

CHAPTER I

Fateful Choices

Political Leadership and the Paths to and from Mass Atrocities

Alex J. Bellamy and Stephen McLoughlin

Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, had an important decision to make on 30 March 2011. His country had been engulfed by protests for the past two weeks, triggered by the security force's overreaction to anti-regime graffiti scrawled on a school wall by a group of teenagers and fuelled by the tumults of the 'Arab Spring'. Now, the President was to deliver his first televised address to the nation since the protests began. Assad had a real choice to make; his counselors were divided. Indeed, there is some suggestion that there were even two—very different—draft speeches.⁴ Some, like Manaf Tlass, a close confidant to Bashar and his father Hafez al-Assad before him, and Brigadier General in Syria's elite Republican Guard, advised restraint. The President should align himself with the protesters, sack corrupt officials and offer political and economic reform, Tlass argued. Above all, he should rein in the security forces, end the use of force against peaceful protesters and prosecute those responsible.

⁴ David Lesch views the speech as a pivotal turning point and documents the background and debates in impressive detail. See David W Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 75–82.

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The people still believed in him, Tlass told his President. Moderation and accommodation would dampen the protests and secure the regime—just as it had in neighbouring Jordan.⁵ Others disagreed. Hesitation and restraint would be taken as signs of weakness, they argued, just as in Egypt, where the army's refusal to fire on protesters had sealed President Mubarak's fate six weeks earlier. Assad would have no such problem persuading the feared security services, the *Mukhabarat*, and elite military units loyal to the government to attack the protesters. The President should denounce the protesters and step up the crackdown, they argued.

It was a close-run thing. On the day itself, moderates inside Assad's inner circle believed the President would offer a hand of conciliation to the protesters. Millions of Syrians tuned in to watch, most hoping that their President would offer words to unite the country and stem the escalation of violence. They were to be bitterly disappointed. Assad chose instead to pour fuel on the fire; to send Syria on a path towards civil war, mass atrocities and utter destruction, all in order to protect his family's hold on power. The President denounced the protesters as part of a great foreign-backed conspiracy that was using sedition to weaken and destroy Syria itself. All part of a masterplan supposedly orchestrated by Israel. The government, he argued, must take a firm hand. The touch-paper was lit and many Syrians left bitterly disappointed. But beneath all that lay the hard realisation that the state was positioning itself against the people, that the government would not reform and that violence was inevitable.

It is true that genocides and other mass atrocities do not emerge out of nowhere, that they are processes often long in the making.⁶ All too often, however, a focus on the structural causes and pathways of escalation that lead to mass violence obscures the role of human agency, the fact that along the way leaders make decisions that push their countries towards, or away from, mass violence. Syria's recent history might have been very different had Assad chosen a different path. Likewise, Slobodan Milošević might have led Serbia in a different direction, Salva Kiir and Riek Machar might have pursued a more peaceful way of resolving their differences in South Sudan and Aung San Suu Kyi's government of Myanmar might have dished out citizenship rights not atrocity crimes in Rakhine state. Decisions made by leaders line the path to mass atrocities, yet they can also forge a path away from mass atrocities.

There are uncomfortable truths here for those invested in atrocity prevention, too. In May 1998, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan gave a speech in Kigali, Rwanda, in which he underscored an undeniable—if uncomfortable—

⁵ Tlass later defected. For an account based on his testimony see Sam Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2019).

⁶ Except where specifically noted, we use the terms 'mass atrocities' and 'mass violence' as shorthands for the atrocity crimes of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

truth about the genocide there four years earlier. For all that the international community could be condemned for failing to confront the mass slaughter, the genocide itself ‘was a horror that came from within.’⁷ Atrocity crimes do not emerge from nowhere but arise out of deep-seated fear and practices of discrimination, marginalisation and conflict. On most occasions both the forces that push societies towards the abyss, and those that inhabit such moves, are propelled not by international actors but by national governments, civil societies and private sectors animated by decidedly local concerns.⁸ As Scott Straus recently argued, international actors can play a ‘supporting role’ but ‘it is very difficult, if not impossible, for international actors to impose new political narratives or to impose peace on ruling elites who do not want to compromise.’⁹ The hard truth is that more often than not, the actors primarily responsible for determining whether or not a country will experience the horror of atrocity crimes are those within the country itself.¹⁰

In this essay, we explore the role of national leaders in committing, stopping and preventing mass atrocities. We argue that leaders play crucial but poorly understood roles in determining whether or not mass atrocities occur, as well as the degree to which they do and how they are terminated. To begin to better understand the role of leadership in causing and preventing mass atrocities, this essay unfolds in two main parts. First, we build a case for the importance of understanding the influence that leaders have had. We do this by pointing out the tendency on the one hand to accept as a given that such leaders as Josef Stalin, Pol Pot and Adolf Hitler were central to perpetration of genocide and mass violence, yet on the other there is very little interest in investigating what leaders have done to navigate things in a different direction. We then draw on examples to explore the role and impact of leaders in three ways: in creating or inhibiting risk; in pulling societies back ‘from the brink’—or pushing them over it—in times of crisis; and in halting—or prolonging—atrocities that have already started. In better understanding the decisions that leaders have

⁷ Stanley Meisler, *Kofi Annan: A Man of Peace in a World of War* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 172.

⁸ The importance of the local in driving atrocities is emphasised by Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2008) and, more generally, Stathis N Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁹ Scott Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ For an account of the different types of roles played by individuals with respect to atrocity crimes, see Edward C Luck and Dana Zaret Luck, ‘The Individual Responsibility to Protect’, in *Reconstructing Atrocity Prevention*, eds. Sheri P Rosenberg, Tibi Galis, and Alex Zucker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 214–32.

made historically, which have led to both the perpetration and avoidance of mass atrocities, and why they have made such decisions, what becomes clearer are the circumstances within which leaders make such decisions, the reasons behind their decisions and how preventive strategies can be better calibrated to deal with different types of leaders.

Leadership and mass atrocities

Historians have written dozens, if not hundreds, of volumes about the central role that leaders such as Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot played in planning, authorising and orchestrating mass violence.¹¹ But we lack a broader understanding of the role of leadership, the choices that leaders make and the factors that influence those choices. In particular, because we tend to focus only on the most notorious of genocidal leaders, we tend not to see the other paths that were open to them and the impact other leaders have had on halting atrocities that have started. And almost completely ignored are those leaders who succeeded in steering countries away from violence entirely during times of upheaval and dangerous risk escalation.¹² We know much about Bashar al-Assad's fateful decision, much less about how Jordan's King Abdullah II or Tunisia's Ben Ali and then Hamadi Jebali navigated more peacefully the same winds that destroyed Syria (though not entirely peacefully in Ben Ali's case). When it comes to leadership and mass atrocities, the dogs that do not bark are never heard. As a result, we have only a partial understanding of the role that leaders play—one that provides relatively little advice for the prevention of mass atrocities.

