the Mexican cartels. The Juarez-Sinaloa “federation” began to fracture; Joaquin Guzman Loera, also known as “El Chapo,” allegedly ordered the assassination of the brother of the Juarez cartel’s leader, Vincente Carrillo Fuentes, and in return, Fuentes had Guzman’s brother killed.³⁶⁰ Fighting began in earnest between the Juarez and Sinaloa cartels, particularly in Ciudad Juarez. In response to the increasing violence, the Mexican government, led at the time by Vincente Fox, began operations against the cartels: in June 2005, Fox launched Operation Secure Mexico, deploying 1,500 soldiers and federal police to Baja California, Chihuahua, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, and Veracruz, among other areas; the following year, Fox started the Northern Border Initiative, stationing 800 Preventive Federal Police (PFP) in Nuevo Laredo.³⁶¹ In 2006, Fox was succeeded by Felipe Calderón, who had campaigned on a platform of combating drug violence; he, unlike

³⁵⁵ “A Profile of Los Zetas.”

³⁵⁶ “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

³⁵⁷ “A Profile of Los Zetas.”

³⁵⁸ “Zetas,” *InSight Crime*.

³⁵⁹ “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

³⁶⁰ “Mexico,” *InSight Crime*.

³⁶¹ *Armed Conflict Database*.

Fox, described anti-cartel operations as a “war.”³⁶² Immediately after assuming office, Calderón began operations in nine states, including sending 6,500 soldiers to Michoacán,³⁶³ where fighting had broken out between the Zetas and a former client group called the Familia Michoacana.³⁶⁴ Later, he mobilized 35,000 troops to regions including Baja California, Sinaloa, Tamaulipas and Nuevo León, and began a policy of extensive cooperation with the United States, dramatically ramping up extraditions.³⁶⁵ In addition, Calderón secured \$400 million in US aid to assist in fighting the cartels through the Mérida Initiative, which the US Congress approved in 2008.³⁶⁶

As time went on and anti-cartel efforts increased, fighting between the groups intensified. In 2008, a leader of the the Beltran Leyva organization, convinced that the Sinaloa cartel betrayed him, declared war against the cartel, turning on Zambada and Esparragoza’s affiliated organizations as well.³⁶⁷ Beltran Leyva partnered with the Zetas, who had increasingly come into conflict with the Sinaloa cartel; Sinaloa, meanwhile, had reached a truce with the Gulf Cartel. This combination of alliances finalized the split between the Zetas and the Gulf cartel, and the two organizations entered into conflict at a low level before boiling over into all-out war in 2010.³⁶⁸

By 2010, the Zetas had grown into the second largest and perhaps the most dangerous cartel in Mexico; the *Guardian* called it “probably the most powerful drug-trafficking

³⁶² *Armed Conflict Database*.

³⁶³ *Ibid*.

³⁶⁴ “Mexico,” *InSight Crime*.

³⁶⁵ *Armed Conflict Database*.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

³⁶⁷ “Mexico,” *InSight Crime*.

³⁶⁸ Other sources claim that the Zetas split from the Gulf cartel later, in 2010; this, however, does not jibe with reports of Zeta activity between 2008 and 2010, which suggests not only that they were acting independently during this time, but that they were in conflict with the Gulf cartel. However, it *is* clear that conflict between the two organizations reached a previously unseen level of intensity in 2010, in part due to the Gulf Cartel’s alliance with Sinaloa and *La Familia Michoacana*. There is, perhaps, another paper entirely that could be written on the twin dynamics of conflict and alliance formation among violent criminal groups. *Armed Conflict Database*.

organisation in the world.”³⁶⁹ By that time, their numbers had grown to an estimated 4,000 men, and their zones of control included their core areas along the Gulf Coast in Tamaulipas and Veracruz all the way down to Cancún, much of the suburbs around Mexico City, north through the Nuevo Laredo area, and west along the border with Arizona, which they seized with the help of the Beltran-Leyva organization.³⁷⁰ They controlled or had a presence in 405 municipalities, more than twice as many as their next-largest rivals; these included the key cities of Monterrey, Matamoros, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo.³⁷¹ Their international influence included extensive markets throughout the US, links to European crime syndicates, and, of course, stakes in cocaine farms in Guatemala, Peru, Colombia, and Venezuela.³⁷² In addition to drugs, the Zetas trafficked arms and people; they also took a stake in nearly every black or grey-market business conducted in their territory. In Nuevo Laredo, for instance, the Zetas extorted the women who sold *ropa usada* (used clothes) brought from warehouses on the Texas side and sold in front yards. One woman told the *Guardian*, “the multinational billion-dollar gang extorts 8 to 16 US cents (4-9p) for every 100 pesos (£4.57) she makes.”³⁷³ In many of their territories, they operated completely in the open, such was their lack of concern about reprisal. In Reynosa, cartel members emblazoned their trucks with special windshield stickers, and would sometimes even shut down the international bridges into the US in shows of force; shipping drugs into the US was sometimes as simple as holding up a border crossing at gunpoint.³⁷⁴ They entered the 2010-2012 period as, perhaps, the most feared criminal organization in the world.³⁷⁵

³⁶⁹ All quotes are *sic*. “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ “Zetas,” *InSight Crime*.

³⁷² “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ “Zetas,” *InSight Crime*

The Operating Logic of the Zetas³⁷⁶

The Zetas were, essentially, a militarized, privately-owned shipping company.³⁷⁷ Their basic “ideology,” if they could be said to have one (beyond the personal motivations of its members), was to make money as efficiently as possible.³⁷⁸ The Zetas took part in a significant number of illicit businesses outside of the drug trade, including (as noted above) arms and human trafficking, the reselling of stolen goods, and the theft and resale of intellectual property.³⁷⁹ Their primary product, therefore, was less a particular physical good than it was their logistical mastery: “Drug-trafficking organizations are using the same philosophy [as companies like Wal-Mart or Amazon] to cut costs, better control distribution, and develop new sources of revenue.”³⁸⁰ The group placed a high value on military-style professionalism, using the expertise of its original members to train newer recruits, and attempting to recruit operators away from Mexican and other Central American state special forces units; in some areas, the group openly posted banners aimed at military officers, advertising better pay and benefits than those offered by the Mexican government.³⁸¹ As noted above, the Zetas often pursued policies of vertical

³⁷⁶ Normally, this section deals with the ideology of the group in question; however, I feel that “operating logic” is more appropriate in this case, given that the Zetas are a criminal organization, and have no substantial “political or ideological motivations.” Shawn Teresa Flanigan. “Terrorists Next Door? A Comparison of Mexican Drug Cartels and Middle Eastern Terrorist Organizations.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 279–94. doi:10.1080/09546553.2011.648351.

³⁷⁷ Although the Zetas still exist, I use the past tense here because the organization as it exists in 2017 is little more than a shadow of its 2010 self.

³⁷⁸ Some scholars draw attention to “narco-saints such as Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde” as being crucial to the ideology and operating logic of the Zetas. While these cultish figures may be relevant to the personal motivations of cartel members or to the internal social structures of the organization, there is little to indicate that these quasi-religious beliefs amount to an ideology in the sense of informing the group’s actions or perception of the world. Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan. “Cartel Evolution Revisited: Third Phase Cartel Potentials and Alternative Futures in Mexico,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 21, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 30–54. doi:10.1080/09592310903561379.

³⁷⁹ “Think Again: Mexican Drug Cartels.”

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ “Los Zetas Called Mexico’s Most Dangerous Drug Cartel - CNN.com.” Accessed March 21, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/08/06/mexico.drug.cartels/index.html>.

integration, attempting to bring as many elements of their business as possible under their direct control in order to cut costs and collect a greater share of the profits.

To this end, the Zetas, displaying a kind of “insurgent nature,” placed an overriding importance on territorial control and integrity.³⁸² Their ability to monopolize, vertically integrate, and gain stakes in illicit business on their turf stemmed from this control; unlike “second-wave” criminal organizations like the Cali, Sinaloa, Tijuana, and Gulf cartels, the Zetas represented a movement (albeit incomplete) towards the “third wave” of a globalized “criminal state successor.”³⁸³ In their home state of Tamaulipas, the Zetas were running a fully-fledged “narco-state” wherein the group “controls every facet of life, is uncontested by its rivals and presides over an omnipresent reign of terror.”³⁸⁴ Although the Mexican government maintained a nominal presence in Zeta territory—police officers and civil society institutions were still present—the Zetas existed around and above government institutions in those areas, engaging in their activities entirely in the open and demonstrating their capacity to supersede the Mexican government’s nominal authority at will. Although killing was “less common” than in contested cities like Ciudad Juarez, the Zetas maintained order through selective killing of police and military officers.³⁸⁵

Interestingly, the Zetas also engaged in positive public relations campaigns: in addition to the recruitment banners noted above, they posted other banners directed at the public as well,³⁸⁶ countering accusations of violence and brutality made (also through *mantas*) by competing

³⁸² “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

³⁸³ “Cartel Evolution Revisited,” 32.

³⁸⁴ “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Commonly known as *narco-mantas*.

organizations like the Gulf cartel.³⁸⁷ Other recruitment banners advertised “a good salary, food, and attention to your family” and “benefits, life insurance, a house for your family and children” as potential benefits for joining or working for the Zetas.³⁸⁸ An activist monitoring abuses by the Mexican government, living in Reynosa, told the *Guardian* that the Zetas “the Zetas organize[d] their own mass demonstrations” against government abuses as well. In most towns controlled by the Zetas, they were careful to make deals with local government officials; a businessman from the Reynosa/McAllen area also noted that the Zetas mostly left unaffiliated civilians living in their territories alone.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁷ “Mexican Cartels Strategize to Win Hearts and Minds.” *The Monitor*. Accessed March 21, 2017. http://www.themonitor.com/news/local/article_1665e43f-a696-521b-a238-c252cf10db3c.html.

³⁸⁸ David Shirk, Joel Wallman, and Stathis N. Kalyvas. “How Civil Wars Help Explain Organized Crime—and How They Do Not.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 8 (December 1, 2015): 1517–40. doi:10.1177/0022002715587101.

³⁸⁹ “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”



Figure 5: Political map of Mexico. Areas of heavy Zeta activity included Nuevo Laredo, Matamoros, Reynosa, Monterrey, Victoria, Veracruz, and Tampico.³⁹⁰

Atrocities: 2010-2012

In this section, I review mass atrocities committed by the Zetas between 2010 and 2012. During this time, the Zetas were at the height of their power and engaged in violent campaigns against a number of other criminal groups (including the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels and the Familia Michoacana), as well as the Mexican government. Mass atrocities committed by the Zetas during this period took the form of massacres, kidnappings, targeted assassinations, sexual violence, and

³⁹⁰ Map courtesy of Geography.com.

bombings. Due to the sheer number of atrocities committed during this period (and the difficulty of verifying, in some cases, the perpetrators), I limit my account to descriptions of particular incidents that give a good sense of what the general types of atrocities committed by the Zetas looked like, as well as offering statistics indicative of the broader scope of the group's actions. I have selected these "highlights" primarily according to the availability of reliable (and English-language)³⁹¹ evidence, and have tried to limit myself to incidents cited in other academic works. It is also important to note that I selected these incidents *before* performing my analysis, in order to avoid any confirmation bias in their selection.

The most common type of atrocities committed by the Zetas were killings (either massacres or targeted assassinations). I group these two types of killing together for simplicity's sake, particularly because targeted killings, although not infrequent, often go unreported.³⁹² Between 2010 and 2012, the Zetas committed a number of high-casualty massacres. On August 23, 2010, in the town of San Fernando in Tamaulipas, the Zetas murdered a group of 72 migrants from Central and South America; according to a survivor, the group was kidnapped, held in a house for a day or so, and then taken outside to be executed. The next day, Mexican Marines discovered the site of the massacre, allegedly committed because the migrants refused to work for the organization or to pay a ransom.³⁹³ The next year, several other massacres were committed in the same town: between March 25 and 29, 2011, Zetas forcibly stopped a number

³⁹¹ I have used some Spanish-language sources, all of which were translated through Google Translate. The quality of automatic translation was a factor in which sources I used.

³⁹² The Spanish-language newspaper network *La Prensa* reported that the Zetas were responsible for at least three high-profile deaths in 2010 and 2011: the killing of a Tamaulipas political candidate, Rodolfo Torre Cantú, on June 28, 2010, only six days before an election; the September 30, 2010 murder of an American tourist, at the border; and the February 14, 2011 murder of a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent in San Luis Potosí. "Los Zetas, Una Cronología de Sangre." *La Prensa*. Accessed March 23, 2017. http://www.prensa.com/mundo/Zetas-cronologia-sangre_0_3193180707.html.

³⁹³ Gustavo Castillo Garcia, "Sobreviviente de La Masacre Afirma Que Los Secuestrados Fueron 76; Dos, Desaparecidos." *La Jornada*. Accessed March 23, 2017. <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/09/03/politica/015n1pol>.

of commercial buses, kidnapping and killing many of the passengers.³⁹⁴ Survivors reported that their bus had been stopped by armed men, who ordered the passengers to pay \$300 USD each.³⁹⁵ The *Houston Chronicle*, relying upon anonymous interviews with a cartel member, claimed that some of the passengers had been forced to fight each other to the death with hammers, machetes, or crude clubs; survivors of the fighting were forcibly recruited to the cartel.³⁹⁶ The cartel member also claimed that female passengers had been kidnapped and raped, and that some had been passed on through the Zetas' human trafficking network. After investigating, Mexican authorities discovered a total of 47 mass graves containing 193 bodies scattered throughout the area.³⁹⁷ However, an activist from the area has claimed that there were graves containing at least 500 more dead that went unreported due to pressure from Mexican government authorities.³⁹⁸ In the same year in Allende, near the Texas border in the state of Coahuila, the Zetas abducted and killed several hundred people—the friends and extended families of two men who were alleged to have “betrayed” the cartel in some way—mortaring, burning, and bulldozing their houses afterwards. The bodies went undiscovered for three years. In 2014, estimates of the number of dead sat between 300 and 500, with as many as 40 families killed.³⁹⁹ On August 25, 2011, five

³⁹⁴ “Caso San Fernando: La Hipótesis de Los Autobuses Secuestrados Se Fortalece.” *Expansión*. Accessed March 23, 2017. <http://expansion.mx/nacional/2011/04/08/caso-san-fernando-se-fortalece-la-hipotesis-de-los-autobuses-secuestrados>.

³⁹⁵ “Militares Localizan Cuatro Fosas Con 16 Cadáveres Más En Tamaulipas.” *Expansión*. Accessed March 23, 2017. <http://expansion.mx/nacional/2011/04/10/militares-localizan-cuatro-fozas-con-16-cadaveres-mas-en-tamaulipas>.

³⁹⁶ Dane Schiller. “Mexican Crook: Gangsters Arrange Fights to Death for Entertainment.” *Houston Chronicle*. Accessed March 23, 2017. <http://www.chron.com/news/nation-world/article/Mexican-crook-Gangsters-arrange-fights-to-death-1692716.php>.

³⁹⁷ “Body Count in San Fernando Now at 193.” *Brownsville Herald*. Accessed March 23, 2017. http://www.brownsvilleherald.com/news/valley/article_db219594-28ad-5aa2-bc00-75c15ad8b739.html.

³⁹⁸ “En San Fernando Hay Fosas Con 500 Muertos Más: Wallace.” Accessed March 23, 2017. <https://www.elsiglodetorreon.com.mx/noticia/654174.en-san-fernando-hay-fozas-con-500-muertos-mas-wallace.html>.