There is broad consensus that mass atrocities are processes that are deliberately planned, rather than spontaneous outbursts of violence.¹³ There is also good evidence that authoritarian political regimes are more prone to perpetrate such violence than others, and that those regimes that promoted exclusionary ideologies are especially prone.¹⁴ But these contextual factors, and

¹¹ See, for example, Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge 1975–1979* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008).

¹² See, for example, Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization during the Holocaust* (New York: Free Press, 1980); Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Genocide and Massacre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹³ For example, see Adama Dieng, 'Seeing Atrocity Crimes as Processes, Not Single Events', interview by YJIA, *Yale Journal of International Affairs* 9, iss. 1 (2014): 85–90.

¹⁴ Straus, *Making and Unmaking*, 326.

the impact they have on the course of events, are mediated by human agency, meaning that similar sets of factors create different effects in different settings because the people who are taking decisions and acting upon them are different. As the historian Margaret Macmillan points out, no two settings are ever the same precisely because the people involved are different. These regimes are more often than not headed by a prominent, sometimes ‘charismatic’, leader. What matters—when we are looking for evidence of processes or risk factors—is the collective impact these have on the choices that leaders make across time and space. The way we understand mass atrocities and their prevention therefore needs to be ‘saturated with agency’ to a much greater extent than it is.¹⁵

On the one hand, structural or contextual factors associated with heightened risk of mass atrocities matter only inasmuch as they influence the decision making of individuals and groups, and little is more consequential than the decision making of political leaders. On the other, it is important to recognise that contextual factors are often themselves produced by the conscious decisions of national elites. Forms of government, patterns of discrimination, the quality of the rule of law, the character of national ideologies—all of these factors associated with heightened risk are human artifices usually constructed by national elites. In relation to each one, national leaders could have chosen to follow more propitious paths, as indeed they tended to do in those countries that successfully navigated their way through moments of potential crisis.¹⁶

For example, in explaining why Côte d’Ivoire ‘retreated from the brink’ in early 2011 while Rwanda spiralled into genocide 16 years earlier, Scott Straus points to the distinct approaches each country’s inaugural post-colonial leader took. Rwanda’s Grégoire Kayibanda repeatedly emphasised the threat that ethnic Tutsis represented, while Côte d’Ivoire’s Houphouët Bouigny ‘preached the values of inter-ethnic cooperation, dialogue and tolerance.’¹⁷ Another study investigated the domestic factors that were instrumental in three countries—Botswana, Zambia and Tanzania—navigating long-term risk associated with mass atrocities following independence in the 1960s. It found that effective long-term risk mitigation was in large part the product of the inclusiveness of vision, and corresponding inclusive policies implemented by these states’ founding leaders: ‘This in itself highlights the importance of individual agency in the long-term prevention of mass atrocities.’¹⁸ Evidently, not only do leaders

¹⁵ To borrow a phrase used by Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Penguin, 2012), xxvii.

¹⁶ This way of thinking about the relationship between human agency and social structures in the context of mass violence draws from Alex J Bellamy, *East Asia’s Other Miracle: Explaining the Decline of Mass Atrocities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.

¹⁷ Scott Straus, ‘Retreating from the Brink: Theorizing Mass Violence and the Dynamics of Restraint’, *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (2012): 353–55.

¹⁸ Stephen McLoughlin, *The Structural Prevention of Mass Atrocities* (London: Routledge, 2014), 159.

matter in the prevention of mass atrocities, but often their agency plays a central role in shaping and limiting scenarios of risk.

That mass atrocities tend to be deliberative and well planned is well established. This suggests the importance of leadership, and historical experience seems to bear this out. Scholars have long argued that leaders are of central importance in making purposeful decisions that lead to such violence. They argue that the leader is often the key agent responsible for instrumentalising pre-existing divisions and prejudices that escalates tensions and mobilises populations to either take part in violence, or turn a blind eye to the violence directed against collective groups.¹⁹

But as experience in Côte d'Ivoire, Botswana, Tanzania and Zambia shows, the influence of leadership goes both ways. In some cases where atrocities begin but are ended relatively early—as in the post-election violence in Kenya in 2007–8, or in the communal violence experienced in Kyrgyzstan's city of Osh in 2008—it is often political leadership that has been effective in changing course away from violence. As the next section demonstrates, there are numerous examples where leaders have helped curb mass violence and de-escalate risk. Knowing how these different scenarios unfold is crucial in developing our understanding as we continue to seek greater clarity on why, as Ban Ki-moon observed during his time as the UN's Secretary-General, 'some states have taken one path and other states a different path.'²⁰

What does this mean for how we ought to think about the prevention of mass atrocities? Surprisingly, perhaps, given the voluminous historical literature on the role of individual leaders, emerging practices, policies and theories for atrocity prevention pay scant regard to understanding the role of leaders and leadership, the importance of their decision-making, or the manner in which influence might be effectively wielded. Indeed, thus far deliberations have tended to focus on the importance of ensuring the legal accountability of leaders in the event of mass violence, without much in the way of longitudinal or case specific evidence that accountability factors into the decisions leaders make. Thus, for example, the landmark International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) report on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) acknowledged that the systematic targeting of victims was the product of a failure of both 'leadership and institutions' and observed that in cases where such targeting was occurring, sanctions that targeted leadership groups were

¹⁹ Neil J Kressel, *Mass Hate: The Global Rise of Genocide and Terror* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2002), 171; David Hamburg, *Preventing Genocide: Practical Steps Toward Early Detection and Effective Action* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2008), 34; Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Worse than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), 76.

²⁰ Ban Ki-moon, *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect: Report of the Secretary-General*, A/63/677 (2009), 20.

more effective than general sanctions.²¹ Of course, mass atrocities are not ‘failures’ of leadership but the product of wilful choices made by leadership, the means by which leaders try to get what they want. Echoing the scholarly literature on the causes of genocide and other mass atrocities, the report identified ‘leadership’ as a key causal factor but this did not translate into guidance about how this might be addressed. The report’s discussion of strategies of prevention focussed heavily on institutions such as human rights reform, improving the rule of law and the promotion of dialogue and reconciliation, but said nothing about leadership.²² In effect, then, leaders disappear from the equation when it comes to preventive policies and strategies, as if institutional reform is driven by invisible hands rather than existing political leaders.

The wider roles of leadership received more oxygen in Ban Ki-moon’s first report on the R2P principle in 2009. In it, the Secretary-General observed that atrocity crimes are the results of the actions of political leaders who make deliberate political decisions aimed at manipulating pre-existing social divisions and weak institutions.²³ Ban Ki-moon went on to point out that often weak leadership lies at the heart of mass atrocity crimes, in response to which he recommends international programmes that seek to ‘build leadership capacity’, such as work done by the UNDP and the Woodrow Wilson Centre.²⁴ The Secretary-General broke new ground by observing that ‘farsighted leadership’ can play critical roles in preventing ethnic violence, pointing explicitly to the example of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the early 1990s, which avoided mass violence as its neighbours Kosovo, Bosnia and Croatia burned. The Secretary-General also highlighted the importance that successive generations of leaders (in at-risk societies) have in preventing the kinds of ‘fissures and frustrations’ that lead to mass atrocity crimes.²⁵

Clearly, therefore, the UN’s inaugural report on R2P laid out the importance of understanding the crucial role of leadership, both in the path to the perpetration of mass atrocities and in managing risk of such violence. Yet the precise role of leadership, in terms of mass atrocity prevention, is not clear. Indeed, the report acknowledged that: ‘... more research and analysis is needed on why one society plunges into mass violence while its neighbours remain relatively stable ...’²⁶ Little was known about why many at-risk societies *do not* experience mass atrocities, let alone the role that individual leaders might have played in risk de-escalation.

²¹ International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001), 2.

²² *The Responsibility*, 19.

²³ Ki-moon, *Implementing R2P*, 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

The Secretary-General began to fill this void in a 2013 report that explored the domestic-level actors and strategies that made countries more (and less) resilient to mass atrocity risk—the first formal report on atrocity prevention to project a focus on the role that domestic actors play in avoiding mass violence. Ki-moon identified six key national sources of resilience that inhibited escalation towards mass atrocities—including constitutional protections, systems of democracy and accountability, measures addressing inequality and the criminalisation of atrocity crimes—but again opted to focus on institutional capacities and factors rather than individual agency. Indeed, none of the six sources of resilience identified individual agency and leadership as being important inhibiting factors in risk de-escalation and atrocity prevention.²⁷

Subsequent United Nations reports on atrocity prevention and R2P have continued to gloss over the role of leadership. While there are passing references to the importance of leaders as prevention actors, they tend to articulate the importance of leadership in four ways: the preventive role of local leaders;²⁸ the importance of international leadership in responding to impending or unfolding atrocities around the world;²⁹ military leadership;³⁰ and the need for strong leadership at all levels (local, national and international).³¹ The role of religious leaders has also emerged as a key focus thanks to the efforts of the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng. Nonetheless, though the idea of national leadership playing an important role in steering countries towards or away from upheaval and mass atrocities was acknowledged in the 2009 report on R2P, thinking about this important question has not advanced since.

In what remains of this essay, we want to suggest a more systematic way of thinking about this question that focuses on three critical contexts:

1. The role that leaders play in creating or inhibiting the risk of mass atrocities within societies;

²⁷ Ban Ki-moon, *Responsibility to Protect: State Responsibility and Prevention*, A/67/929-S/2013/399 (2013), 8–11.

²⁸ Ban Ki-moon, *A Vital and Enduring Commitment: Implementing the Responsibility to Protect*, A/69/981-S/2015/500 (2015), 8, 11, 20; Ban Ki-moon, *Mobilizing Collective Action: The Next Decade of the Responsibility to Protect*, A/70/999-S/2016/1620, 10, 14; António Guterres, *Implementing the Responsibility to Protect: Accountability for Protection*, A/71/1016-S/2017/556, 15; António Guterres, *Responsibility to Protect: From Early Warning to Early Action*, A/72/884-S/2018/525, 3, 4, 11, 14.

²⁹ A/69/981-S/2015/500, 13; /70/999-S/2016/1620, 14.

³⁰ A/69/981-S/2015/500, 11.

³¹ A/70/999-S/2016/1620, 10, 18; A/72/884-S/2018/525, 7.

2. The role that leaders play in driving societies ‘over the brink’ into mass atrocities and why some leaders are effective in steering countries away from mass atrocities during times of upheaval and heightened risk; and
3. Why and how some leaders put a halt to mass atrocities early.

The fateful decisions leaders make can either inhibit mass atrocities or push states and societies towards—and over—the brink, as shown in the table below. In what follows, we will examine these different roles in more detail.

	Atrocity accelerator	Atrocity inhibitor
Context	<i>Risk makers</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assads in Syria, Milošević in Serbia 	<i>Risk breakers</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East Asian governments
Crisis	<i>Drivers</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suharto in Indonesia 	<i>Preventers</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gligorov in Macedonia, Mandela in South Africa
Resolution	<i>Prolongers</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government and opposition in Syria 	<i>Terminators</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kibaki and Odinga in Kenya

The role and impact of leaders

Risk makers and risk breakers

Social contexts—the stuff of atrocity risk factors measured by early warning frameworks—do not appear out of nowhere. Sometimes, as in the case of Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot too, they are driven by ideology, the murderous intent there from the start, and an end in itself. More often, though—and this is something missed by our focus on the demagogic core—leaders create risk almost unknowingly, as a by-product of their efforts to simply cling to power in settings where most of their people would rather that they did not. A good recent example of this takes us back to where we started: Syria’s Assad family.

The Assads, father Hafez and son Bashar, played a key role in creating the conditions for mass atrocities, building a corrupt minority-led state that maintained order through the ruthless and arbitrary application of extreme violence, including killing, torture and detention. Internally divided and externally threatened, it is unsurprising that post-independence Syrian domestic politics were anything but stable. After a failed attempt at parliamentary democracy and a series of coups and counter-coups, the Ba’athists seized control of the government in 1963. Arab nationalist and determinedly socialist in orientation, the Ba’ath Party appealed to Syrian society’s outsiders, such as the

religious minorities and rural poor.³² The new government, led by Salah Jadid, embarked on a radical programme of socialist reform. Behind the scenes, Hafez al-Assad, an ambitious army officer from the minority Alawite sect, consolidated his control over the military. In November 1970, a dispute over policy on the Palestinian issue came to a head. Jadid tried to dismiss Hafez, who then led a successful coup and claimed power.