³⁹⁹ “Tracing the Missing.” *The Economist*. Accessed March 23, 2017. <http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21604162-many-thousands-disappeared-mexicos-drug-war-government-should-do-more-find>.

armed members of the Zetas entered the Casino Royale in Monterrey, and, as patrons hid in the bathrooms, they doused the interior of the casino with gasoline, setting the building on fire before escaping. Fifty-two people were killed; the attack was allegedly ordered because the casino's owner refused to pay the Zetas protection money.⁴⁰⁰

In addition to massacres, kidnappings were common. In addition to the massacres listed above in which kidnapping was an element,⁴⁰¹ the Zetas kidnapped a number of other civilians for the purposes of ransoming, forced labor, recruitment into the gang, or human trafficking. A number of the victims were Central American migrants attempting to reach the United States; in 2010, over 1000 such migrants were kidnapped.⁴⁰² In April 2010, Zeta members kidnapped seven people from hotels in Monterrey.⁴⁰³ Often, authorities would raid a suspected Zeta safehouse and discover kidnapped victims inside, as was the case in a September 2 raid in Ciudad Meir, Tamaulipas, when police attacked a Zetas compound and discovered three kidnapped people inside.⁴⁰⁴ On October 28 of that year, Mexican marines rescued another eight kidnapping victims from an abandoned house apparently controlled by the Zetas; along with the victims, the marines found a significant cache of arms and ammunition.⁴⁰⁵ On October 17, 2011, the Mexican army announced that it had freed 61 men who had been kidnapped and used as

⁴⁰⁰ "The Monterrey Massacre: A New Nadir in Mexico's Drug War." *The Guardian*, September 1, 2011.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/sep/01/mexico-monterrey-drug-war>.

⁴⁰¹ I classify these as massacres because the "kidnapping" element of the crime seems to serve little purpose besides moving the victims to a more convenient place in which to kill them. However, it should be noted that there is a strong possibility that not all who were taken in the 2011 San Fernando killings were killed at the identified massacre site.

⁴⁰² "Marines free 8 kidnapped by Zetas in northern Mexico." *EFE World News Service*, October 28, 2010. *General OneFile* (accessed March 23, 2017).

http://libraries.state.ma.us/login?gwurl=http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=ITOF&sw=w&u=mmln_m_tufts&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA240730402&sid=summon&asid=aef24008a8babccf9f6c13183c1c87bb.

⁴⁰³ *Armed Conflict Database*.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰⁵ A week before the eight victims were freed, authorities rescued a group of twenty-two victims, all migrants from Honduras, from a house in Villahermosa, the capital of Tabasco. Although the identity and affiliation of the kidnappers was not included in the report, the Zetas were known to have extensive operations in Tabasco at this time. "Marines free 8 kidnapped by Zetas in northern Mexico."

forced laborers for the Zetas in Piedras Negras, Coahuila.⁴⁰⁶ In 2012, Mexican federal police made a similar bust, laying siege to a Zetas compound in Saltillo and eventually rescuing ten kidnapping victims, who had been held in “unsanitary conditions and had their faces covered,” along with a large store of materiel.⁴⁰⁷ A report drawing on Mexican government data, released on December 31, 2011, stated that 15% of all kidnappings in Mexico between 2006 and 2011 were committed by the Zetas or their affiliates.⁴⁰⁸

Finally, the Zetas were linked to a number of bombings in densely populated areas; sometimes, hand-held weapons were used, but car bombings also became a common tactic in the 2010-2012 period. Car bombings were particularly common in the cities of Juarez, in Chihuahua, and Victoria and Nuevo Laredo, in Tamaulipas. Notably, these three cities were the sites of major turf wars between the Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel (Juarez and Nuevo Laredo) or the Gulf cartel (Victoria). A number of bombings were linked to the Zetas during that time, due to operational similarities with known Zeta capabilities; however, in some cases it is impossible to conclusively assign responsibility to the group, as many of the bombs were remotely detonated.⁴⁰⁹ In some cases, however, messages left at or near the blast sites left clues as to the identity of the perpetrators. Also of note is that bombings rarely targeted cartel members, who were mostly killed execution-style, with the bodies publically displayed alongside *narco-mantas* or *narco-pintas* (painted messages). Rather, the majority of bombings targeted the police,

⁴⁰⁶ *Armed Conflict Database*.

⁴⁰⁷ "Mexico busts Zetas cell, rescues 10 kidnap victims." *EFE World News Service*, August 11, 2012. *General OneFile* (accessed March 24, 2017). http://libraries.state.ma.us/login?gwurl=http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=ITOF&sw=w&u=mlin_m_tufts&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA299301280&sid=summon&asid=00a318a827f2717a163e15c8584ce751.

⁴⁰⁸ *Armed Conflict Database*.

⁴⁰⁹ Samuel Logan. "Preface: Los Zetas and a New Barbarism." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 5 (December 1, 2011): 718–27. doi:10.1080/09592318.2011.620809.

military, or government locations.⁴¹⁰ Bombings of other types were rather sporadically carried out, using thrown or remotely detonated explosives; on August 31, 2010, for example, a bar in Cancún was firebombed by Zetas, killing eight, in retaliation for the owner refusing to pay a protection fee.⁴¹¹ Other cities that experienced bombings linked to the Zetas include Monterrey, Reynosa, Matamoros, Acapulco, Turreon, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosi, and Guadalajara.⁴¹²

Evaluation

In this section, I evaluate whether or not the atrocities committed by the Zetas in Mexico between 2010 and 2012 were strategic in nature, and, if so, attempt to deduce the particular operating logic behind them. I then weigh the evidence in favor of my evaluations against evidence supporting alternative explanations (that the atrocities committed by the Zetas were not primarily strategic in nature). If Zeta atrocities were committed strategically, they could reflect this fact in a number of ways—most importantly, in the presence of a consistent operating procedure among those carrying out the atrocities, as well as other, more direct evidence of specific targeting of victims or the carrying out of orders (the direct presence of group elites, etc.). The violence itself, likewise, would be relatively consistent from incident to incident, as wild inconsistencies would be more indicative of random, dysfunctional violence than strategic atrocities.

⁴¹⁰ I code these bombings as being atrocities despite being committed against some military targets for a number of reasons. First, the targets, despite including military personnel, were mixed groups of civilian police and military, which I interpret as being primarily civilian in nature. Second, the bombings took place in civilian contexts—police stations in large cities, etc.—where, even if military forces were operating, they would be working under strictly limited rules of engagement that would effectively render them indistinguishable from civilian police in terms of potential action. In short, the simple designation of military versus nonmilitary is insufficient to determine whether military personnel are a “legitimate” target; context is required. Adam L. Dulin and Jairo Patiño. “The Logic of Cartel Car Bombings in México.” *Trends in Organized Crime* 17, no. 4 (December 1, 2014): 271–89. doi:10.1007/s12117-014-9230-z.

⁴¹¹ *Armed Conflict Database*.

⁴¹² “Preface: Los Zetas and a New Barbarism.”

The available evidence suggests that the vast majority of atrocities committed by the Zetas between 2010 and 2012 were strategic in nature. Kidnappings, for example, are almost always strategic, due to the nature of the act; in the case of the Zetas, the combination of their repeated pattern of kidnappings and the fact that victims were regularly rescued from locations where they were stored as “contraband,”⁴¹³ of a sort, are good indications of a strategy being played out through the kidnappings, even if that strategy is as simple as plunder. Similarly, the scope and target-set of bombings—which were limited to urban areas being contested by two or more cartels, and were almost exclusively aimed at Mexican government forces—suggests that they were perpetrated with strategic intent.⁴¹⁴

Finally, the manner in which the massacres were conducted suggests that they were conducted with strategic intent. The killers’ methodology provide some clues: in the case of some massacres, the killers were careful to move their victims to isolated areas,⁴¹⁵ and attempted to extract bribes from the victims.⁴¹⁶ In many cases, the Zetas followed up the killings by carefully burying bodies in a number of gravesites.⁴¹⁷ As noted above, activists suspect that the number of bodies unearthed in certain areas of particular Zeta activity only scratch the surface in terms of the potential total number of victims.⁴¹⁸ While efforts to hide bodies are surely an attempt to obfuscate the true number of dead, such efforts do not necessarily arise from a desire to escape criminal prosecution—the perpetrators were readily identified, in many cases, and killings were often committed in areas where only the Zetas were known to be operating in any significant

⁴¹³ See above examples.

⁴¹⁴ “The Logic of Cartel Car Bombings in Mexico.”

⁴¹⁵ See both the 2010 and 2011 San Fernando massacres; in both cases, the killers moved their victims to isolated areas or safehouses before committing the killings.

⁴¹⁶ “Caso San Fernando: La Hipótesis de Los Autobuses Secuestrados Se Fortalece.”

⁴¹⁷ This is a common behavior among mass killers: while the 1995 genocide at Srebrenica is the most famous example of such, it has also been observed among ISIS mass killers (see Chapter 6).

⁴¹⁸ “En San Fernando Hay Fosas Con 500 Muertos Más: Wallace.”

capacity.⁴¹⁹ Rather, the obfuscation appears to be intended to reinforce the authority of the cartel, indicating that its members could make untold numbers of people disappear with impunity. This explains a particular behavior observed in the Allende case, where there is evidence that the cartel killed people who later investigated the empty houses of the victims, even though the culpability of the Zetas in the massacres was certain; rather than killing to obscure guilt, the cartel killed, in this case, to reinforce their continued influence in the town.⁴²⁰

The killings were also not random. In multiple cases, the Zetas are suspected of having committed massacres in retribution for perceived offenses: in the case of the Monterrey casino massacre, the owner allegedly owed money to the Zetas;⁴²¹ in the case of the 2010 San Fernando massacre, the Central American migrants targeted by the Zetas had allegedly refused to work for the cartel;⁴²² the victims of the Allende massacre in 2011 were all affiliated with two men who had allegedly “betrayed” the cartel.⁴²³ This, combined with the repeated and widespread nature of the massacres,⁴²⁴ indicates that a strategy was likely being played out through the killings.

What, then, were the strategies of atrocity pursued by the Zetas between 2010 and 2012? The atrocities detailed above are best explained as being part of strategies of plunder, deterring civilian defection, and coercion by denial, as I detail below.

⁴¹⁹ “Caso San Fernando: La Hipótesis de Los Autobuses Secuestrados Se Fortalece.”

⁴²⁰ “Tracing the Missing.”

⁴²¹ “The Monterrey Massacre: A New Nadir in Mexico’s Drug War.”

⁴²² “Sobreviviente de La Masacre Afirma Que Los Secuestrados Fueron 76; Dos, Desaparecidos.”

⁴²³ “Tracing the Missing.”

⁴²⁴ This is crucial: if the massacres were not widespread, motives of revenge or punishment would be nonstrategic; however, these “punishments” were regularly doled out, with a similar operating principle each time. While isolated incidents of revenge killings are nonstrategic, repeated instances of such committed by the same actor over a large area are likely a strategy at play.

Plunder and deterring civilian defection

The major strategy of the Zetas—the strategic prerogative from which other sub-strategies flow—was one of plunder. The Zetas were, at heart, a profit-making enterprise; while they engaged in a number of other activities (some of which bordered on state-building), their overall purpose was to extract wealth not only from their core trafficking business, but also from numerous sources of potential side payments in the territory they controlled. The vast majority, if not all, of their behaviors stem from the strategic mandate of plunder.

As noted above, the Zetas prioritized territorial control to a degree much more significant than that of other cartel organizations. This territorial control, in turn, allowed the Zetas access to significant streams of revenue beyond those generated by trafficking; the Zetas took cuts from both licit and illicit business ventures operating in their territory, even those as limited in scope as the theft and resale of used clothing.⁴²⁵ This, along with their standard operations, made the Zetas, however briefly, perhaps the most powerful and profitable criminal organization in the world.⁴²⁶ While the Zetas did construct a kind of “narco-state” in the territories they controlled, the point of those efforts was not to control a state of their own in the manner of some politically-oriented non-state actors; rather, the construction of the “narco-state” was merely the most efficient means of executing their overarching strategy of plunder.⁴²⁷ Control of this narco-state was achieved through mass violence intended to deter civilian efforts to resist being plundered.

Although the Zetas were weak relative to the Mexican and American governments (and were not, it must be noted, a hegemonic force even relative to their fellow criminal organizations

⁴²⁵ “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

⁴²⁶ Michael Ware. “Los Zetas Called Mexico’s Most Dangerous Drug Cartel.” *CNN*. Accessed March 21, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/americas/08/06/mexico.drug.cartels/index.html>.

⁴²⁷ “Cartel Evolution Revisited,” 32.

in Mexico), they were able to maintain territorial control through brutality to deter civilian defection, in line with Kalyvas's model of civil war violence.⁴²⁸ In that model, armed groups in internal conflicts deter defection through varying degrees of targeted violence: in zones of strong control, groups can use very selective violence or positive inducements to guarantee civilian cooperation and deter defection to the enemy; in zones of weaker or fragmented control, groups have less capacity to act discriminately and so are forced to use cheaper, less discriminate violence.⁴²⁹

The problem with directly applying this model of civil war violence to explain atrocities committed by the Zetas, of course, is that Kalyvas's conception of territorial sovereignty as formulated in the context of "normal" civil wars, where two or more primarily political actors struggle for control of a polity, varying in capacity and level of territorial control from internationally legally recognized states to underground insurgencies. In the case of the Mexican "Drug War" and the Zetas in particular, however, this dynamic does not necessarily apply. Powerful cartels like the Zetas or Sinaloa are weak actors relative to the states in which they operate, having only a few hundred to thousand core members and relying almost exclusively on footsoldiers and small arms to conduct kinetic action, but also operate over wide areas and across borders, and even possess a certain amount of soft power.

Observers have noted that core Zeta territories were often extremely quiet, almost peaceful, with cartel members overtly operating alongside Mexican government and civil society institutions; the Zetas advertised the benefits of membership in the group, bribed officials willing to cooperate, and even organized protests against government overreach alongside civilian

⁴²⁸ See Chapter 2 or Chapter 3: Algeria for more detailed descriptions of this theoretical model.

⁴²⁹ *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars*.

activists.⁴³⁰ However, this seemingly strong control by the Zetas was also easily broken—because other cartels also operated below and around the scope of state authority, peaceful areas could become contested with little warning and without any sort of territorial sensibility.⁴³¹

Because of this particular dynamic of the conflict, the intensity and indiscriminateness of Zeta killings undertaken in response to perceived defections does not appear to modulate according to level of territorial control in the same way as the level of target discrimination may change in other conflicts.⁴³² While the level of discrimination, or lack thereof, may in fact modulate based on other factors—the notoriety of targets, the potential for blowback, etc.—I do not have complete-enough data to make a conclusive confirmation or denial of such mechanisms at this time. Rather, I contend that while discrimination *appears* not to modulate, this is not, in fact, due to the presence of alternate causal mechanisms to those described by Kalyvas. Instead, the reason that Zeta violence in response to perceived defections does not change was because, despite appearances, their narco-state was actually fairly fragile. Although Zeta territorial control appeared to be absolute at times, it could (and in many places, did) fall apart extremely quickly. As such, the Zetas *almost always* lacked the capacity to punish defection with extremely discriminate measures,⁴³³ instead using broad massacres to deter civilian defection.

It should also be noted that “defection” in this case, does not necessarily denote defection to the Mexican government. The Zetas were not necessarily exclusively combative towards the government, as a whole, using bribery and intimidation to hijack or exist alongside civil society

⁴³⁰ “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

⁴³¹ That is to say that the territorial control of the Zetas was challenged by the Mexican government and other cartels in ways that don’t make sense in the context of standard geographies of conflict; while even in other internal conflicts territory can be (generally) delineated, territorial control in this context was significantly more fluid. *Armed Conflict Database*.

⁴³² See Chapter 3: Algeria.

⁴³³ Mostly for particularly notorious individuals who would be easy to conclusively identify as a defector (such as politicians), or for members of opposing cartels, who would not only be known to the Zetas but also whose deaths would likely receive very little attention from government forces.

in some areas, and, of course, were also often engaged in combat with other cartels.⁴³⁴ Therefore, “civilian defection,” in this instance, can denote not only straightforward defection to the government or other cartels, but also includes civilian resistance to Zeta plunder, as was the case for the 2010⁴³⁵ and 2011⁴³⁶ San Fernando massacres, as well as the 2011 Monterrey casino fire massacre.⁴³⁷ However, as in the case of the 2011 Allende kidnappings and massacre, large numbers of civilians were killed as punishment for defection in the standard sense, as well.⁴³⁸

In addition to the above dynamic of a narco-state organized through violence in order to better facilitate ongoing plunder, the Zetas also engaged in other behaviors that I classify as plunder. The widespread kidnapping engaged in by the Zetas, for example, was the plunder of human capital: the Zetas regularly kidnapped civilians from areas under their control,⁴³⁹ in some cases attempting to use them as cheap manpower,⁴⁴⁰ forced labor,⁴⁴¹ or as goods for the human trafficking element of their business.⁴⁴² In many cases, the victims of Zeta kidnappings were migrants, making them easy targets.⁴⁴³ There was little downside to kidnapping migrants for the Zetas, who could reasonably expect that government authorities would likely put little effort into investigating their disappearances.