Survival was the principal goal of Hafez's new government. Hafez al-Assad proved to be a supremely gifted, if ruthless, political tactician. But he lacked a compelling strategic vision beyond survival itself.³³ His ambition was to establish a strong Ba'athist state and mass party based on socialist principles that would marshal economic development, reform the social order and empower previously marginalised groups.³⁴ The reality rarely matched the ambition and Syria lurched from crisis to crisis, the government almost permanently in crisis mode. Hafez's 'was a government which grew out of seven years of bloody struggle, and its foundations were and would remain the army, the security services, and the party and government machinery'.³⁵ Trusted loyalists, most of them Alawites, were placed in the key command positions. The security sector was purged of non-Ba'athists and of any whose loyalty to Hafez al-Assad was questioned. Thus, the new president came to rely heavily on a close network of trusted personal followers, many of them kin, for leadership of the military and security forces.³⁶ While his government's legitimacy depended on a broader coalition of allies, those outside his almost exclusively Alawi inner circle were kept well away from positions that could be used to challenge the leader's supremacy.³⁷ According to one estimate, 90 per cent of the commanders of major military formations were Alawites.³⁸ Economic benefits were given

³² John McHugo, *Syria: A Recent History* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 118–22.

³³ Central argument made by Eyal Zisser, *Assad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 190–91.

³⁴ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba'athist Syria: Army, Party and Peasant* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), 2; also Patrick Seale, *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1988).

³⁵ Seale, *Assad*, 178.

³⁶ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above* (London: Routledge, 2002), 67.

³⁷ Compare Hinnebusch, *Authoritarian Power* with Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria: Institutions and Social Conflict: 1946–1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), and Andrew Rathmell, 'Syria's Intelligence Services: Origins and Development', *Journal of Conflict Studies* 16, no. 2 (1996): 75–96.

³⁸ Eyal Zisser, 'Appearance and Reality: Syria's Decision-Making Structure', *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 2, no. 2 (1998): 29–41.

to key allies, part of a highly corrupt patronage network designed to keep the Assads in power.

This was all part of the government's attempt to 'coup-proof' itself. To this, Hafez added a complex system of multiple overlapping security agencies, including the military, the secret police, six intelligence agencies (five of which focused primarily on 'internal' threats) and government militia—known collectively as the *mukhabarat*.³⁹ The feared *mukhabarat* enjoyed complete impunity and autonomy, and were responsible for policing Syrian society as well as each other. Their activities were governed by an 'emergency law' first enacted in 1963 and still in force at the beginning of 2011, which allowed the security forces to detain, try and sentence people—in secret—under the rubric of 'protecting the state'.⁴⁰ Numbering between 50,000 and 70,000 officers, these agencies supported operations overseas and extensive activities at home. Each agency also operated its own prisons and interrogation centres that enjoyed almost complete independence and faced little in the way of oversight or scrutiny.⁴¹ *Mukhabarat* members enjoyed immunity from prosecution for any actions undertaken in the service of the state. Together, the security services maintained a dense network of surveillance and regularly used arrests, imprisonment, torture and extra-judicial killings to intimidate or eliminate actual or suspected opponents. In 1982, the security forces brutally repressed an uprising in Hama, killing 30,000 in the process. A demonstration of what the security forces were willing to do to keep the Assads in power, and a portent of worse to come.

Bashar al-Assad's ascendancy to the presidency in 2000 was greeted with optimism. The new leader promised reforms but the hope was short lived. The *mukhabarat* state prevailed. Indeed, if anything, the *mukhabarat* became a more visible part of daily life in Syria. According to a 2010 report by Human Rights Watch, 'Syria's security agencies ... detain people without arrest warrants and torture with complete impunity'.⁴² In 2003 there were an estimated 1,000 political prisoners.⁴³

Thus, on the eve of the 'Arab Spring', Syria was a society on the brink, put there largely by the policy choices of its own leaders. Resentments over past violence, the privations caused by the *mukhabarat* state and Bashar's failure to deliver on reform ran deep. Economic hardships had grown, displacing whole communities, and the government had failed to offer any respite. Most Syrians

³⁹ On the establishment of the security state in Syria see Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in*.

⁴⁰ Lesch, *Syria*, 71.

⁴¹ Alan George, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom* (London: Zed Press, 2003), 2.

⁴² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/07/16/syria-al-asads-decade-power-marked-repression>.

⁴³ International Crisis Group, 'Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges', Feb. 11, 2005, 11.

were deeply dissatisfied with their government, many loathed it, and a large number wanted it overthrown.

But national leaders can choose different paths. It is instructive to compare the experience of different regions on this point. Etel Solingen did just that in a landmark study that compared post-colonial East Asia with the Middle East. Both had emerged from colonisation around the same time, both were plagued by territorial disputes and ideological fissures, and in the 1950s they had similar types of highly centralised authoritarian states. They both had societies dominated by conservative feudal lords and military elites. In some respects, the Middle East's starting position was better than East Asia's since it enjoyed a higher degree of cultural similarity and fewer sharp ideological divides. From that point on, however, the two regions took very different paths. Most East Asian states consciously prioritised economic development through industrialisation and trade. National resources and government energies were directed towards supporting industrialisation. Intra-regional trade grew strongly, creating its own demands for regional stability and establishing national elites with international interests. The region developed strong anti-war norms of non-interference that helped stabilise relations between states. Middle Eastern governments, on the other hand, preferred self-sufficiency over trade, state-led rather than state-supported entrepreneurship and privileged the military, the military-industrial complex and militarised conceptions of security over the civilian economy.⁴⁴ In the Middle East, war remained a persistent feature of political life. In East Asia, it declined dramatically. The incidence of armed conflict in the Middle East was some five times greater than in East Asia. The principal cause of this marked difference, Solingen found, was the prioritisation of economics by East Asian governments and the outward-looking and trade-focused path to development they embraced. The prioritisation of 'economic development' in East Asia, Rosemary Foot writes, 'reflects a widely held belief among many of the elites in these states that there is a reciprocal relationship between economic growth and the promotion of regime and state security'.⁴⁵

Our point here is that East Asian governments *chose* to prioritise economic development rather than military spending. Ironically, East Asia's path away from mass atrocities was shaped by a country that had recently perpetrated massive atrocity crimes but that was now looking to turn its back on that past. The adoption of the developmental trading state model began in Japan immediately after World War Two. It did not take long for others in the region

⁴⁴ Etel Solingen, 'Pax Asiatica versus Belli Levantina: The Foundations of War and Peace in East Asia and the Middle East', *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007): 758.

⁴⁵ Rosemary Foot, 'Social Boundaries in Flux: Secondary Regional Organizations as a Reflection of Regional International Society', in *Contesting International Society in East Asia*, eds. Barry Buzan and Yongjin Zhang (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 196.

to notice Japan's remarkable post-war economic growth and try to emulate it. Another war-stricken country, Taiwan—an island state built on the remnants of China's nationalist government—quickly adopted Japanese style priorities and policies, with similar results. Not every government intervention was effective, of course, but the cumulative prioritisation of economic development, building of public-private partnerships and promotion of foreign trade yielded positive results overall. Taiwan was followed by Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea—the growth of an educated middle class in the latter eventually propelling political reform, as well as elites realising the economic costs of trying to hang on to authoritarian government. Then Malaysia and Thailand followed, as authoritarian governments in Indonesia and The Philippines also tried, and failed, to mimic the model, prompting relatively peaceful transitions to democracy there too. And, as national leaders came to prioritise economic growth at the expense of military growth, ideological crusades and sectarian division, so the incidence of mass atrocities and the risks associated with them declined. As a result of that, one of the most violent and atrocity-risk prone parts of the world became progressively more peaceful as the social context of risk receded.⁴⁶

Our point here is that just as the Assads played an instrumental role in *creating* the risk of mass atrocities in Syria, and successive governments in Sudan and Rwanda did the same, a number of leaders in East Asia played pivotal roles in dampening risks and helping their countries navigate difficult challenges without mass violence. The key lesson in all this is that, as Scott Straus has argued in the context of post-independence Africa, we need to pay much more attention to the states and societies that leaders build and shape, and think more carefully about how to engage earlier to inhibit the drift towards atrocities. As Straus explains, 'the long-term best asset against the risk of genocide and mass categorical violence is to craft a political vision that incorporates a role for multiple identities as fundamental to the project of the state'.⁴⁷ The key to this, Straus argues, is for national leaders to 'articulat[e] a nationalist narrative of pluralism and inclusion [which] provides the greatest source of restraint'.⁴⁸ Whether or not they do matters a great deal.

Drivers and inhibitors

Even in situations of risk, political leaders have choices about the type of political, institutional and economic paths they want to take. These choices are not pre-determined, but they are immensely consequential. We know this because societies with similar structural conditions can experience wildly different

⁴⁶ The central argument of Bellamy, *East Asia's Other Miracle*.

⁴⁷ Straus, *Making and Unmaking*, 323.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

trajectories owing to the decisions their leaders make. To give one example, Zimbabwe from the early 2000s contained all the elements necessary for internal conflict and mass atrocities. That it has not suffered the same fate as many of its neighbours owes much to the conscious decision of opposition leader Morgan Tsangirai to keep peace.⁴⁹

It is not difficult to see evidence of leaders driving a politics of fear that push societies to the brink. For example, we can see it in the current Hungarian government's rhetoric and policy of marginalisation and discrimination directed towards the country's Roma population and refugees. We see it also in the sectarian preferences exhibited by states across the Middle Eastern region—practices that sowed the seeds of resentment, violent conflict and mass atrocities.⁵⁰

It is also clear to see leaders driving states and societies over the brink. In fact, as a wide range of studies have demonstrated, mass atrocities rarely happen in the absence of humane leadership.⁵¹ Take for example the mass killing of alleged communists in Indonesia in 1965–66, long regarded as an example of organised frenzied violence. The famous anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who was well aware of the killings, ascribed the violence to cultural factors, specifically 'popular savagery' driven by pent up frustrations.⁵² But it is now clear that the atrocities were planned, instigated and organised by the Indonesian army that was led by the country's incoming president, Suharto.

In late September 1965, a small group of Indonesian military officers with putative ties to the Communist Party (PKI), kidnapped and killed six senior army officers in what is widely thought to have been an attempted coup in support of Indonesia's increasingly leftward leaning President, General Sukarno. The army, led by General Suharto, quickly suppressed the coup and killed the ringleaders. The army then initiated the PKI's violent destruction. Between October 1965 and March 1966, around 500,000–600,000 Indonesians were slaughtered by the army and allied militia, religious youth groups

⁴⁹ On which, see Stephen Chan, *Citizen of Zimbabwe: Conversations with Morgan Tsangirai* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2010).

⁵⁰ Daniel Byman, 'Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East', *Survival* 56, no. 1 (2014): 79–100 and Christopher Phillips, 'Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria', *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2015): 357–76.

⁵¹ The literature on this is extensive. For example, see Kuper, *Genocide*; Fein, *Accounting for*; Goldhagen, *Worse than*; and Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* (London: Hurst and Co., 2014).

⁵² Clifford Geertz, 'Afterword: The Politics of Meaning', in *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Claire Holt (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 282, and Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 332.

and zealous mobs.⁵³ The killing was remarkable for its speed and intensity. Suharto employed units with strong anti-communist credentials KOSTRAD (reservists under Suharto's command) and RPKAD (elite units, staunchly anti-communist) to spearhead the killings.⁵⁴ The campaign began in Central Java and moved quickly to East Java and other provinces, Suharto claiming the purge was an 'absolutely essential cleaning out' of communists.⁵⁵ The army encouraged the establishment of militias and offered them the political authority, training, arms and logistical support they needed to conduct mass killings.⁵⁶

Although much of the killing was not done by the military, in most cases militias, youth groups and mobs did not start committing atrocities until elite military units arrived to direct, encourage and enable violence by instructing and arming the groups. In October 1965, the army worked hard to whip up a 'near hysterical anti-communist pogrom'.⁵⁷ Killing was typically initiated by the military and then continued by others at the military's urging.⁵⁸ The massacres were planned and orchestrated by the army with the intention of

⁵³ An army fact-finding commission put the figure at 78,500, but this has widely been criticised as being too low. Some estimates put the death toll at 2 million. Another official report, by KOPKAMTIB, estimated that 800,000 had been killed in central and eastern Java, and another 100,000 in both Bali and Sumatra, putting the total at 1 million. See Robert Cribb, 'Problems in the Historiography of the Killings in Indonesia', in *The Indonesian Killings 1965–1966: Studies From Java and Bali*, ed. Robert Cribb (Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash, 1990), 7, and Arnold C. Brackman, *The Communist Collapse in Indonesia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 115. Today the figure of 400,000–500,000 is generally accepted by the Indonesian government.

⁵⁴ John Hughes, *Indonesian Upheaval* (New York: David McKay Co., 1967), 132.

⁵⁵ Brackman, *The Communist*, 119; Robert Cribb and Colin Brown, *Modern Indonesia: A History Since 1945 (The Postwar World)* (New York: Longman, 1995), 100. The actual complicity of the PKI remains a question of considerable doubt.

⁵⁶ Cribb, 'Problems in', 21.

⁵⁷ Michael van Langenberg, 'Gestapu and State Power in Indonesia', in *The Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966: Studies From Java and Bali* (Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990), 49.

⁵⁸ For example, Kenneth Orr, 'Schooling and Village Politics in Central Java in the Time of Turbulence', in *The Indonesian Killings 1965–1966: Studies From Java and Bali*, ed. Robert Cribb (Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990), 182–91, and Robert Cribb, 'Bali', in *The Indonesian Killings 1965–1966: Studies From Java and Bali*, ed. Robert Cribb (Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990), 182–91.

eliminating the PKI.⁵⁹ As Julie Southwood and Patrick Flanagan note: 'The Indonesian massacre was essentially a project of systematically indiscriminate killing. A project connotes aims, means and responsibility. It was systematic in that the military leadership clearly defined the set of victims: the PKI and its sympathisers. It was indiscriminate in that within the category of victims specified, all members were to be killed regardless of age, sex, guilt or any other criteria.'⁶⁰ By March 1966, the atrocities had achieved the army's objective of eliminating the PKI and it moved to end the killing and restore order.⁶¹ The deal was sealed by the elevation of General Suharto to the presidency.