⁴³⁴ ““The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

⁴³⁵ In this case, the migrants kidnapped and killed by the Zetas had refused to work as forced laborers for the cartel. “Sobreviviente de La Masacre Afirma Que Los Secuestrados Fueron 76; Dos, Desaparecidos.”

⁴³⁶ Which involved the kidnapping and killing of civilian travelers who had refused to pay bribes to Zetas, alongside alleged kidnapping for more straightforward purposes of plunder. “Caso San Fernando: La Hipótesis de Los Autobuses Secuestrados Se Fortalece.”

⁴³⁷ The casino’s owner had allegedly refused to pay the Zetas protection money. The Monterrey Massacre: A New Nadir in Mexico’s Drug War.”

⁴³⁸ “Tracing the Missing.”

⁴³⁹ See “Atrocities, 2010-2012” above.

⁴⁴⁰ “Mexican Crook: Gangsters Arrange Fights to Death for Entertainment.”

⁴⁴¹ “Sobreviviente de La Masacre Afirma Que Los Secuestrados Fueron 76; Dos, Desaparecidos.”

⁴⁴² “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

⁴⁴³ “Tracing the Missing.”

Alternative Explanation(s)

What evidence is there that the Zetas were not perpetrating atrocities in accordance with a strategy of plunder (specifically to deter civilian defection from their narco-state)? Very little. Few credible alternative explanations for the Zetas' observed behavior exist; while revenge may be a credible explanation for some massacres, it is a nonsensical motive for others (the 2010 San Fernando massacre of Central American migrants, for example), and the methodology of many prominent massacres would seem to preclude tactical myopia by a local commander as a possible explanation. As the Zeta organization did place significant social currency in violent behavior by its soldiers,⁴⁴⁴ there is some possibility that intragroup dynamics of outbidding and one-upsmanship did create increasingly intense cycles of mass violence; however, the tight control over the group's activities exercised by the Zetas' leaders, Lazcano and Trevino, would seem to rule out the existence of the kind of internal power vacuum that would lead to such a dynamic.

Coercion by denial

I contend that car bombings perpetrated by the Zetas were committed as part of a strategy of coercion by denial in order to deter the Mexican government from undertaking high-intensity operations against the Zetas and other cartels in contested cities like Juarez, Victoria, and Nuevo Laredo. By attacking the Mexican government presence in these contested cities (primarily in the form of police units or facilities, although military units were also targeted),⁴⁴⁵ the Zetas were attempting to alter the strategic calculus of the government and compel them by denial, essentially convincing them that the probability of victory in anti-cartel operations was low and that withdrawal—essentially leaving the cartels to fight it out amongst each other—would be a

⁴⁴⁴ “The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State.”

⁴⁴⁵ “The Logic of Cartel Car Bombings in Mexico.”

significantly smarter option. This fits with the classic definition of coercion by denial as a use of force that attempts to change an enemy's calculations of the probability of victory or defeat; coercion by denial "seek[s] to make resistance to the coercer look futile instead of prohibitively painful" as in coercion by punishment.⁴⁴⁶

Notably, car bombings were a relatively new tactic in the conflict between cartels, having only been observed starting in 2010.⁴⁴⁷ They were also observed almost exclusively in urban areas, and mostly directed at government forces.⁴⁴⁸ Although the explosive devices used were low-yield and crude compared to the sophisticated VBIEDs encountered in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, they were still fairly successful in reinforcing the ability of the cartels to embrace new tactics and technologies, and, importantly, gave government planners reason to project the significant growth in VBIED capabilities on the part of the cartels.⁴⁴⁹ In addition, the car bombings did alter the strategic calculus of government forces: the mayor of Ciudad Juarez, speaking in 2010 after the first few IED attacks, said that the Mexican government "will have to change the way we operate. We've started changing all our protocols, to include bomb situations."⁴⁵⁰

Conclusion

I find that, between 2010 and 2012, the "Los Zetas" cartel committed massacres, kidnappings, and bombings against civilian targets for strategic purposes, as states do. Furthermore, I find that the strategies of atrocity used by the Zetas are highly similar to those that

⁴⁴⁶ Karl Mueller. "Strategies of Coercion: Denial, Punishment, and the Future of Air Power." *Security Studies* 7, no. 3 (March 1, 1998): 182–228. doi:10.1080/09636419808429354.

⁴⁴⁷ "The Logic of Cartel Car Bombings in Mexico."

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ John P. Sullivan. "Explosive Escalation? Reflections on the Car Bombing in Ciudad Juarez." *Small Wars Journal* (July 21, 2010). Accessed March 31, 2017. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/explosive-escalation>.

⁴⁵⁰ "Explosive Escalation?"

state actors have employed in the past: plunder is an extremely common strategy among state actors, particularly when conducted through the artifice of a quasi-state social formation (which allows for ongoing plunder, rather than one-time and violent seizure of capital).⁴⁵¹ Detering civilian defection (in this case, away from the Zetas' criminal quasi-state) through violence is, of course, a common practice among states; even this particular conception of violence as coercing civilians into cooperation with a state explicitly built around plunder is not far off from a number of historical examples of state behavior.⁴⁵²

There is also some evidence to support the use of these strategies as a last resort, as postulated in part B of my second hypothesis: "Group elites will order their groups to commit atrocities when they have generally exhausted less costly options⁴⁵³ for protecting that interest." Although plunder was always the operating principle of the Zetas, evidence exists that large-scale violence was not a first resort to maintain order in the narco-state: bribery of Mexican government officials was, of course, common, and the Zetas took pains to maintain the public image of being, at the very least, generous to those that collaborated with them.⁴⁵⁴ However, other atrocities like kidnappings were regularly committed as part of their strategy of plunder. Therefore, I cannot conclusively confirm or refute the assertions of part B of my second hypothesis.

What do these findings mean in terms of generalizable warning signs? As is the case with state actors, non-state actors that actively seek to maintain some kind of social order (however

⁴⁵¹ My conception of plunder as being distinct from pillage/looting/theft is borrowed from Ta-Nehisi Coates, who initially used the term to describe policies in the United States which allowed for the large-scale extraction of wealth from black communities. See Chapter 3: Angola for more details.

⁴⁵² Ta-Nehisi Coates. "When Plunder Becomes a System of Governance." *The Atlantic*, October 25, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/10/when-plunder-becomes-a-system-of-governance/280885/>.

⁴⁵³ I.e., diplomatic efforts, coercive threats, targeted or selective use of force, etc.

⁴⁵⁴ "The Zetas: Gangster Kings of Their Own Brutal Narco-State."

rudimentary) in the service of key aims will react with violence to challenges to that order; in this case in particular, the level of threat to that order determines the ferocity of the response. It is also worth noting that the Mexican “Drug War” is quite lengthy (it is, to a lesser extent than previous, still ongoing) and was, particularly when the Zetas were at their height, a rather crowded battlefield. While I have found no conclusive evidence that Zetas committed atrocities as part of a policy of last resort or in an effort to outbid other groups during my time period,⁴⁵⁵ the potential impact of these factors on the strategic calculus of Zeta elites is logically sound. Finally, the Zetas were a highly committed actor, particularly relative to the Mexican government; this characteristic may also hold predictive value.

⁴⁵⁵ Although it should be noted that the Zetas’ reputation for brutality was one of their initial trademarks, helping them stand out in a crowded criminal landscape. “A Profile of Los Zetas.”

Chapter Six

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, 2014-2015

Introduction

In the summer of 2014, the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (*al-Sham* in the original Arabic),⁴⁵⁶ formerly referred to by President Barack Obama as the “jayvee team” for Al Qaeda, burst out of the hinterlands in northern Iraq and Syria. It captured the major city of Mosul, broke thousands of former jihadist fighters out of prisons, caused mass defections among the Iraqi army, and came within miles of the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.⁴⁵⁷ At the same time as the group’s territory expanded to roughly the size of Great Britain, its ranks swelled with tens of thousands of fighters, including disillusioned and disenfranchised Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis, former Baathist officers from the toppled Hussein regime, and a disconcertingly large number of foreign fighters from Europe, Australia, and North America—thousands joining the group every year.⁴⁵⁸ More than the strategic surprise of its emergence, Western publics were captivated and appalled by the level of barbarity ISIS seemed capable of inflicting: graphic videos of beheadings and immolations of captives, mass executions of captured enemy fighters, and the attempted mass starvation of thousands of the Yazidi ethnic minority, besieged on Mount Sinjar in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴⁵⁹

Despite a massive and, at times, contentious public and political debate on how to best prevent ISIS atrocities and ultimately destroy the group, little thought has been given as to why they even commit atrocities in the first place. In this chapter, I intend to fill that gap in the discourse; I evaluate atrocities committed by ISIS between mid-2014 and early 2015 in order to

⁴⁵⁶ The group is also referred to as the Islamic State, ISIL, or *Daesh*. I use these terms interchangeably throughout.

⁴⁵⁷ Graeme Wood. “What ISIS Really Wants.” *The Atlantic*, March 2015.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

determine whether or not they were committed with strategic intent, seeking also to determine if the atrocities were committed at the direction of group elites and as last resorts, per my second hypothesis. To that end, I first provide a short history of the so-called Islamic State, along with a brief description of its ideology. I then examine various atrocities committed by the group at the height of its power, from the summer of 2014 through the fall and winter, when a US-led coalition began to apply pressure on the group through a coordinated campaign of aerial bombing, Special Forces operations, and coordinated assaults by local partners, including the Kurdish *peshmerga* militias, Syrian moderate rebels, Iraqi Shia militias, remnants of the Iraqi Army, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.⁴⁶⁰ During this time, ISIS committed a number of mass atrocities that fit my working definition of the term: these include mass executions of captured Iraqi Army personnel, the attempted starvation of Yazidi refugees on Mount Sinjar, mass killings in Yazidi and Kurdish villages, and the large-scale sexual exploitation and enslavement of Yazidi women and girls.

I focus on ISIS actions in 2014-2015 not only because of the number of atrocities committed during this period, but also because it is one in which the group's strategic priorities (and their situation) should have drastically shifted from consolidating power and territorial control to defending themselves against a large and highly capable adversary—if the group was committing atrocities along the lines of a larger strategic logic, then this drastic shift in circumstances may be reflected in their actions in that area.

In examining these atrocities, I make an evaluation as to whether they were committed with any strategic logic and intent—and, if so, make inferences as to what that strategic logic was. I then weigh these evaluations against any evidence that may lend credence to alternative

⁴⁶⁰ “What ISIS Really Wants.”

explanations—that the group committed atrocities primarily because of individual-level factors, dysfunctional group dynamics, or other non-strategic causes. I conclude this chapter by summarizing my findings and briefly looking toward their potential usefulness in terms of formulating warning signs of impending mass atrocity.

The Roots and Rise of ISIS

In this section, I provide a brief history of ISIS, starting with its formation as al-Qaeda in Iraq, its growth during the US-led invasion, occupation, and later troop surge, and its transformation into its current form. This summary is meant not only to contextualize the atrocities I address in later sections, but to ground my analysis of ISIS strategies within the group's history.

The group now known as ISIS can be traced back to the al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq (hereafter referred to as AQI, in order to differentiate it from the command cell of the organization, which I will refer to as al-Qaeda) that itself has its origins in Jordan and Afghanistan during the late 1990s.⁴⁶¹ The organization that eventually became AQI was founded by a Jordanian named Ahmed Fadl al-Nazal al-Khalayleh (better known under the pseudonym Abu Musab al-Zarqawi), who, upon release from a Jordanian prison in 1999, traveled to Afghanistan and opened a terrorist training facility near the Iranian border with financing from al-Qaeda's central command and personal approval from the Taliban's Mullah Omar.⁴⁶²

In 2002, Zarqawi and his fighters left Afghanistan and entered northern Iraq, hooking up with the more established jihadist organization Ansar al-Islam, a group known for its extensive operations in Iraqi Kurdistan, and rumored to have links to Saddam Hussein's regime as a result

⁴⁶¹ Charles R. Lister. *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*. London: Hurst & Company, 2015. 261.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

of his conservative “Faith Campaign” of the early 1990s.⁴⁶³ During the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, Zarqawi’s organization was one of the first actors to launch attacks on foreign forces, detonating vehicle bombs at the Jordanian embassy, the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq offices, and the city of Najaf’s Shia Imam Ali Mosque in August 2003.⁴⁶⁴ Even at this time, Zarqawi and his group’s mission was deeply anti-Shia, whom he “perceived to be the greatest threat to Sunni power in Iraq and the wider Middle East... [and to] the establishment of an Islamic state that would take root in Iraq and expand across the Islamic world.”⁴⁶⁵ In the last personal statement released before his death, Zarqawi referred to the Shia as “apostates” and called for their “total annihilation.”⁴⁶⁶

As the insurgency in Iraq grew, Zarqawi’s group continued its campaign of suicide bombings against coalition forces and Iraq’s Shia communities, and in 2004 adopted its now-infamous habit of publically broadcasting the beheadings of captured Westerners.⁴⁶⁷ Zarqawi, likely seeking greater levels of material support and public infamy, and in spite of “differences in strategy and outlook between Bin Laden, Zawahiri and [himself],” formally pledged allegiance (*bay’a*) to al-Qaeda in 2004, rebranding his organization as AQI.⁴⁶⁸ Under al-Qaeda’s auspices (although with substantial disagreements between Zarqawi and Bin Laden/Zawahiri on the issue of inflicting civilian casualties on Muslim populations), AQI attracted the support of many smaller jihadist organizations, eventually becoming one of the most powerful insurgent actors in

⁴⁶³ *The Syrian Jihad*, 263.

⁴⁶⁴ *The Syrian Jihad*, 264.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ *The Syrian Jihad*, 265.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

Iraq, and taking one step closer to Zarqawi's goal of establishing a territorially-defined Islamic state based in northwest Iraq's "Sunni heartlands."⁴⁶⁹

However, in June of 2006, Zarqawi and a close confidant were killed by US Special Forces in the town of Baqubah.⁴⁷⁰ Soon afterward, the group named a new leader, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, who, in response to concerns from al-Qaeda leadership, began to reach out to lower-level Sunni insurgent groups and tribal leaders, who, weary of AQI's brutality, had begun to move into Baghdad's orbit.⁴⁷¹ Shortly later, AQI restyled itself once again as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), and announced the appointment of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as *emir al-mu'minin*, a highly esteemed title usually "reserved for caliphs."⁴⁷² As ISI continued to consolidate its control of territory in northern and western Iraq and to implement its extremely harsh domestic vision, Iraq's tribal Sunni communities tired of its extreme violence formed Sahwa (or Awakening) Councils and began a campaign of armed resistance to ISI in conjunction with the Iraqi Army and US troops.

In the face of this combined front, ISI began to hemorrhage territory, abandoning its territorial model, adopting the mostly-underground tactics of a typical terrorist organization, and moving its base of operations to Mosul, where it retained extensive networks.⁴⁷³ ISI retaliated by targeting Sunni Sahwa Councils as well as enemy insurgent groups, and, notably, ethnic minorities it saw as being dangerous to its project—in August 2007, ISI used suicide bombs to kill roughly 800 people in several Yazidi villages in northern Iraq.⁴⁷⁴ However, these desperate efforts were insufficient, and by 2010, thirty-four members of ISI's forty-two-person leadership

⁴⁶⁹ *The Syrian Jihad*, 266.

⁴⁷⁰ *The Syrian Jihad*, 266.