There is abundant evidence that the military's senior leadership wilfully drove their country over the edge into mass atrocities. General Nasution, one of the survivors of the coup, instructed that, 'all of their [PKI] followers and sympathisers should be eliminated, otherwise the incident will recur.' The PKI, he argued, should be exterminated 'down to its very roots.'⁶² Nasution insisted that 'they must be immediately smashed' because 'they have committed treason.'⁶³ Army propagandists insisted that 'the sword cannot be met by the Koran ... but must be met by the sword. The Koran says that whoever opposes you should be opposed as they oppose you.'⁶⁴ The army forced or simply fabricated confessions from PKI leaders that intimated a deep plot to take over the country and impose communism.⁶⁵ In addition, the army concocted lurid stories about the torture, humiliation and mutilation of the six general who were killed and claimed that naked female communists danced over the generals' bodies. Images portraying these horrific scenes were frequently broadcast on television.⁶⁶ The communist assault on Indonesia's way of life and their perverted brutality required a thorough 'cleansing' and the killing was often described

⁵⁹ Julie Southwood and Patrick Flanagan, *Indonesia: Law, Propaganda and Terror* (London: Zed Press, 1983), 73.

⁶⁰ Southwood and Flanagan, *Indonesia: Law*, 73.

⁶¹ Robert Cribb, 'Nation: Making Indonesia', in *Indonesia Beyond Suharto: Polity, Economy, Society, Transition*, ed. Donald K. Emmerson (Armonk: ME Sharpe, 1999), 33. As one officer put it, 'the people regained confidence in the government as a result of its positive actions to restore security and order'.

⁶² Cited by Brackman, *The Communist*, 117.

⁶³ Cited by Hughes, *Indonesian Upheaval*, 189.

⁶⁴ Geoffrey Robinson, 'The Post-Coup Massacre in Bali', in *Making Indonesia: Essays on Modern Indonesia in Honour of George McT. Kahin*, eds. Daniel S. Lev and Ruth McVey (Ithaca: Southeast Asian Program Publications, Cornell University), 124.

⁶⁵ Dinas Sejarah, 'TNI—Angkatan Darat—Crushing the G30S/PKI in Central Java', in *The Indonesian Killings 1965–1966: Studies From Java and Bali*, ed. Robert Cribb (Melbourne: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash, 1990), 165.

⁶⁶ Rex Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism under Sukarno: Ideology and Politics, 1959–1965* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 389.

in this way by the army and its allies.⁶⁷ The army made a point of portraying the communists as denigrating traditional Indonesian beliefs, be they Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian or nationalist.⁶⁸

But leaders can also be proactive in introducing policies and strategies to confront escalating tensions even in the midst of crisis. In the early 1990s, as the Former Republic of Yugoslavia was fragmenting amid tension and conflict, the newly independent Republic of Macedonia stood at a crossroad. With minority Serbs and Albanians raising grievances, and Serbia threatening military action against Macedonia's recent secession, the country appeared to be on the brink of war. That Macedonia avoided the conflict and mass atrocities that unfolded in Croatia and then Bosnia, was largely due to its new president, Kiro Gligorov, but also other political and ethnic leaders.

Gligorov succeeded in negotiating an agreement with Serbia that was instrumental in defusing tensions between Skopje and Belgrade. Macedonia's declaration of independence in September 1991, took place in a climate of high tension. Secessions in Slovenia and Croatia earlier in the year had triggered violent clashes in both states with the Yugoslav National Army (JNA). JNA units were still stationed throughout Macedonia, making military reprisal a real possibility.⁶⁹ Gligorov negotiated with the Serbian government on the removal of all JNA units, securing an agreement in early February 1992. The agreement guaranteed the total withdrawal of JNA troops, while leaving behind some military equipment. The departure of the JNA decreased the likelihood of Serbian military interference in the nascent state of Macedonia.

Yet this move did not affect the possibility of internal identity-based tensions from escalating. There were two chief fault lines along which problems could potentially arise—between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Macedonians; and between Albanians and ethnic Macedonians. Leaders in the Macedonian government chose a path of accommodation and dialogue with the leaders of the largest Serbian political party, the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia (DPSM). This led to an agreement that leaders on both sides signed in mid-1993, the terms of which included constitutional recognition of Serbs, greater media access and greater resources for Serbian language education. In return, the DPSM agreed to put an end to their opposition to Macedonia's statehood. As Ackerman points out, following the agreement, major confrontations between Serbs and Macedonian authorities ceased.⁷⁰

Accommodation and dialogue between leaders lay at the heart of managing tensions between ethnic Albanians and Slavic Macedonians. Prior to independence, the Macedonian government allowed ethnic Albanian political parties to be established, facilitating a range of voices and demands from the

⁶⁷ Cribb, 'Problems', 24, 30.

⁶⁸ See Robinson, 'The Post-Coup', 124.

⁶⁹ Alice Ackermann, *Making Peace Prevail: Preventing Violent Conflict in Macedonia* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 82.

⁷⁰ Ackermann, *Making Peace*, 87.

Albanian community. While tensions remained high in the first couple of years of independence, the Macedonian government took political inclusion a step further by introducing power sharing measures. Five Albanians were elevated to ministers between 1990 and 1994, and following this, the number was four.⁷¹ The government also agreed to include Albanian language programmes on the state-run television channels and radio stations and supported the daily publication of an Albanian language newspaper.⁷² While these measures were still not regarded as sufficient by many in the Albanian community, grievances—particularly in the first few years of independence—were mostly aired in non-violent ways. Most Albanian leaders did not advocate the use of violence in their push for greater recognition.⁷³ Indeed, they themselves were measured in how far they would push their specific agendas for more autonomy within the newly independent state.⁷⁴ In an effort to place limits on Macedonian nationalism, Gligorov and other ministers were proactive in constructing a national identity that was broad based and inclusive. They did this by downplaying myths and avoiding extremist nationalist rhetoric in a variety of public forums and political debates.⁷⁵