⁴⁷¹ *The Syrian Jihad*, 267.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*

⁴⁷³ *The Syrian Jihad*, 268.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

group had been either captured or killed at the hands of the US-led coalition.⁴⁷⁵ In April 2010, when a joint US/Iraqi special forces raid killed Abu Hamza al-Muhajir and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, it looked like the once-powerful group was done for.⁴⁷⁶

As ISI approached the brink of total defeat, however, they were spared—mostly through dumb luck. By mid-2010, the US military had withdrawn a significant number of troops and other assets from Iraq: in August of that year, the US had roughly 50,000 troops remaining in Iraq, deployed in bases away from urban centers; by the end of 2011, only about 700 US personnel remained, mostly civilians in training roles.⁴⁷⁷ As this drawdown occurred, security responsibilities were increasingly shifted to the Iraqi Army, its Federal Police, and local police and security forces, a move that “quickly diminished the potency of the Sahwa militias,” which had come to rely on American operational support.⁴⁷⁸ As US troops left, so did US money, and the sudden reduction in salaries paid to Sahwa fighters left an opening for a still-well-financed ISI to chip away at the forces that had once brought it to the edge of defeat.

As ISI began to operate underground, it changed its tactics, but kept its original end goal of state formation. In response to the effective counter-insurgency tactics used by the US and Iraqi governments, ISI targeted the enemies who had hurt them the most: the Sunni Sahwa militias who had effectively combated ISI on their own turf, and eroded their credibility as a force for Iraq’s Sunni minority. Between 2009 and 2013, strategic towns in contested areas that ISI desired to regain control over saw large numbers of assassinations of Sunni Sahwa members—during that time, for example, “the small but strategic town of Jurf ah Sahkar south of

⁴⁷⁵ *The Syrian Jihad*, 269.

⁴⁷⁶ *The Syrian Jihad*, 270.

⁴⁷⁷ “Timeline: Invasion, Surge, Withdrawal; U.S. Forces in Iraq.” *Reuters*, December 15, 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-usa-pullout-idUSTRE7BE0EL20111215>.

⁴⁷⁸ *The Syrian Jihad*, 269.

Baghdad... saw 46 [Sahwa] members killed.”⁴⁷⁹ A low estimate of the total number of Sahwa members killed between 2009 and 2013 sits at 1,345 deaths—and this number only includes killings that can be conclusively confirmed from media reports.⁴⁸⁰ At the same time as the assassination campaign ramped up, ISI leaders alternated between threatening and cajoling former Sahwa members, with the group’s chief spokesman claiming in 2011 that ISI would never “cease to exist or get bored” with its campaign of revenge killings, while its new emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi offered former Sahwa fighters a chance to “repent and reform” by pledging allegiance to ISI in 2012.⁴⁸¹

As ISI chipped away at Sahwa forces through bribery and assassination, it stepped up its attacks on other forces that had constrained it in the past. In 2012 it launched its “Breaking the Walls” campaign, a major attempt to free former fighters from Iraqi prisons, erode the Iraqi justice system, and consolidate territorial control in Sunni-dominated regions of Iraq. During that year, eight major prison assaults took place, including a successful assault—featuring combined arms tactics that paired light infantry units with suicide bombers and vehicle-based IEDs (VBIED)—on the infamous Abu Ghraib prison that killed 68 Iraqi Security Forces personnel and freed over 500 prisoners.⁴⁸² As ISI was adding to its ranks, it began to degrade the Iraqi government’s capacity to combat the insurgency by assassinating judges and prosecutors, destroying courtrooms and crime labs, and launching attack after attack on the Iraqi Army and police’s “ubiquitous” security checkpoints—a system originally designed by the US occupation force to limit the use of IEDs, but not capable of being maintained by the poorly-equipped and

⁴⁷⁹ “War, Interrupted, Part I: The Roots of the Jihadist Resurgence in Iraq.” *War on the Rocks*, November 5, 2014. <http://warontherocks.com/2014/11/war-interrupted-part-i-the-roots-of-the-jihadist-resurgence-in-iraq/>.

⁴⁸⁰ “War, Interrupted, Part I.”

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² “ISW Blog: Al Qaeda in Iraq’s ‘Breaking the Walls’ Campaign Achieves Its Objectives at Abu Ghraib--2013 Iraq Update #30.” *ISW Blog*, Institute for the Study of War, July 28, 2013. <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2013/07/al-qaeda-in-iraq-walls-campaign.html>.

slow-to-mobilize Iraqi forces.⁴⁸³ These checkpoint attacks—often filmed and broadcast as part of ISI propaganda efforts—not only made for easy training runs for the ISI’s army of small, lightly-armed infantry units, but also helped to degrade the territorial control of the Iraqi government. ISI attackers, leaving the scenes of their hit-and-run surprise attacks, would leave flyers bearing the group’s insignia encouraging other police officers to abandon their duties or risk death.⁴⁸⁴ At other times, higher-ranking police or army officers received threats directly at their homes or through their personal mobile phones.⁴⁸⁵ Between mid-2013 and mid-2014, ISIS stepped up its campaign of targeted assassination of security personnel (Iraqi Army and police) by about 150 percent, leaving those forces frightened and leaderless when the time came for full-scale combat against IS.⁴⁸⁶

As ISI regained its core territories in Iraq, it began to dispatch some of its most trusted, high-ranking members to Syria, where its leadership saw an opportunity to expand in the absence of state control. In 2012, officers dispatched to Syria created the semi-independent group Jabhat al-Nusra (known in the US as the Nusra Front).⁴⁸⁷ However, when, in 2013, ISI once again expanded its operations in Syria and publically announced its intent to reabsorb Jabhat al-Nusra, that group’s leadership refused and split from ISI, realigning itself with al-Qaeda’s core leadership.⁴⁸⁸ Undeterred, ISI continued to expand into Syria, taking away significant amounts of fighters and materiel from al-Nusra, and establishing major presences in Aleppo, Deir ez Zour,

⁴⁸³ “War, Interrupted, Part II: From Prisoners to Rulers.” *War on the Rocks*, November 6, 2014. <http://warontherocks.com/2014/11/war-interrupted-part-ii-from-prisoners-to-rulers/>.

⁴⁸⁴ “Gunmen Kill 27 in Raids on West Iraq Checkpoints.” *Reuters*, March 5, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-attack-idUSTRE82408220120305>.

⁴⁸⁵ *The Syrian Jihad*, 271.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ *The Syrian Jihad*, 270.

⁴⁸⁸ *The Syrian Jihad*, 119.

and Raqqa by the summer of 2013.⁴⁸⁹ To some extent, the dramatic method by which ISI emerged in Syria hurt its initial prospects, as many rebel fighters in the east of the country, well aware of the group's brutal reputation and wary of its intentions, balanced against its emergence, with Islamist rebels forming the united Islamic Front, and moderate rebels tightening the links between the Free Syrian Army's fairly disparate constituent groups.⁴⁹⁰ Although ISI quickly came into conflict with competing rebel groups, it was mostly ignored by the Assad regime, and managed to entrench itself in northeastern Syria, moving its base of operations to the city of Raqqa by the spring of 2014.⁴⁹¹

By 2014, ISI had essentially completed a counter-surge in response to the US troop surge seven years before. In the summer of that year, ISI launched a major assault on northern Iraq, capturing the major city of Mosul, coming within miles of Baghdad and Kirkuk, breaking the back of the Iraqi Army and security forces, and declaring itself to be a new caliphate in June 29—the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ruled by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the fairly complex system of regional governors and military leaders beneath him. I evaluate the period beginning at this time and ending in early 2015—the height of ISIS power and territorial control, just before a US-led international coalition began to combat it—and the atrocities ISIS committed as it consolidated its so-called caliphate.⁴⁹²

⁴⁸⁹ *The Syrian Jihad*, 119.

⁴⁹⁰ *The Syrian Jihad*, 151.

⁴⁹¹ David Ignatius. "How ISIS Spread in the Middle East." *The Atlantic*, October 29, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/how-isis-started-syria-iraq/412042/>.

⁴⁹² For an excellent visual representation of ISIS territory and hotspots of activity leading up to this period, see: Jeremy Ashkenas, Archie Tse, Derek Watkins, and Karen Yourish. "A Rogue State Along Two Rivers." *The New York Times*, July 3, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/07/03/world/middleeast/syria-iraq-isis-rogue-state-along-two-rivers.html>.

The Ideology and Goals of ISIS

The core ideology of ISIS is that of totalitarian theocracy, based upon an apocalyptic, millenarian reading of Salafism, itself a fundamentalist reading of Sunni Islam. Salafism places a high value on the reading and strict observation of all Islamic texts, such as the *hadith*, an exhaustive and lengthy catalogue of the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the vast body of scholarship surrounding the primary texts of the religion. Typical Salafists live quiet lives of “personal purification and religious observance,” and most outside of ISIS territory tend to eschew politics but strictly follow the rules of the societies they live in, in observance of “the Koran’s hatred of discord and chaos.”⁴⁹³

ISIS religious leaders differ in their reading of religious texts, particularly in terms of how one should respond to differences of belief within Islam itself. Therefore, the concept of *takfir* (excommunication; the declaration that someone is an apostate) is central to the ideology of ISIS.⁴⁹⁴ Apostasy, according to ISIS, is far more common than is realized amongst mainstream Islam, and their religious leaders, starting with the spiritual founder of the group, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, have declared massive numbers of people to be *takfiri* based on a number of acts previously unrecognized as worthy of excommunication—even the leadership of al-Qaeda has expressed concern over the group’s sweeping doctrine of *takfir*.⁴⁹⁵ According to ISIS’s religious teachings, a Muslim may become an apostate by “selling alcohol or drugs, wearing Western clothes or shaving one’s beard, voting in an election—even for a Muslim candidate—and being lax about calling other people apostates.”⁴⁹⁶ On a grander scale, ISIS

⁴⁹³ “What ISIS Really Wants.”

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

considers all the members of the Shiite Muslim sect to be apostates—“the Islamic State regards Shiism as innovation, and to innovate on the Koran is to deny its initial perfection.”⁴⁹⁷

According to the teachings of the Islamic State, apostates—including 200 million Shia living around the world, and who comprise an ethnic majority in Iraq—must be killed. Christians and Jews may live as second-class citizens in the Islamic State, so long as they pay a special *jizya* tax.⁴⁹⁸ Members of the Yazidi minority, a Kurdish sect which combines elements of Islam, Christianity, and Persian Zoroastrianism, are considered to be “pagans” and are therefore “fair game for enslavement.”⁴⁹⁹

There is also the overriding importance that the Islamic State places upon creating and preserving a caliphate. This was one of Zarqawi’s most valued goals during the time he ran AQI—the organization placed an outsized importance on taking and holding territory, and later, on maintaining religious purity in that territory through ethnic cleansing and the harsh enforcement of *sharia*, even at the cost of good relations with the central leadership of Al Qaeda and with other insurgent groups in Iraq. ISIS values territorial control so highly because of the religious importance it places upon creating a caliphate which, naturally, requires territory. Followers of the Islamic State regard the establishment of a caliphate as a “communal obligation,” and believe that to die without pledging allegiance to a caliphate is a sin for Muslims.⁵⁰⁰ Furthermore, according to ISIS, there are strict definitions for creating a caliphate which have made past attempts illegitimate: the first is that a caliphate must control territory and strictly enforce its interpretation of Islamic law upon the populace so as to ensure the religious purity of the territory; this requires, among other things, the enslavement of “pagans” and the

⁴⁹⁷ “What ISIS Really Wants.”

⁴⁹⁸ *The Syrian Jihad*, 274.

⁴⁹⁹ “What ISIS Really Wants.”

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

killing of *takfiri* populations.⁵⁰¹ The second key component of a caliphate—one that, in the eyes of IS adherents, has disqualified many past caliphates, including the Ottoman Empire—is that it be led by a member of the Quraysh tribe, which is held to be the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad.⁵⁰² Both the former and current *emirs* Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi were or are supposedly Qurayshi; ISI leadership made a point of broadcasting this fact even during the group’s weakest period between 2009 and 2011.⁵⁰³ So powerful is the perceived commitment to the establishment of a caliphate that, prior to Baghdadi’s June 29th pronouncement to that end, there was a faction within the group that was prepared to “make war against Baghdadi’s group if it delayed further [in the announcement]”—inter-group conflict was barely staved off by reassurances from the group’s high leadership that the caliphate had already been secretly created long before 2014, and by hastening the public announcement of such a fact.⁵⁰⁴

Although public perception of ISIS ideology often focuses on its explicitly genocidal elements (see the prescriptions for Shia or Yazidi mentioned above), perhaps more important is the group’s focus on territorial control. Having gone so far as to establish a caliphate, ISIS has staked its legitimacy on its ability to protect and administer that territory. Its ability to draw recruits, ally with like-minded organizations (such as Nigeria’s Boko Haram), and, as noted just above, maintain internal cohesion is dependent on its territorial control. In addition, practical matters like the group’s funding also stem from its territorial control: while oil/gas revenues are the group’s main source of income, it also levies numerous taxes or fines on civilians within its territory. Therefore, the loss of territory directly leads to loss of money, not to mention the

⁵⁰¹ “What ISIS Really Wants.”

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ *The Syrian Jihad*, 270.

⁵⁰⁴ “What ISIS Really Wants.”

potential manpower or materiel that could be squeezed out of a given area through coercion and looting.⁵⁰⁵

Summer 2014 through January 2015: Atrocities

Beginning in the summer months of 2014, reports began to trickle out from ISIS territory of terrible atrocities, beyond the previously known facts of the execution of Western hostages and mass-casualty suicide bombings. Among the crimes reported include mass executions of civilians in newly-captured ISIS territory, forced conversions of non-Muslims, the abduction and sexual enslavement of women and girls of the Yazidi minority group, and the forced expulsion of non-Sunni minority groups from captured territory. In response, on August 6, 2014, US President Barack Obama authorized a campaign of airstrikes against ISIS militants in Iraq and later, in Syria, to be conducted in cooperation with forces on the ground including Kurdish *peshmerga* militias, the Iraqi Army, US special operators, and other actors.

In this section, I detail a number of atrocities committed against various groups by ISIS in the summer and fall of 2014, as ISIS territory reached, perhaps, its greatest extent and then as it came under siege by a powerful international coalition. Due to the sheer number of atrocities committed during this period, I limit my account to descriptions of particular incidents that give a good sense of what the general types of atrocities committed by ISIS looked like, and I offer statistics indicative of the broader scope of the group's actions. In some cases, due to the unique information dynamics of this ongoing conflict—ISIS, at the time of writing, has not been conclusively defeated—a few dates or times will be imprecise. However, I have made an effort to place them as conclusively as possible, and am confident, on the whole, in the quality of

⁵⁰⁵ Sarah Almukhtar. "Life Under the Islamic State: Fines, Taxes and Punishments." *The New York Times*, May 26, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/05/26/world/middleeast/isis-taxes-fines-revenue.html>.

reporting and general information pertaining to this conflict. It is also important to note that I selected these incidents *before* performing my analysis, in order to avoid the intrusion of any confirmation bias in their selection.

Pre-intervention: June – Early August, 2014

During its campaign in northern Iraq (including the capture of Mosul and extension of zones of attack southward towards Baghdad and eastward into Iraqi Kurdistan) and continuing consolidation of previously captured territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS committed a number of atrocities against several target groups: captured Iraqi and Syrian Army personnel, police officers and other government “collaborators,” members of religious minorities (including the Yazidi and Iraqi Christians), Shia Muslims, and civilians living in occupied areas convicted of “crimes” by ISIS courts. The types of atrocities include mass killings in numbers ranging from less than ten to an estimated over one thousand, forced displacement and seizure of abandoned property, forced deprivation, kidnapping and sexual slavery of women and girls, and the use of child combatants.⁵⁰⁶

Atrocities against captured Iraqi Army (IA) personnel were widely reported in the summer months of 2014. As IA forces collapsed, many soldiers surrendered to ISIS fighters, turning over weapons and materiel. On June 12, 2014, at Camp Speicher in Salah-ad-Din governate, witnesses and survivors reported to UNAMI that roughly 1500 IA personnel were executed by ISIS forces after surrendering and being taken prisoner. Witnesses interviewed by

⁵⁰⁶ In addition, highly-publicized reports from inside ISIS-held territory confirm the regular infliction of extremely cruel punishments or torture, such as beheadings, floggings, stonings, defenestration, and crucifixion as the result of ISIS “judicial” processes. However, the exact timing and numbers of victims associated with the crimes described in these reports cannot be confirmed; therefore, I am unable to include them in my analysis. “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Human Rights Situation in Iraq in the Light of Abuses Committed by the So-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and Associated Groups.” Annual report, *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, March 13, 2015.

UNAMI after the fact attest to “numerous dead bodies in the streets around the military base and in some parts of Tikrit.”⁵⁰⁷ In separate testimony, a UN investigator cited witnesses claiming that ISIS fighters executed the captives by a combination of shooting and beheading, and that some had been “kicking [severed] heads around like footballs.”⁵⁰⁸ On June 16, ISIS fighters captured the town of Tel Afar, executing approximately 170 captured IA soldiers.⁵⁰⁹ On July 28, ISIS released a piece of video propaganda, depicting the executions of “dozens” of IA personnel.⁵¹⁰ At roughly the same time, ISIS continued its campaign of targeted assassinations of Iraqi Army officers, killing an indeterminate number in Mosul and in other areas of control.⁵¹¹

While IA personnel were often executed at the frontlines of ISIS territory, due to being captured during the course of territorial expansion, atrocities committed against other security forces and so-called “collaborators” (including former Sahwa fighters) generally took place in a given town after ISIS had established safe passage in and around it. In June, as ISIS solidified control of Mosul and Tikrit, a number of former police officers were killed by militants, often during house-to-house searches, and witnesses and survivors report that ISIS fighters relied on lists of “collaborators” while conducting the searches.⁵¹² Former police officers reported that ISIS fighters screened civilians at checkpoints in captured towns; upon discovery of their identities, the militants would kill the companions or family members of the officers, leaving the men themselves alive.⁵¹³ While members of government security forces were mostly summarily executed, or subject to retribution against family members, former Sahwa fighters were offered

⁵⁰⁷ “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner.”

⁵⁰⁸ Nick Cumming-Bruce. “United Nations Investigators Accuse ISIS of Genocide Over Attacks on Yazidis.” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/20/world/middleeast/isis-genocide-yazidis-iraq-un-panel.html>.

⁵⁰⁹ *The Syrian Jihad*, 233.

⁵¹⁰ *The Syrian Jihad*, 248.

⁵¹¹ *The Syrian Jihad*, 271.

⁵¹² “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner.”

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

the choice to “repent” by pledging allegiance to ISIS and by paying a large fine (about one million Iraqi dinar, or 850 US dollars), facing execution if they did not assent.⁵¹⁴ On June 10, while attacking Mosul’s Badoush prison, ISIS fighters screened captured inmates for affiliation with Iraqi government forces or with the Sahwa militias, with an indeterminate number of those discovered being executed alongside roughly 600 Shia prisoners.⁵¹⁵

Members of religious minorities were also the targets of atrocity. Notably, ISIS fighters dealt with members of various religious groups in distinctly different ways. The Yazidi, a Kurdish heterodox group widely known as the targets of an attempted mass starvation atop Mount Sinjar, were the targets of particularly brutal ethnic cleansing. Survivors and witnesses from the villages and towns of al-‘Adnaniya, al-Qahtaniya, Barah, Bazwaya, Dogore, Gogjali, Hardan, Khanasor, Qani, Kocho, Sharf ad-Din, Sinjar city, Solagh, Tel Banat, Tel Qasab and Zummar attest that ISIS fighters, upon entering a village or town, would forcibly separate men from women and children, whereupon the men would be driven away from town and executed—in numbers as large as 700 at a time—and women and children would then taken away from the village as slaves.⁵¹⁶ Survivors also report that their captors would force them to convert to Islam, with many men being killed even after converting.⁵¹⁷ In extreme cases, witnesses reported to UNAMI that villages were “completely emptied of their Yezidi [sic] population.”⁵¹⁸ Often, alongside massacres, ethnic cleansing of villages is accomplished through kidnapping: after nearly one hundred men and boys—suspected of being anti-ISIS combatants—were killed in the

⁵¹⁴ “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner.”

⁵¹⁵ *The Syrian Jihad*, 232.

⁵¹⁶ “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner.”

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

village of Qiniyeh on August 3, dozens more women and children were abducted, leaving the village nearly empty.⁵¹⁹

The problem of Yazidi slavery has also been widely reported: as of mid-2015, an estimated 3000 Yazidi women were being held in ISIS captivity.⁵²⁰ As mentioned above, ISIS considers the Yazidi to be fair targets for enslavement due to their unique religious tradition: because they are “pagans” and not apostates or “people of the Book,” they can be enslaved. Yazidi women who have escaped ISIS captivity report being bought and sold as property and being subjected to extremely inhumane and degrading treatment, with rape being highly prevalent under the label of an involuntary and temporary “marriage.”⁵²¹ Girls as young as six years old were reported to have been raped, sold, and raped again by ISIS fighters. Torture was also highly common; one pregnant captive reported being repeatedly tortured and raped by a so-called “doctor,” who at one point tried to kill her unborn child, claiming that “the baby should die because it is an infidel;” other pregnant women were forced to have abortions, as their captors did not “want more Yezidis to be born.”⁵²²

Finally, Yazidi children captured by ISIS fighters have been trained and used as child soldiers. Following their kidnapping from villages in Iraq in the summer of 2014, thousands of Yazidi children were transferred to “schools,” near Tel Afar in Iraq or Raqqa in Syria, and forced to convert to Islam and receive military training.⁵²³ Children were forced to watch graphic videos of torture and beheadings, and were beaten if they refused. Other witnesses in Fallujah and

⁵¹⁹ Amnesty International. Accessed December 6, 2016.

https://www.es.amnesty.org/uploads/media/Iraq_ethnic_cleansing_final_formatted.pdf.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ Amnesty International.

⁵²² “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner.”

⁵²³ Ibid.

Mosul reported seeing teenagers as young as 13 years old manning ISIS checkpoints during the summer of 2014.⁵²⁴

Although Christians and Jews are supposedly protected under ISIS rule, they have also been the target of atrocities, albeit in a different capacity than Shia or Yazidi. Christians have primarily been the victims of forced displacement: by August 6, 2014, some “200,000 Christians and members of other ethnic and religious groups had fled from al-Hamdaniya, Ba’shiqa, Bartella, Tel Keif, and other towns and villages in the Ninewa plains,” fearing brutality or forced conversion at the hands of ISIS fighters.⁵²⁵ Among them were 50,000 Christians who had already fled Mosul when ISIS captured the city in June. In areas where Christians have been unable to pay the *jizya* tax, ISIS fighters have confiscated their valuables—including identity documents like passports and government IDs—and forced them to flee, before seizing their houses and other abandoned property. Finally, ISIS has demonstrated a drive to eliminate Christian cultural artifacts as well: in the city of al-Hamdaniya, witnesses reported that ISIS fighters “pillaged and destroyed buildings in the city including historic Christian cathedrals and churches.”⁵²⁶

Finally, ISIS has pursued a campaign of extreme violence against Iraq’s Shia population. Witnesses from Amerli (Salah ad-Din), Barawjali, Bashir, Jerdghali, Qaranaz in Diyala governorate, and Ba’shika, Bazwaya, Gogjali, Omar Kan in Ninewa governorate report a similar pattern of operation in all their cases: ISIS, upon capturing a town, would destroy Shia religious sites, pillage and destroy abandoned property, and execute many, if not all, of the remaining Shia inhabitants. On June 17, the Shia Turkmen village of Bashir (near Kirkuk) was attacked, with

⁵²⁴ “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner.”

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

over 60 of its inhabitants executed, including women, children, and the elderly.⁵²⁷ In occupied areas, witnesses report Shia residents being stopped at checkpoints and being summarily executed upon discovery. In the aforementioned Badoush prison attack, ISIS fighters organized the prison population by religion, letting Sunnis mostly go free, and executing the prison's entire Shia population in a nearby ravine; survivors were able to escape death by hiding underneath the bodies of men who were already killed.⁵²⁸ When ISIS laid siege to the Shia-majority city of Amerli, starting on June 11, 2014, it quickly cut off supplies of food, water, electricity, and medical services; an indeterminate number of civilians fell ill and died because of contaminated drinking water, and at least two died due to inadequate medical care.⁵²⁹ Throughout the siege (ended in September 2014 by coalition forces), ISIS shelled the city indiscriminately, killing at least six civilians.⁵³⁰

Post-Intervention: Mid-August – December, 2014

After intervention by a US-led international coalition (airstrikes, special operations, and military advisory provided by the US and other NATO member states; ground troops provided by the Iraqi government, Shia paramilitaries, Iranian SRGC, Kurdish *peshmerga* militias, and various Syrian rebel factions), the type and scale of ISIS operations changed in several ways. Attacks against Kurds were drastically increased. Retaliation against Sunni tribes that had allied with coalition forces increased in intensity, and major ISIS operations against Syrian regime forces, who had until then been largely ignored by the militants, began to occur. With ISIS resources occupied in a defensive effort, and with the group therefore unable to continue to take

⁵²⁷ "Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner."

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

and hold territory in Iraq's Shia-dense south, the scale of atrocities against Shia decreased. However, in the still-ISIS-held north, attacks against Yazidis, for example, continued apace. In addition, the mass abduction of civilians, particularly Yazidi but including some Christians, increased in scale starting at roughly the same time as airstrikes commenced—in addition, ISIS propaganda publications began to advertise the enslavement of Yazidi “wives” as an incentive for joining the group.

As ISIS came under attack from Kurdish militias, it retaliated in kind. On September 16, ISIS began to assault the Kurdish town of Kobane, on the Syrian-Turkish border. A large force of ISIS fighters, complete with armor and artillery, moved into sixty villages around the town, driving civilians towards the safety of the city, which ISIS then began to indiscriminately bombard, causing a Kurdish YPG spokesman to warn the international community of “a new genocide, but this time in Kobane.”⁵³¹ As the battle continued in the following months, ISIS began to use less conventional but equally indiscriminate methods, including suicide bombers and VBIEDs.⁵³²

Attacks on Yazidi villages also continued. Witnesses from the town of Kocho reported to Amnesty International that, on August 15, ISIS fighters entered the village and separated the men from women and children; at least 100 men and boys (estimates range as high as 700⁵³³) were taken out into the countryside in trucks and systematically executed, while the women and children were taken away with the ISIS fighters.⁵³⁴ Mass abductions increased in scale: although many of the men missing from Kocho are presumed dead, a video released by ISIS on August

⁵³¹ *The Syrian Jihad*, 289.

⁵³² *The Syrian Jihad*, 312.

⁵³³ “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner.”

⁵³⁴ Amnesty International.

22, 2014, shows “scores” of Yazidi men converting to Islam, many of whom could have originated in Kocho or other villages.

Attacks against anti-ISIS Sunnis ramped up as the Islamic State was put on the defensive. In late October 2014, as villages belonging to the Albu Nimr Sunni tribe in western Iraq—who had previously fought ISIS to a standstill during the summer—were captured, large numbers of civilians were killed by ISIS fighters: on October 28, 48 people, including children, were executed in Hit, and on the following day, 213 tribesmen were executed in al-Furat.⁵³⁵ Tribal leaders who fled to Baghdad said that fighting to take the village had left bodies strewn throughout the streets, and that sources inside the village cooperating with ISIS had provided the militants with a 200-name list of fighters and senior leadership for the tribe, all of whom were marked for death.⁵³⁶

Finally, ISIS retaliated against its military opposition with further mass killings and brutal battlefield tactics. On [date], at Tabqa Air Base in Syria, roughly 200 captured Syrian armed forces personnel were executed, including at least one Lebanese captive.⁵³⁷ On September 22, ISIS forces attacked Iraqi army forces in Anbar with chlorine gas, captured from Syrian stockpiles; at least 300 soldiers were killed.⁵³⁸ In November, ISIS released a propaganda video, detailing the group’s history, and including a sequence in which twenty-two ISIS foreign fighters decapitated an equal number of captured Syrian Army soldiers.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁵ “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner.”

⁵³⁶ “Islamic State Militants Seize Iraq Village, Press Assault on Yazidis.” *Reuters*, October 23, 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-violence-idUSKCN0IC22B20141023>.

⁵³⁷ *The Syrian Jihad*, 258.

⁵³⁸ “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner.”

⁵³⁹ *The Syrian Jihad*, 308.

Evaluation

In this section, I make an evaluation as to whether or not the atrocities committed by the so-called Islamic State during the summer and fall of 2014 were strategic in nature, and attempt to deduce the logic behind them. I then weigh the evidence for this inference against the evidence supporting the alternative explanations: in this case, that the atrocities committed by ISIS were not strategic in nature, and rather were primarily driven by individual greed and violence, or dysfunctional intra-group dynamics. If ISIS atrocities were committed strategically, they could reflect this fact in a number of ways—most importantly, in the presence of a consistent operating procedure among those carrying out the atrocities, as well as other, more direct evidence of specific targeting of victims or the carrying out of orders (the direct presence of group elites, etc.). The violence itself, likewise, would be relatively consistent from incident to incident, as wild inconsistencies would be more indicative of random, dysfunctional violence than strategic atrocities.

It is clear that the vast majority of ISIS atrocities were committed strategically. In the cases of crimes against the Yazidi and Shia, they constitute genocide, having clearly been coordinated attacks intended to destroy the groups. The repeated pattern of atrocity—sizeable units of fighters capturing a village, systematically dividing the men from women and children, and then removing the men to a remote location for execution—bears a chilling resemblance to tactics employed during the genocide at Srebrenica in 1995. Both the US government and UN investigators in Iraq labeled the specific attempt to besiege internally displaced Yazidi on Mount Sinjar as an attempt at genocide,⁵⁴⁰ and the same UN investigators went further in characterizing

⁵⁴⁰ “United Nations Investigators Accuse ISIS of Genocide Over Attacks on Yazidis.”

the entire campaign against the Yazidi, including their extensive use as slaves, as being genocidal in nature.⁵⁴¹

Targeted assassinations of political opponents, meanwhile, have occurred with both a frequency of occurrence and complexity of action that would be impossible without elite guidance—they are inherently instrumental. Finally, the large-scale executions of captured army personnel, while perhaps attributable to the motivations of revenge or bloodlust in smaller-scale incidences, are more convincingly explained as instrumental actions, given the numbers involved—hundreds of captured soldiers (as in the case of the Camp Speicher killing) being executed seems more likely to be a deterrent or coercive effort than a case of their captors deciding independently to slaughter them all.

There is also the observable change between ISIS atrocities committed before and after coalition bombing began in early August. Smoking gun evidence may come in the form of attacks against Syrian military personnel whom, until international military intervention began against ISIS, had been largely left alone by the militants; coming under attack from new foes, ISIS clearly attempted to deter the powers arranged against it by demonstrating its capacity to inflict atrocities against the most powerful infantry force active in the region.⁵⁴² Furthermore, the increase in the pace of abductions of Yazidi civilians (particularly women) may constitute an attempt to deter the coalition through hostage-taking, operating under the logic that air raids would be less likely to target ISIS facilities housing innocent prisoners, therefore forcing the

⁵⁴¹ “United Nations Investigators Accuse ISIS of Genocide Over Attacks on Yazidis.”

⁵⁴² In addition, propaganda videos depicting the beheading of captured Westerners increased in frequency after bombing began. Although these killings fall outside the limits by which I define atrocity, they clearly constitute an attempt to deter Western intervention by creating a highly public moral cost to such actions; many of the videos were personally addressed to leaders of states participating in the bombing campaign, particularly US President Barack Obama.

coalition to either scale down its bombing operations, or switch to costlier, more contestible methods such as ground attacks or special operations raids.

What, then, are the strategies of atrocity that ISIS was pursuing during the summer and fall of 2014? Given ISIS's history, ideology, and the patterns of atrocity recorded during my sample period, there are several intersecting strategies being carried out: ethnic mass killing, plunder, and coercion by terror, all of which would provide ample strategic justification for the atrocities committed by the group during this time.