Finally, Gligorov was aware that the departure of the JNA left Macedonia vulnerable to potential outside military threats. In an effort to avoid the possibility of the descent into violence that occurred in other newly independent states from the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, Gligorov made a personal appeal to the United Nations for military assistance. The UN Preventive Deployment Force (UNPREDEP)⁷⁶ was authorised at the end of 1992. Gligorov first flagged the idea for a preventive deployment in December 1991 in a meeting with Cyrus Vance, UN special envoy at the time. He then made an official appeal in November 1992, as the conflict in Bosnia was rapidly escalating, amidst growing concerns that violence would spill over into Macedonia. In a letter to Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Gligorov proposed a 'preventive mission', which then led to the authorisation of UNPROFOR's deployment along Macedonia's borders. This then evolved into UNPREDEP in 1995. UNPREDEP is broadly credited with playing a key role in preventing war from spilling over into Macedonia.⁷⁷ Gligorov, along with other political leaders in Macedonia, were instrumental in preventing identity-based violence in

⁷¹ Ackermann, *Making Peace*, 90.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷⁴ Stefan Troebst, 'An Ethnic War that Did Not Take Place: Macedonia, its Minorities and its Neighbours in the 1990s', in *War and Ethnicity: Global Connections and Local Violence*, ed. David Turton (San Francisco: Boydell Press, 1997), 90–91.

⁷⁵ Ackermann, *Making Peace*, 95.

⁷⁶ UNPREDEP was part of the larger UN Protection Force in the Former Yugoslavia (UNPROFOR).

⁷⁷ Ackermann, *Making Peace*, 84; Raimo Väyrynen, 'Challenges to Preventive Action: The Cases of Kosovo and Macedonia', in *Conflict Prevention: Path to*

the early years of the country's independence. Their strategies anticipated and targeted multiple flashpoints, which meant that preventive strategies they instigated included accommodation of and dialogue with the country's minority groups; the effective negotiating of the JNA's departure; and the facilitation of an international military presence, which helped to plug the gap in the nascent country's security capacity during an extremely volatile period.

Mediation, compromise and public appeals based on inclusive ideas also lay at the heart of South Africa's transformation from Apartheid state to universal enfranchisement, steered by Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk. The avoidance of mass atrocities during this transition in the early 1990s was a product of de Klerk's commitment to dismantling Apartheid, Mandela's willingness to shift away from some of the ANC's more radical objectives, and the readiness of both to consult and compromise. These factors ensured that South Africa's transformation had widespread support. They were also instrumental in preventing extremist groups on both sides of the political divide from provoking widespread conflict. Yet, the transition away from Apartheid took place in a context of rising inter-group tension and violence, and widespread mistrust. The challenges, on de Klerk's part, of managing rogue elements within the security establishment, and on Mandela's part of dampening tensions between Inkatha Freedom Party supporters and ANC supporters, made the prospect of a peaceful transition insurmountable at times. However, both leaders were instrumental in navigating the country to peaceful elections in 1994.

Two moments stand out. The first was a speech made by de Klerk on 2 February 1990, when he announced the lifting of the ban on previously illegal opposition parties, the repeal of the 1953 Separate Amenities Act and the immediate and unconditional release of Mandela.⁷⁸ This sudden and dramatic change heralded the instant end of the Apartheid system, and belied de Klerk's record as a solid advocate of National Party policies to that point. However, upon becoming president in 1989, he concluded that a continuation of the status quo would place the country on an irreversibly destructive path.⁷⁹ In his opening speech to parliament, he prefaced the rescinding of Apartheid policies by stating that 'only a negotiated understanding among the representative leaders of the entire population is able to ensure lasting peace. The alternative is growing violence, tension and conflict'.⁸⁰ With a single speech, de Klerk announced to the country a radical change of direction. Far from alienating the white population, the

Peace or Grand Illusion?, eds. David Carment and Albrecht Schabe (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2003), 50–53.

⁷⁸ Betty Glad and Robert Banton, 'F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela: A Study in Cooperative Transformational Leadership', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1997): 565–90, 567.

⁷⁹ Betty Glad, 'Passing the Baton: Transformative Political Leadership from Gorbachev to Yeltsin; From de Klerk to Mandela', *Political Psychology* 17, no. 1 (1996), 1–28: 3.

⁸⁰ F.W. de Klerk, 'Address by the State President, F. W. de Klerk, DMS, at the Opening of the Second Session of the Ninth Parliament of the Republic of

speech won the support of most South Africans, including the white population. According to one journalist, people 'were propelled by the sheer excitement of a journey undertaken at last'.⁸¹ A referendum conducted two years later confirmed that two thirds of the white population were indeed in favour of these reforms.⁸² It was de Klerk's decisive public announcement that marked the end of Apartheid, and won widespread support, both among the minority white and broader South African population.

The second moment was Mandela's commitment to diffusing inter-ethnic tensions in the year leading up to the election in 1994. Between 1990 and 1994, inter-group tensions grew increasingly violent and threatened to derail the transition to democracy. This provoked tensions on two fronts—between supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the ANC, but also between Mandela and de Klerk.⁸³ In this four-year period, the IFP perpetrated thousands of human rights violations, including the Boipatong massacre, which resulted in forty-five deaths, prompting the ANC to temporarily halt transition talks with the South African government and other groups.⁸⁴ In the wake of this, Mandela faced calls from his own supporters to abandon peaceful strategies and resume an armed struggle. His public response to such calls was emphatic and uncompromising, using his own position to drive home a path of peace: 'If you have no discipline, you are not a freedom fighter. If you are going to kill innocent people, you don't belong to the ANC. Your task is reconciliation'.⁸⁵ Violence escalated again in 1993, with the assassination of Chris Hani, leader of the South African Communist Party and head of the ANC's armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, by a white nationalist. This triggered widespread riots that threatened to escalate to full blown war. Again, Mandela publicly diffused tensions and steered public rhetoric away from calls for retribution.⁸⁶ Mandela's determination to transition away from Apartheid through negotiation and not

South Africa, Cape Town, February 2, 1990', <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/documents/fw-de-klerks-address-of-february-2-1990>.

⁸¹ Journalist Bill Keller, quoted in Glad and Banton, 'F.W. de Klerk and Mandela', 567.

⁸² Glad and Banton, 'F.W. de Klerk and Mandela', 570.

⁸³ The tensions between Mandela and de Klerk increased partly due to the South African security establishment's covert support of IFP's militant activities, though de Klerk later claimed that he had knowledge of government involvement in such violence. See Tom Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 170.

⁸⁴ Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, Volume 2*, 1998, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%202.pdf>, 583–84.

⁸⁵ Nelson Mandela, quoted in Martin Meredith, *Mandela: A Biography* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 495.

⁸⁶ Lodge, *Mandela*, 180–82.

violence, and his calls for supporters to refrain from responding violently to inter-group violence provoked by both the IFP and security forces, were instrumental in navigating the country back from the brink of conflict in 1993 and the final months leading up to the elections in April 1994.