Ethnic Mass Killing

I believe that ISIS's large-scale, systematic executions of Yazidi and of Shia Muslims are best explained as the consequence of a strategy of ethnic mass killing by the group. This strategy of atrocity, originally defined by Ben Valentino in *Final Solutions*, occurs when a group leader or set of elites comes to view an ethnic, national, or religious group as being fundamentally dangerous to a core strategic end or to their power itself; they therefore attempt to eliminate the threat posed by the group through a campaign of mass killing.⁵⁴³ A number of historical genocides and ethnic cleansing campaigns (including the Holocaust and Armenian Genocide) are best explained as the end results of a strategy of ethnic mass killing.

As noted above, a core component of ISIS ideology is the establishment, purification, and defense of a caliphate—a swath of territory governed by a religious leader and upholding what ISIS considers to be Islamic law. Creating and maintaining such a territory is of paramount importance to the group, both as a function of ideology and of the practical matter of maintaining group cohesion: a source considered to be closely associated with the group claimed in an

⁵⁴³ *Final Solutions*, 76.

interview with the *Atlantic* that, prior to the June 2014 declaration of a caliphate, certain factions within ISIS were willing split off from and declare war on the group's leadership if they had continued to delay making such an announcement.⁵⁴⁴

Therefore, the core strategic end that ISIS is attempting to “protect” through the mass killing and ethnic cleansing of the Yazidi and Shia Muslims is the religious integrity of its caliphate, which could not—by the group's logic—incorporate the Yazidi, whom are considered to be polytheists, and the Shia, who are *takfiri*. Allowing people from those ethno-religious groups to live within the caliphate would destroy its religious purity, and therefore, its legitimacy. From a more cynical point of view, the loss of the caliphate's legitimacy would deprive ISIS of ideological purpose, removing an important propaganda tool to attract both foreign fighters and pledges of allegiance from ideologically similar militant groups. The same applies to the intra-group dynamics of ISIS, whose leadership may be attempting to use a fixation on protecting the caliphate (through the elimination of a fundamentally threatening enemy population) as a means of fostering and maintaining cohesion even in the face of overwhelming odds.

Independent of the particulars of ISIS religious ideology, Shia Muslims and the Yazidi are groups that a fledgling totalitarian state in Iraq would likely view as being dangerous. Beyond the long history of the minority Sunni-majority Shia divide in Iraq, even the nominally secular Saddam Hussein feared a Shia uprising against his Baathist government, claiming that “Iraqis are always plotting against you—especially the Shia,” and insisting that his greatest fear was Iraq's Shia majority “bringing the turban into politics.”⁵⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the Yazidi, even relative to other Kurdish groups, have a history of community-based resistance to outside

⁵⁴⁴ See above: “The Ideology of ISIS.”

⁵⁴⁵ John Nixon. *Debriefing the President*. New York: Blue Rider Press, 2016. 3-4 (Kindle Edition; page numbers may differ in print).

government that dates back to the days of Ottoman rule.⁵⁴⁶ The Iraqi-dominated ISIS leadership would more than likely know this, and proactively act to remove these potential sources of opposition.

To protect the legitimacy of the caliphate—again, a cause that some within the group would go so far as to provoke internecine warfare to serve—ISIS therefore employed a strategy of ethnic mass killing for their campaign of expansion during the summer of 2014. First, ISIS made no attempt to hide who it was targeting for death; pronouncements from the group itself and from affiliated religious leaders make it clear that Shia Muslims must be killed, and that Yazidi must be forcibly converted, killed, or taken as slaves. The public nature of their goals, in turn, minimized the level of actual killing that ISIS fighters had to do during the second, active stage, when they captured villages; ideally, most of a given village’s inhabitants had fled, and fighters could plunder valuables and occupy remaining structures as they saw fit. Remaining Shia or Yazidi inhabitants were rounded up; men were taken outside the village and slaughtered en masse (leaving the village itself useable by the occupying ISIS forces), while women and children were often expelled, taken prisoner, or killed as well.

A strategy of ethnic mass killing explains why the group continues to pursue such brutal measures, even after they have attracted substantial blowback for doing so. Given the importance of territorial religious integrity to ISIS, the group’s leadership likely believes that a strategy of ethnic mass killing is worth implementing, despite its costs both in terms of manpower, materiel, and public perception. This dynamic is not a new one; under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s leadership, AQI carried out a brutal campaign of suicide bombings, territorial expansion, and

⁵⁴⁶ Avi Asher-Schapiro. “Who Are the Yazidis, the Ancient, Persecuted Religious Minority Struggling to Survive in Iraq?” *National Geographic News*, August 11, 2014. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/08/140809-iraq-yazidis-minority-isil-religion-history/>.

harsh internal justice in order to achieve its goal of establishing a caliphate, despite the tremendous costs incurred along the way. Clearly, ISIS views the legitimacy of its so-called caliphate as key to its survival, for either the ideological or cynical reasons outlined above.

Finally, a strategy of ethnic mass killing explains the variation in ISIS attacks against refugee columns. In areas slated for future expansion (notably around Mount Sinjar), ISIS fighters made efforts to attack refugees as they abandoned villages; whether the goal of these attacks was to wipe out the refugees or merely to keep them moving outside of desired territory is unanswerable given the resources available to me. Meanwhile, for captured villages bordering areas that ISIS did not desire or could not reasonably expect to control in the near future, fighters did not pursue refugees, instead focusing on securing the village against counterattacks.

What evidence supports alternative explanations for these observed behaviors? There is very little reason to believe that individual-level dynamics of bloodlust or revenge are driving these massacres. As noted above, ISIS fighters, when capturing Shia or Yazidi villages, followed a fairly uniform set of operating procedures, separating villagers by gender (and, in the case of villages with both Sunni and “apostate” inhabitants, by ethno-religious affiliation) before transporting the men to remote locations for killing.⁵⁴⁷ Such a procedure precludes spur-of-the-moment killing as a reasonable alternative to strategy. Alternative explanations of tactical myopia or other intra-group pathologies importantly, fail to account for the congruence between the strategy of ethnic mass killing described above and ISIS propaganda, which proudly proclaims the righteousness of killing Shia, and, while not advertising the mass killing of Yazidi,

⁵⁴⁷ “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Representative.”

has been clear that they are deserving of death (while, interestingly, omitting, for example, the killing of the family members of Sahwa militiamen).⁵⁴⁸

Plunder

Another key strategy (and one linked to their above strategy of ethnic mass killing) for ISIS is plunder.⁵⁴⁹ ISIS, as a group, is nearly entirely self-funded; due to its extreme violence, it does not enjoy the same covert, international patronage network as al-Qaeda, and for the same reason, lacks (known) state sponsors. Instead, the so-called Islamic State funds itself through a variety of other means, including oil sales, the harsh taxation of its civilian residents (including the *jizya* tax levied on Christians and Jews), fees paid by traders operating within its territory, and through the looting of captured villages, all of which constitute an overarching system of plunder.

In particular, the plunder of captured villages—wherein a village that is home to the supposed enemies of the state, notably the Yazidi, other Kurds, or Shia Muslims is cleansed of that population and occupied by ISIS fighters—provides a not insignificant source of revenue for ISIS. Seized valuables are sold; weapons or military materiel are repurposed; even stolen identity documents (a common practice for ISIS fighters cleansing a town is to steal identity documentation from refugees before they are allowed to flee the area) could potentially be used to help smuggle foreign fighters into ISIS territory. Even the use of abandoned property by occupying ISIS forces is a form of plunder. Finally, the taking of slaves should be considered to

⁵⁴⁸ Patrick Burke. “It Is Time to Shine a Light on the Islamic State’s Hidden Executions.” *War on the Rocks*, September 20, 2016. <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/it-is-time-to-shine-a-light-on-the-islamic-states-hidden-executions/>.

⁵⁴⁹ I draw a distinction between pillage, the single-instance violent removal of wealth from a community, and plunder, the systematic, large-scale extraction of wealth from a community or set of communities.

be a form of plunder—it materially benefits ISIS forces by increasing morale, and is used as an inducement to recruit new fighters.

Because the targets of plunder overlap almost entirely with the targets of ISIS’s ethnic mass killing, there is little to no opportunity cost for this tactic; the wealth in question is being seized from people for whom ISIS places an overriding importance on removing from its territory. Although the aim of taking, holding, and religiously purifying territory is of such overriding importance to ISIS (for both ideological and cynical reasons) that the group would almost definitively engage in ethnic mass killing to such an end even if plunder were not a side benefit, the existence of such a benefit may further impact the strategic calculus of the group’s leadership.

What differentiates ISIS plunder from spur-of-the-moment pillaging or looting? Repeated patterns of property seizure in newly-occupied areas seem to indicate, at least, some kind of standard operating procedure for wealth extraction. Evidence indicates that, upon the capture of a village or town, ISIS fighters carefully sweep through dwellings, both occupied and abandoned, for valuables or other useful goods.⁵⁵⁰ Notably, refugees from captured towns attest that, in many cases, militants were careful to confiscate their identity documents before allowing them to flee.⁵⁵¹ While I speculate above that having a store of such documents may be useful in terms of smuggling illicit goods or fighters in and out of the region, their exact use is unclear; however, it is extremely unlikely that such a unique tactic would appear over and over again if all that was going on was spur-of-the-moment looting.

⁵⁵⁰ “Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner.”

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

Coercion by Terror

The final strategy behind ISIS atrocities in the summer and fall of 2014 is one of coercion—specifically, deterrence—by terror. Conceptually in between Valentino’s categories of “coercive mass killing,” wherein an actor attempts to coerce a target through indiscriminate bombing, and “imperialist mass killing,” where an occupying power uses moderately discriminate violence to intimidate an intransigent conquered population, ISIS uses mass killings within its own territory to deter attacks by outside political and military opponents. Examples of this behavior include the mass executions of captured Iraqi military personnel at Camp Speicher, of Syrian military personnel at Tabqa Air Force Base, the targeted assassination of members of the Iraqi police and security forces, the targeting assassination of former Sahwa militia fighters, and reprisals against Sunni and Kurdish tribes that have engaged in armed conflict with ISIS forces (such as the Albu Nimr Sunni tribe). Most of the examples of ISIS coercion by terror fall into two categories, which I differentiate as two operationally distinct but strategically similar campaigns of atrocity: the mass executions of captured enemy fighters (usually uniformed military of either Iraq or Syria, but occasionally Kurdish *peshmerga* or other sectarian militias as well), which I will refer to as the execution campaign for facility’s sake; and the campaign of targeted assassination and intimidation (including the targeting of family members) of Iraqi political opponents of ISIS, which includes Sahwa fighters or leaders, police or security officers and related officials, justice system officials (including judges, prosecutors, crime lab operators, etc.), and local politicians or leaders who have opposed ISIS in the past, which I will refer to as the assassination campaign.

I believe that ISIS, engaged in asymmetric conflict with a large number of opponents, some of whom were and are significantly more powerful than the militant group, used vast

campaigns of execution and assassination to signal its willingness to go to much greater lengths than its opponents in order to secure victory. The leadership of ISIS may have (rightly) assumed that the balance of will should have been in their favor relative to almost any of their opponents, and that strongly signaling this fact may have dissuaded potential attackers, therefore sparing limited ISIS blood and treasure for other fights. Furthermore, by terrorizing opponents and therefore deterring them from fighting, ISIS may have hoped to drive wedges between members of the opposing coalition, many of whom had and continue to have differing levels of investment in the conflict; an imbalance of will between the actors providing air power and those engaging in ground attacks may create knock-on effects that further weaken the coalition relative to ISIS, which can continue to fight with a unity of will and tactics.⁵⁵²

While I refer to this strategy as “coercion by terror,” I use “terror” in a loose, descriptive sense, rather than to refer to established definitions of coercive terror bombing. Indeed, the ISIS campaigns I refer to here differ from standard definitions of terrorism in the sense that they are not, entirely, coercion by punishment—while ISIS does carry out standard coercion-by-punishment terror attacks in areas outside its territorial control,⁵⁵³ these coercive killings tend to occur in areas where ISIS has a high degree of control. Furthermore, while the assassination campaign in particular brings to mind Kalyvas’s conceptualization of discriminate violence as a means of coercing a civilian population into cooperation with an armed actor (itself the theoretical underpinning of Valentino’s “imperialist mass killing”), some key differences exist between the theory and the reality: the targets of the ISIS assassination campaign, while being ostensibly civilian in many cases, are not necessarily in a position to pick sides between ISIS and the Iraqi state, as would be the case in Kalyvas’s model. Instead, they are already committed to

⁵⁵² Dominic Tierney. “ISIS Against Humanity.” *The Atlantic*, October 12, 2015.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/war-isis-us-coalition/410044/>.

⁵⁵³ See my discussion of Sanchez-Cuenca and De La Calle in Chapter 2.

the side of the state,⁵⁵⁴ and their killings, rather than serving to coerce an undecided civilian population, are meant to deter action by enemies operating outside areas of ISIS control: Sahwa fighters in yet-unclaimed territory, and the Iraqi state.⁵⁵⁵

It should be noted that I believe that this strategic paradigm of coercion by terror applies to both the mass-casualty executions ISIS regularly carries out against captured enemy soldiers and the extensive campaign of targeted assassination ISIS conducted against Iraqi security and civil society officials and their families. Although the tactics differ significantly between the two campaigns, the strategic end goal remains the same: deterrence of enemy forces (in particular, on-the-ground foes like the Iraqi Army or the Sahwa) from attack against the much more committed ISIS.

While I believe that the instrumentalism of large-scale, highly propagandized executions of captured enemy combatants is fairly self-evident, what factors may differentiate the killings of the assassination campaign from simple revenge? Simply put, the tactics at play for the ISIS assassination campaign—target lists with names of family members, home addresses, and cell phone numbers, as well as the use of checkpoints in captured territory to locate targets—seem to suggest a cohesive strategy of terror rather than one-off attacks. Particularly in the case of targeted Iraqi government or security officials, the use of phoned or mailed threats precludes their potential explanation as spur-of-the-moment violence.

Although this campaign of assassination has not been extensively propagandized in the same way as ISIS's campaign of prisoner executions, this does not indicate that ISIS leadership

⁵⁵⁴ Sahwa fighters, while technically militiamen, received payment, materiel, and operational support from Baghdad; they were/are a state organ in everything but name.

⁵⁵⁵ The most vivid historical analogy is that of Genghis Khan annihilating the tribes that chose to fight him so as to frighten those yet outside his borders into surrender.

is ashamed of or disavows such efforts.⁵⁵⁶ Rather, it indicates the high degree of strategic planning behind them: ISIS leadership recognizes that the assassination campaign (particularly when it targets Sunni Sahwa fighters), while useful as a deterrent against outside enemies, is also problematic in terms of optics for an organization that claims to be the ultimate protector of the world's Sunni Muslims. This particular behavior is also key to differentiating this strategy of coercion by terror (aimed at enemy groups) from one of deterring civilian defection (aimed at civilians).⁵⁵⁷ If such killings were meant to deter ostensibly neutral civilians from defecting to the Sahwa/government side, ISIS would extensively publicize them in order to maximize the deterrent effect. However, the group vastly prefers to publicize the killings of enemy fighters on social media, while keeping the killings of "collaborators" quiet.⁵⁵⁸ This is because broadcasting the group's assassinations of Sunni "collaborators" may harm the organization's ability to recruit both within Iraq and Syria, and around the world. As such, the campaign—while incredibly widespread and brutal—has not been public-facing in the manner of other ISIS campaigns of atrocity. Instead, ISIS has relied on internal means of communication (word of mouth as well as more formal intra-organization communication networks) within the targeted groups to effectively communicate its deterrent threat.

Conclusion

I find that ISIS committed the atrocities attributed to it in the summer and fall of 2014 for instrumental purposes, working within its own strategic logic, in much the same way as states do. Likewise, I find that the particular strategies of atrocity employed by ISIS are fairly similar to

⁵⁵⁶ "It Is Time to Shine a Light on the Islamic State's Hidden Executions."

⁵⁵⁷ As proposed by Kalyvas and seen in the case of the Algerian GIA.

⁵⁵⁸ "It Is Time to Shine a Light on the Islamic State's Hidden Executions."

that of state actors, as delineated in *Final Solutions* and other related works. In particular, ISIS committed atrocities through the strategies of ethnic mass killing, plunder, and coercion by terror, working toward the ends of territorial control/purification, group sustenance, and deterrence of outside enemies, respectively.

There is also some evidence to support the use of these strategies as a last resort, as postulated in part B of my second hypothesis: “Group elites will order their groups to commit atrocities when they have generally exhausted less costly options⁵⁵⁹ for protecting that interest.” Coercion by terror killings of Iraqi and Syrian military personnel increased after ISIS began to come under heavy attack by the US-led coalition in August 2014. Likewise, attacks against Kurds (Kurdish militias were working in concert with the US and Iraqi militaries) picked up at this time, both in terms of village-clearing operations and the mass execution of captured enemy fighters. However, there is not enough evidence to completely confirm this part of my hypotheses. Many other atrocities were committed before coalition bombings began; although the tumultuous history of the group gives some indication that ISIS elites may have viewed the 2014 period as an appropriate time to use strategies of last resort, there is no direct evidence to confirm this notion.

What does this mean in terms of deducing generalizable warning signs of potential future atrocities? As in the case of states, territorial control is an important factor to consider: if a non-state actor, as is the case of ISIS, has explicit, highly valued territorial aims, it may be more likely to engage in destructive ethnic cleansing or depopulation efforts. As always, high levels of racial/ethnic/religious animosity are important factors to consider, especially to the extent that they inform political ideology and strategic aims. Finally, major differences in the balances of

⁵⁵⁹ I.e., diplomatic efforts, coercive threats, targeted or selective use of force, etc.

power and commitment between a non-state actor and its enemies may create situations where a weak actor engages in atrocity crimes as a kind of deterrent against under-committed foes.

Chapter Seven

Facing the Future: Potential Warning Signs

Introduction

In addition to shedding light on the potential strategic mechanisms by which non-state actors conceive of and commit mass atrocities, I also aim to contribute to the prevention of future atrocities. To this end, I have derived, from my case study findings, a set of warning signs that may prove instructive in predicting (and thus preventing) impending atrocities. Although these findings are necessarily informal and incomplete, the nature of my research endeavor demands inclusion of a future-focused, forward-looking component. Any research into mass atrocities and genocide is perforce driven by a desire to prevent future abuse; it is my hope that the warning signs I detail below may prove useful, even in some tiny capacity, in this overarching goal.

In this chapter, I briefly summarize the warning signs for impending atrocities derived from my case studies. I then briefly test the validity and plausibility of each warning sign along two primary lines of inquiry: First, does this warning sign make logical sense?⁵⁶⁰ And second, does it provide any practical value in terms of atrocity prediction and prevention?⁵⁶¹ Finally, I combine the frequency of appearance among my case studies and the results of the plausibility probe to create a weighted list of the warning signs in order of importance. While this ranking will be fairly unscientific, I feel that it provides useful context for the rest of the findings that I explore in this chapter.

Summary of Findings

Through four case studies of violent non-state actors (Los Zetas, the GIA, UNITA, and ISIS), I derived a number of potential, generalized “warning signs.” These warning signs, if

⁵⁶⁰ Are the proposed causal mechanisms viable? Is it supported by any existing empirical or theoretical research?

⁵⁶¹ Does it limit false positives? Can it be observed as situations develop, or is it only discernable after the fact?

applicable to a particular violent non-state actor, may indicate varying degrees of risk⁵⁶² that said actor may commit mass atrocities in the near future. These warning signs are not uniform in type, however; while some are general characteristics of a potential conflict or actor, others describe generalized strategic scenarios that an actor may perceive themselves as occupying.

This is not meant to be a complete prediction scheme by any means, and the applicability of one or more warning signs for a particular actor does not guarantee that it will then go on to commit atrocities. This is, in short, a probabilistic exercise, rather than a deterministic one. To that end, in this section, I list my proposed warning signs in no particular order, offer a brief description for each, as well as indicate the case studies from which they were derived.

1. *Significant losses*: Non-state actors that perceive themselves as having suffered significant losses in terms of manpower, territory, or societal cache will be more likely to commit mass atrocities. (GIA and UNITA.)
2. *Territorial control*: Non-state actors that place an overriding importance on territorial control will often respond to the threat of territorial loss or the degradation of territorial integrity with extreme force, up to and including mass atrocities. (GIA, ISIS, and Los Zetas.)
3. *Challenges to social order as enforced*: Non-state actors that place an overriding importance on the creation and enforcement of a particular social order in controlled or contested territory will often respond to challenges to that social order (from within) with extreme force, and may commit mass atrocities in doing so. (Los Zetas, ISIS.)
4. *Lengthy conflicts*: As conflicts drag on, actors may find themselves desperate to end a conflict. In this desperation, and having exhausted other options, actors may take extreme

⁵⁶² Obviously, the more warning signs present, the higher the risk.

steps, including committing mass atrocities, with the goal of either forcing the enemy to capitulate or by forcing international intervention and then acquiescing to a brokered peace.⁵⁶³ (Los Zetas, UNITA.)

5. *Crowded battlefields:* In conflicts with a significant number of competing actors (both state and non-state), and especially in conflicts where alliances between said actors are fluid, armed groups may commit mass atrocities as a means of differentiating themselves or as part of coercive strategies. (Los Zetas, ISIS.)
6. *Highly committed actors:* For a number of reasons (ideology, intra-group cohesion, desperation) a group may be highly committed to a particular conflict or strategy. Regardless of their relative material capacity or the commitment level of their adversaries, they may attempt a number of potential strategies of atrocity.⁵⁶⁴ (GIA, UNITA, ISIS.)

Testing Findings

In this section, I test the potential warning signs listed above by conducting a short plausibility probe for each item. As the point of this process is less to rigorously test the causal logic of each warning sign and more to establish a decent level of potential usefulness for them, the testing process will be relatively loose. I test each potential warning sign along two lines of inquiry: First, does the proposed warning sign make logical sense, in that a potential causal

⁵⁶³ See Chapter 2, “Hypotheses, Coding of Strategies, and Warning Signs.”

⁵⁶⁴ Potential strategic mechanisms exist for a highly committed actor to commit atrocities regardless of the commitment level or capacity of their adversaries:

	Committed adversary:	Uncommitted adversary:
Higher capacity adversary:	Militarized engineered migration	Coercion by terror
Lower or equal-capacity adversary:	Counter-insurgency/punishing civilian defection	Coercion by punishment

mechanism can be extrapolated which would reasonably link the sign to a high (or, at least, significantly increased) likelihood of impending atrocity?⁵⁶⁵ Second, does the proposed warning sign enable prediction, in that it can be reasonably measured and clearly interpreted by outside observers? As a rule, to avoid selection biases, I eschew reliance on evidence or observations from my case studies in probing the plausibility of these proposed warning signs, as doing so would create a kind of circular logic wherein the findings used to derive the warning signs in the first place are then used to confirm them as being legitimate.

1. *Significant losses*

- a. Logical sense? Yes. A group that has suffered significant losses of manpower, territory, or social cache (soft power, in other words) will be forced to use increasing levels of violence to defend key interests; Valentino identifies the protection of vital interests as a key driver in mass killings committed by states.⁵⁶⁶ In the case of insurgent groups, which rely upon civilian support to survive, Kalyvas correlates increasing levels of indiscriminate violence with the loss of territorial control; with lower levels of control, insurgents are forced to use cheaper, less discriminate means of violently deterring civilian defection to the enemy.⁵⁶⁷ Groups that do not necessarily rely on civilian support may turn to atrocity in defense of other key interests, such as core territories or lucrative natural resources. Situations of last resort can often driven actors to adopt new

⁵⁶⁵ Of particular importance here is the existence or non-existence of established theoretical mechanisms which could lend credence to a proposed causal chain.

⁵⁶⁶ *Final Solutions*, 67.

⁵⁶⁷ *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 12.

and remarkably violent behavior; Bloom asserts that the use of suicide terror by groups that have previously avoided such tactics is driven by such desperation.⁵⁶⁸

- a. Practical predictive value? Somewhat. While there is a reliable causal link between significant losses by a group and a higher risk of them committing atrocities, this characteristic is fairly broad, and likely offers the more predictive value when combined with the presence of other warning signs. Furthermore, there is a certain element of judiciousness that needs to be applied to the interpretation of this warning sign—the remaining capacity of a group that has suffered significant losses is a key part of their ability to actually commit atrocities.

2. *Territorial control*

- a. Logical sense? Yes. A group that places an extremely high value on territorial control will, per Valentino's theory, use extreme force not only to defend it against outside attack, but also to sustain its perceived integrity, as it is a key strategic interest of the group.⁵⁶⁹ Moreover, Valentino defines more than one type of mass killing that heavily involve territorial control. "Territorial mass killing" involves the killing of the original inhabitants of a conquered territory in the process of resettling it.⁵⁷⁰ "Ethnic mass killing" involves the killing of a particular ethnic group that is seen as a fundamental security threat; a common dynamic in this category of killing occurs when these "enemy" groups are concentrated in an area perceived to be particularly valuable to the would-be mass killers, leading to

⁵⁶⁸ *Dying to Kill*, 1.

⁵⁶⁹ *Final Solutions*, 67.

⁵⁷⁰ *Final Solutions*, 77.

a kind of combination of ethnic and territorial mass killing.⁵⁷¹ In these sets of strategic scenarios, the high value placed on territorial control (often, *specific* territory) can be clearly linked to later mass atrocities. Posen also points out that, speaking more broadly, certain territory/population scenarios (so-called “ethnic islands”) can create strong incentives for insecure actors to commit ethnic cleansing in order to make the “islands” that their brethren occupy more secure.⁵⁷²

- b. Practical predictive value? Yes. There is a reliable causal link between a group highly valuing territory or territorial control and a heightened risk of the group committing atrocities in defense of that interest. Furthermore, this particular warning sign is rather specific: determining whether a particular actor highly values territorial control, or a particular piece of territory, can be done fairly easily, using publically-available information. Such an evaluation can then be combined with other factors in order to disqualify potential false positives.

3. *Challenges to social order as enforced*

- a. Logical sense? Yes. Actors that place an overriding importance on creating and maintaining a particular social order within their zones of control will use extreme force, up to and including atrocities, to protect the perceived core interest. Valentino identifies three types of mass killing that revolve around enacting or protecting a specific social order: “Communist” mass killings occur when a newly empowered Communist regime drastically and rapidly reorients society, dispossessing, imprisoning, or outright killing large numbers of people in the

⁵⁷¹ *Final Solutions*, 76.

⁵⁷² Barry R. Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict.” *Survival* 35, no. 1 (1993): 27–47.

process;⁵⁷³ “imperialist” mass killings are those committed by an imperial or occupying power in a foreign country with the goal of intimidating conquered populations and deterring defection from the social order imposed by the occupiers;⁵⁷⁴ “ethnic” mass killings, as noted above, are those committed to do away with ethnic groups perceived to be threats to the security and societal integrity of a given actor.⁵⁷⁵ In all three of these types of mass killing, the choice to kill is driven, at least in part, by the perceived value of a particular social order (Communism, colonialism, or ethno-statism, respectively).

- b. Practical predictive value? Somewhat. Determining the precise social order desired by an actor will be quite easy in some cases and more difficult in others. There is a strong causal link between an actor’s perceived interest in creating or maintaining a specific social order and the use of extreme violence to achieve or protect that strategic end. However, this warning sign has the potential to create a number of false positives, as actors may strongly prefer a specific social order, but not necessarily commit mass violence in order to maintain it. In my case study on Algeria, the GIA strongly preferred and explicitly desired to create an “Islamic State” in Algeria, and, at the height of their power in the early years of the war, began enforcing a particular version of Islamic law in their core territories.⁵⁷⁶ However, their later massacres, rather than being driven by a particular desire to maintain that social order (by punishing civilians who were perceived to be acting in ways that undermined it), was driven by a strategy of punishing civilians

⁵⁷³ *Final Solutions*, 73.

⁵⁷⁴ *Final Solutions*, 89.

⁵⁷⁵ *Final Solutions*, 76.

⁵⁷⁶ “The Furrows of Algeria.”

defecting politically from the GIA to the Algerian regime. Many of the civilians targeted and killed in GIA massacres were Islamists, and behaved in 1996-98 much in the same way they did in 1993; the only change was that they were perceived to have begun aiding the government.⁵⁷⁷

4. *Lengthy conflicts*

- a. Logical sense? Somewhat. As conflicts drag on, vital interests once considered safe can become endangered, and actors may act extremely violently to protect them, per Valentino.⁵⁷⁸ Furthermore, as mass killings tend to be committed as part of last-resort strategies, and lengthy conflicts tend to occur because the first resorts of actors are unsuccessful,⁵⁷⁹ longer conflicts should tend to feature actors enacting strategies of last resort more often than short ones. Paradoxical peace is also a concern in longer conflicts: as conflicts increase in duration, groups may drastically ramp up their level of violence in order to force their enemy to capitulate entirely, or at least reach some kind of advantageous, brokered peace. However, if, as we are assuming, the politics of war and peace exist on a continuum rather than being distinct, groups may reach perceived situations of last resort just at or even before the commencement of violence.
- b. Practical predictive value? No. As noted above, while lengthy conflicts tend to correlate with the committing of atrocities, the actual causal link is less direct than that of other proposed warning signs, which makes this warning sign less useful as a predictive tool. Furthermore, because this warning sign relies on a fairly

⁵⁷⁷ “Wanton and Senseless,” 255.

⁵⁷⁸ *Final Solutions*, 67.

⁵⁷⁹ If, per Clausewitz, wars are indeed extensions of politics, they are executed with some design in mind, and would naturally involve a process of actors running through strategies from most preferred to least over time.

broad characterization of a conflict, there is a good chance that its use as a predictive tool may lead to a number of false positives *and* false negatives (as noted above, shorter or new conflicts can also feature actors pursuing strategies of last resort). A better reformulation of this warning sign may focus on the particular strategic condition of “paradoxical peace,” which, while being harder to identify, may be more closely linked with mass violence.

5. *Crowded battlefields*

a. Logical sense? Yes. Conflict environments with a number of competing armed groups feature a number of distinctive features that lead to a higher likelihood of actors adopting strategies of atrocity. Bloom contends, for example, that armed groups in competition for public visibility and new recruits adopt tactics of mass-casualty suicide bombing in order to differentiate themselves from other, similar actors.⁵⁸⁰ Crowded battlefields also complicate the security calculations of actors on them. Groups have a limited intelligence capacity and cannot perfectly predict the behavior of other actors; unpredictable environments where threats may come from a number of directions shift security-related incentives presented to actors in favor of preemptive, decisive action.⁵⁸¹

b. Practical predictive value? Somewhat. The crowdedness of battlefields is a somewhat broad criterion on which to base predictions of impending atrocity. However, as described above, there is a reliable causal link between complex conflict environments and increased incentives for mass violence among actors. Making evaluations as to whether the crowdedness of conflict environments could

⁵⁸⁰ *Dying to Kill*, 1.

⁵⁸¹ This argument is of a piece with the general security dilemma described by Posen in relation to ethnic conflicts. “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict.”

lead to an increased risk of atrocity should not be difficult; the basic logic is that of the classic security dilemma. Combined with other warning signs, this particular characteristic of a conflict could have good predictive value.

6. *Highly committed actors*

- a. Logical sense? Yes. Highly committed actors (either due to the leveraging of key interests or the lack of better options)⁵⁸² are more likely to commit mass atrocities in defense of key interests or as last resorts, two key elements of strategic motivation for mass killing, per Valentino.⁵⁸³ Importantly, highly committed actors may be more willing to bear the initial costs of a strategy of atrocity if the only alternative is the loss of a core interest. They may also be more willing to attempt high-risk strategies. Committed actors, recognizing that the balance of will lies in their favor, may attempt one of a number of high-leverage (and highly destructive) coercive strategies, such as punishment, terror, or engineered migration, all of which require fairly significant commitment by the inciting actor in order to make the coercive threat credible. Other strategies of atrocity, too, require significant commitment: militarized, dispossessive, and exportive engineered migrations all take significant time and resources to achieve.
- b. Practical predictive value? Yes. Although making an evaluation as to whether or not an actor is highly committed requires somewhat more energy and analytical rigor than the evaluation for some of the other warning signs suggested here, the causal link between the commitment level of actors and strategies of atrocity is strong and direct—an actor with few other options or with significant interests at

⁵⁸² One imagines that Jonas Savimbi, for example, thought UNITA could rely on broad civilian support, thus abrogating the need for strategic atrocities, right up until his group's 1992 electoral defeat.

⁵⁸³ *Final Solutions*, 67.

stake is considerably more willing to attempt strategies of atrocity relative to less-committed actors. Taking the time to analyze the security situations and potential strategic logics of armed actors in order to determine commitment level can provide a good degree of certainty regarding the likelihood of future atrocities.

Conclusion: Ranking Warning Signs by Overall Usefulness

1. Highly committed actor
2. Territorial control
3. Challenges to social order as enforced
4. Significant losses
5. Crowded battlefields
6. Lengthy conflicts

I believe that these six warning signs all hold some predictive value.⁵⁸⁴ It should be noted, however, that my value judgment favors the signs that have to do with the particular interests or strategic situations of actors over those that describe conditions of conflict writ large. This fits with the basic rationale of the strategic theory of mass atrocities, which asserts that actors commit atrocities as rational, strategic acts in the service of key interests—which, of course, are defined by actors. These results seem to indicate, at least tentatively, that predictions regarding the future actions of armed groups can achieve greater predictive utility by focusing on the interests of particular actors—after all, the conditions of a particular conflict are filtered through the perceived interests of actors before being incorporated into their strategic logics. Future work on this topic—by myself or others—may find some value by continuing in this direction.

⁵⁸⁴ I did, after all, propose warning signs with the idea that they should be useful; I would not waste my or the reader's time probing the plausibility of manifestly stupid signs.

Chapter Eight Conclusions

I wrote this thesis, in part, because I have grown tired of seeing mass violence explained away as being the results of mere hatred, bloodlust, or barbarism—spontaneous outbursts of indiscriminate violence that seem to well up from the earth itself. The problem with this view of mass violence is that it is incorrect. Not only does this idealization inaccurately describe the phenomenon, but it also conveniently packages it with a cowardly excuse for inaction by those with the means to end the violence. After all, if mass violence really is the random, bloody extrusion of “age-old animosities,” “long-simmering hatreds,” or “tribal grievances rooted in history and myth born of boozy nights by the fire,” it therefore follows that prediction or prevention efforts are pointless—that the only reasonable responses to a world overflowing with atrocity are endless palliative efforts.⁵⁸⁵

Although growing numbers of observers now understand mass atrocities—particularly genocides and other ethnic cleansing events—committed by state actors to be the results of explicable, predictable strategies, the same does not apply to atrocities committed by non-state actors, which are still publically conceptualized, for the most part, as unpredictable acts of savagery.⁵⁸⁶ Discussing atrocities committed by non-state actors within such a frame offers no upside: not only does it preclude meaningful discussions on halting ongoing violence, but it lessens our ability to understand such violence in order to lessen the very real threat of future violence by similar actors.

⁵⁸⁵ George Bush, Bill Clinton, and Richard Cohen, respectively, quoted in *International Dimensions of Internal Conflict*, 12.

⁵⁸⁶ Over the year-plus that I have spent developing, researching, and writing this thesis, I have found that the people with whom I have discussed it were far more easily sold on the Holocaust being strategic than, for example, the slaughter of the Yazidi.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

In this thesis, I have sought, in whatever small way I can manage, to refute that lazy, cynical narrative. To that end, I have attempted to answer three primary research questions: *What factors influence some non-state actors to commit mass atrocities? Are mass atrocities committed by non-state actors as strategic acts specifically planned by the group's leadership, or is violence more likely to be committed for other reasons? And what warning signs of impending atrocity can be deduced from the answers to these previous questions?*

In answering these questions, I am essentially extending Valentino's "strategic theory of mass killing and genocide,"⁵⁸⁷ initially proposed and tested in the case universe of state actors, to that of non-state actors. The theory states, in brief, that actors commit mass atrocities as rational, strategic acts in order to defend key interests against perceived threats and as a policy of last resort.⁵⁸⁸ My hypotheses reflect that basic theoretical formulation:

H1: I hypothesize that mass atrocities are committed by non-state actors for strategic reasons. Although material capacity or territorial boundedness can influence the strategic calculus of a non-state actor, these variables, beyond the simple delineation between state and non-state actors, do not fundamentally change the nature of the atrocities they commit.

H2a: Rather than being primarily motivated by individuals within the groups,⁵⁸⁹ atrocities are committed under the express orders, or, at best, willful and knowing negligence, of group elites for strategic ends, and when they perceive an overriding interest in doing so.⁵⁹⁰

H2b: Group elites will order their groups to commit atrocities when they have generally exhausted less costly options⁵⁹¹ for protecting that interest.

I attempted to test these hypotheses through a method of structured, focused comparison among four case studies, each selected to represent one of four broad types of non-state actor according

⁵⁸⁷ See Chapter 2 for extensive discussion of this theory.

⁵⁸⁸ *Final Solutions*, 67.

⁵⁸⁹ Primarily individual sample motives could include revenge, looting and/or pillaging, etc.

⁵⁹⁰ Such as protecting key territories, continuing highly valuable external relationships, maintaining core group cohesion, deterring dangerous foes, etc.

⁵⁹¹ I.e., diplomatic efforts, coercive threats, targeted or selective use of force, etc.

to variables of capacity⁵⁹² and territorial boundedness.⁵⁹³ By disaggregating the broad category of non-state actors, I was able to more comprehensively test the strategic theory of mass killing as it applies to non-state actors, as well as make the task of generalizing warning signs less difficult.⁵⁹⁴ This is to say that, while the independent variable of non-state actor “type” changed in each case study, the end result of atrocities having been committed remained the same.

In each case study, I evaluated a short period in which each actor committed a significant number of atrocities, contextualizing each period of atrocities with a brief history of each group as well as an actor analysis highlighting key organizational characteristics or strategic preoccupations, before analyzing the atrocities themselves. I concluded each case study with a brief look towards the possible predictive utility of the chapter’s findings.

Limitations of the Project

While I stand by the findings I outline below, I feel, in the interest of honesty, that it is worth taking a moment to point out the limitations of this project. Obviously, this is an undergraduate thesis, written with limited time and resources and as such, I was unable to examine a number of angles to my research questions and to the topic of mass atrocities in general. These include: a more overt treatment of the delineations and similarities between political and criminal violence; the relationships between violent actors, and how the violence of

⁵⁹² Generally determined by a combination of raw military power (manpower, materiel) and which technologies of warfare are available to and used by the group, relatively to their adversaries. Under this classification system, a group can be either high-capacity or low-capacity.

⁵⁹³ A means of generalizing the goals of a particular group; essentially, whether or not a group accepts and works within existing state borders, or ignores/transcends them. Under this classification system, a group can be either territorially bounded or territorially unbounded.

⁵⁹⁴ Attempting to apply the strategic theory of mass killings to only one case raises obvious questions, given the massive variation among non-state actors: if a large, conventionally-operating actor was found to commit atrocities strategically, would the same apply to a group of guerilla fighters, or an international terrorist organization, or a criminal enterprise? Testing the theory across multiple non-state actor types settles these issues, allowing a greater focus on the central research questions.

other actors may impact the strategies of the perpetrators on which I focus (in particular, the perverse incentives existing in both the Syrian and Algerian cases for the governments to escalate violence rather than attempt to restrain it); the performative aspects of certain atrocities; an examination of negative cases, in which conditions may be ripe for groups to commit atrocities, but none occur; and the role of intervening variables like transitions to democracy, supply chains, and group command and control apparatuses.

Given my goal of improving the understanding of mass atrocities—with the overall purpose, of course, of preventing as much violence as possible—I am also disappointed that I did not have the time to use my findings to create policy prescriptions for the ongoing conflicts in two of my case studies (ISIS and Los Zetas). While this is not the proper vehicle by which to deliver complex, comprehensive prescriptions for various actors (state and non-state) interested in those conflicts, I feel that a brief discussion of policy would not have been out of place.

Findings

I found, in all four case studies, that my first hypothesis was confirmed. All four non-state actors (UNITA, GIA, ISIS, Los Zetas) committed mass atrocities for strategic purposes, in ways similar to or, in some cases, effectively indistinguishable from state actors. With the exception of “coercion by terror,”⁵⁹⁵ all the observed strategies of atrocity have historical precedent in the realm of state actors. I was also able to confirm part A of my second hypothesis: in all four cases studies, evidence strongly indicated that the impetus to commit atrocities flowed primarily from group elites, rather than individual motives or other intra-group dysfunctions. Part

⁵⁹⁵ An original concept, wherein a coercer enacts violence against a third party (in the case of ISIS, from which I derived the concept, the third parties were captured enemy fighters or their family members) to demonstrate their commitment to the target of coercion, in the hopes of convincing the target that a planned or ongoing action will be costlier than originally envisioned, therefore deterring or compelling them to stop. While operationally similar to coercion by punishment, it is conceptually closest to coercion by denial.

B of my second hypothesis, however, was only partially confirmed, as, in most cases, available evidence was insufficient to confirm that a given group's atrocities were committed as part of strategies of last resort, having exhausted other, less costly options. I summarize my complete findings in the below table.⁵⁹⁶

Case:	H1	H2a	H2b	Strategies of Atrocity
UNITA (Angola)	Confirmed: atrocities were committed for strategic reasons. Capacity likely impacted strategic calculus, but did not fundamentally change it.	Confirmed: individual motives or intra-group dysfunctions may have played a role, but group elite orders were the primary drivers of atrocities.	Confirmed: evidence (albeit circumstantial) strongly suggests that UNITA elites, fearing the loss of key interests and perhaps the destruction of the group itself, ordered atrocities to be committed as part of last resort strategies.	Dispossessive engineered migration/plunder, militarized engineered migration, exportive engineered migration, coercion by punishment.
GIA (Algeria)	Confirmed: atrocities were committed for strategic reasons. Capacity and territorial boundedness likely impacted strategic calculus, but did not fundamentally change it.	Confirmed: intra-group dysfunctions likely played a role, but group elite orders were the primary drivers of atrocities.	Fairly well confirmed: good evidence exists painting GIA massacres and other atrocities as measures of last resort. While the evidence is circumstantial in nature, it is fairly numerous and fits neatly with the strategic logic of GIA	Deterring civilian defection.

⁵⁹⁶ In terms of certainty, I rank hypotheses as confirmed – fairly well confirmed – partially confirmed – fairly well disconfirmed – disconfirmed.

			massacres.	
ISIS (Iraq, Syria)	Confirmed: atrocities were committed for strategic reasons. Capacity and territorial boundedness certainly impacted strategic calculus, but did not fundamentally change it.	Confirmed: individual motives or intra- group dysfunctions may have played a role, but the group elite orders were the primary drivers of atrocities.	Partially confirmed: some evidence exists that may paint ISIS atrocities as measures of last resort, but other evidence contradicts this notion. Further study is necessary.	Ethnic mass killing, coercion by terror, plunder.
Los Zetas (Mexico, US)	Confirmed: atrocities were committed for strategic reasons. Capacity certainly impacted strategic calculus, but did not fundamentally change it.	Confirmed: individual motives or intra- group dysfunctions may have played a role, but the group elite orders were the primary drivers of atrocities.	Partially confirmed: while atrocities committed to deter civilian defection from the Zeta narco- state appear to be second options after threats or positive inducements to cooperate, other atrocities, such as kidnappings, do not exist on such a continuum of behavior.	Plunder/deterring civilian defection, coercion by denial.

In addition to the evaluation of my hypotheses through these case studies, I also used them to develop a set of generalized warning signs, indicating an increased risk for future atrocities in cases where they may apply. I then subjected these warning signs to short tests of validity and plausibility, ranking them in order of projected usefulness. Although these warning

signs were developed from cases of non-state actors, they should be applicable to state actors as well, given my above findings.

1. Highly committed actors
2. Territorial control
3. Challenges to social order as enforced
4. Significant losses
5. Crowded battlefields
6. Lengthy conflicts

In testing these warning signs, I found that warning signs pertaining to a particular characteristic of an actor, rather than a characteristic of a conflict, held greater potential value—albeit, at the cost of requiring somewhat more effort to determine if a proposed warning sign actually applies to a situation.

Looking to the Future

Unfortunately, atrocities are an inescapable part of human history. Looking forward, even after decades of (all things considered) successful educational, legislative, and humanitarian efforts, it seems they will continue to be a fact of life. On the very day I wrote this paragraph, in fact, a column of buses evacuating civilians from the besieged Syrian city of Aleppo was hit by a car bomb; human rights groups estimate that at least 43 people were killed, but the story is still developing, and that number could increase.⁵⁹⁷

What can be done? There is, of course, no easy answer. As I note at the beginning of this chapter, mass atrocities, as recurring phenomena, are still misunderstood on a public level. This,

⁵⁹⁷ Ben Hubbard and Hwaida Saad. “Dozens Killed as Blast Strikes Convoy Carrying Evacuated Syrians.” *The New York Times*, April 15, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/15/world/middleeast/syria-aleppo-car-bomb.html>.

in turn, hinders prevention efforts of every stripe, from naming and shaming to military intervention. Even if all that can truly be done will be palliative efforts, they too can benefit from an improved public understanding of what mass atrocities are and how they come about. More research, too, is necessary; even if mass atrocities are best understood, on a general level, as strategic actions, greater understanding of the microdynamics of the phenomenon, as well as of related topics will, however slowly, make an appreciable difference.

There are also concrete changes to be made that may impact the incidence rate of mass atrocities. Understanding atrocities—whether they are committed by state or non-state actors—as strategically-rooted phenomena offers greater preventative latitude. Valentino, for instance, writes that preventing mass killings can be accomplished by focusing on “disarming and removing from power the small groups and leaders responsible for instigating and organizing the killing.”⁵⁹⁸ Even “modest” intervention efforts can, properly targeted, have a tremendous impact in terms of delaying or averting impending mass killings.⁵⁹⁹ If mass atrocities can be properly anticipated—by recognizing the particular characteristics of actors that may make them more prone to adopt strategies of atrocity, or the conditions of conflict that may lead actors to make such a choice—they could be prevented.

This is, of course, easier said than done. Anticipating mass atrocities is difficult, and there are serious moral issues in reacting too strongly to false positives. Furthermore, the problem of marshalling effective responses to impending atrocities (when predicted with a suitable degree of confidence) is significant. Unilateral action may produce backlash against a would-be intervener; multilateral action may be hamstrung by any number of potential collective action problems. While liberal democracies are the most likely states to attempt proactive interventions against

⁵⁹⁸ *Final Solutions*, 243.

⁵⁹⁹ *Final Solutions*, 244.

potential mass atrocities, they are also uniquely vulnerable to the kinds of asymmetric coercion efforts that opponents or perpetrators of such interventions may attempt (violent terrorism and coercive engineered migration come readily to mind).⁶⁰⁰ There are, unfortunately, no easy answers to these problems.

There are also broader considerations to make when considering the problem of mass atrocities; they are not, after all, an isolated phenomenon. All four of my case studies for this project took place in the context of gaps (often significant) in the rule of law and international norms of human rights. All four cases were, according to the Armed Conflict Database, high-intensity internal conflicts. In addition to strengthening the ability of interested actors (state and non-state) to anticipate and prevent mass atrocities, it is worth investing in projects that seek to alleviate the broader conditions that may increase the likelihood of actors choosing to commit atrocities. Although human rights promotion, economic development, democratization, and other international initiatives logically cannot completely eliminate the possibility that violent actors may adopt strategies of mass violence, these ideals are, in and of themselves, worth pursuing—if only to make overall conditions of life better for as many people as possible.

⁶⁰⁰ *Weapons of Mass Migration*, 280.