Thus, Gligorov and Mandela chose a path different to Suharto, Nasution and their allies, and managed political transitions without mass bloodshed. And while Indonesia pressed on into a bloody war of aggression in Timor Leste and civil war in Aceh that were resolved only decades later with Suharto's forced removal from office, both Macedonia and South Africa emerged from their transitions into a period free from mass killing, both avoiding the very real potential for civil war. Understanding why Gligorov and Mandela chose this path, setting out precisely how both they and their countries benefitted immensely from their actions, and figuring out how others might be encouraged to follow suit, ought to become central avenues of research for those concerned with preventing future violence.

Prolongers and terminators

Once mass killing erupts, leaders make choices about whether to prolong the violence in the hope of getting themselves a better outcome or to prioritise the lives of their people by looking for ways out of the violence. Of course, the choices leaders make are influenced and constrained by their context, ideology and the situation around them, but nevertheless there is ample evidence to suggest that national leaders often do have the room to change their mind if they so choose. Even leaders who for a time drive their societies over the brink are capable of walking them back. In 1995, for example, Slobodan Milošević, the architect and chief prolonger of war, mass atrocities and genocide in former Yugoslavia, decided to abandon the Bosnian Serbs in order to protect his own domestic position.

We can return to the Syrian tragedy for an example of leaders choosing to prolong rather than terminate atrocities, calculating that they could get a better deal by killing more people. In 2012, a plan put forward by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan seemed to offer a chance for peace. Yet by all indications, despite enjoying the UN Security Council's formal support, the plan seemed doomed to failure from the beginning. Why?

Most commentators acknowledge that the Annan plan's failure was caused by forces beyond Annan's control, principally that neither the government nor the opposition was wholly committed to it and that the major powers were deeply divided about it.⁸⁷ Annan explained that 'without serious, purposeful

⁸⁷ Julien Barnes-Dacey, 'West Should Give Annan Plan another Chance', CNN, July 31, 2012, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/07/31/west-should-give-annan-plan-another-chance/>.

and united international pressure, including from the powers in the region, it is impossible for me, or anyone, to compel the Syrian government in the first place, and also the opposition, to take the steps necessary to begin a political process.⁸⁸

First, the Syrian government was never committed to the peace process and likely never intended to entertain a political process that would result in it having to share power or lose power altogether. Russian support for the April 12 ceasefire persuaded Damascus to accept the plan and even to restrain its use of heavy weapons, but, Annan argues, ‘sustained international support did not follow.’ As the ceasefire unravelled, ‘the government, realizing that there would be no consequences if it returned to an overt military campaign, reverted to using heavy weapons in towns.’ Then, having tried to reinvigorate the process by securing an agreement in Geneva on the need for a political transition, no pressure was brought to bear to force Assad to accept it.⁸⁹ Likewise, the armed opposition—emboldened by international support and convinced that Assad’s days were numbered—viewed the initiative as a means to the end of removing Assad. Annan’s deputies, al-Qudwa and Martin Griffiths, engaged with the opposition but found them uncompromising. One UN official, for example, visited the Free Syrian Army and found that the Army believed that NATO was poised to intervene as it had in Libya and this was only a matter of time.⁹⁰ That belief, combined with the influx of weapons from outside, made the opposition think that victory was inevitable. As such, they had few incentives to compromise, and instead looked only to use the process for their advantage. What is more, even had the SNC, for example, been more fully committed, the opposition lacked sufficient unity and coherence to hold the ceasefire together.

Second, Annan could only paper over the deep international fissures for so long. It was immediately clear that the Geneva Communiqué had done little to alleviate the problem. Governments offered wildly different interpretations of what had been agreed. Ultimately, international support for Annan was lukewarm at best, and in some quarters actively hostile. No state was prepared to prioritise the peace plan above their own positions on Syria’s future. Ultimately, while the Kremlin was prepared to urge Damascus to accept Annan’s six-point plan, it had no intention of allowing material pressure to be brought against it. When Moscow reached the limits of its influence, it chose to protect the regime. Russia was adamant that the armed opposition was as much to blame as the

⁸⁸ Cited in Rick Gladstone, ‘Annan Steps Down as Peace Envoy and Cites Barriers in Syria and the United Nations’, *New York Times*, Aug. 3, 2012, A6.

⁸⁹ Kofi Annan, ‘My Departing Advice on How to Save Syria’, *Financial Times*, Aug. 3, 2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/b00b6ed4-dbc9-11e1-8d78-00144feab49a>.

⁹⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch and I William Zartman, *UN Mediation in the Syrian Crisis: From Kofi Annan to Lakhdar Brahimi*, New York Peace Institute, Mar., 2016, 11.

government for the breakdown of the ceasefire, arguing that the opposition had tried to exploit the ceasefire in order to gain territory. On the other side, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia voiced disquiet about the process before it had even begun, Saudi Arabia for example criticising Annan for even engaging with Assad.⁹¹ All three continued to supply or facilitate the supply of arms to the opposition during (albeit not at the levels seen after the process collapsed), and none used their influence over the opposition to encourage it to comply with the ceasefire. All gave the impression that the process was but a stepping stone towards more robust military support for the opposition. The opposition, then, saw little reason to compromise.

Third, there was a pronounced gap between the glacial pace of political negotiations and the deteriorating situation on the ground. The Syrian leadership negotiated while simultaneously stepping up its military actions. As violence escalated, it was clear that the non-coercive approach was not working. Indeed, many in the West worried that the process itself was providing cover for the continuation of violence and that the Russians were stalling in order to buy time for Damascus. There was little point persisting with a failing strategy, they argued, but there was little idea of what could replace it. The peace process collapsed and Syria's war entered a new, even deadlier, phase. At the time of writing, more than 500,000 Syrians had been killed and 6.5 million forced out of the country.

But it does not have to be like this. The ethnic violence that erupted in the aftermath of the disputed 30 December 2007 elections in Kenya was quickly stemmed by both sides of the political divide who agreed to negotiate a compromise that left neither with everything they wanted, but which saved their country from the fate that befell Syria.⁹² While up to 1,500 people were killed and 300,000 displaced, a coordinated diplomatic effort by a troika of eminent persons mandated by the African Union (AU), spearheaded by Kofi Annan and supported by the UN Secretary-General, persuaded the country's president, Mwai Kibaki and main opponent, Raila Odinga, to conclude a power-sharing agreement and rein in the violent mobs. This prevented what many feared could have been the beginning of a much worse campaign of mass atrocities.

⁹¹ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 161.

⁹² For example, Gareth Evans, *Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocities Once and For All* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2009), 106; Desmond Tutu, 'Taking the Responsibility to Protect', *New York Times*, Nov. 9, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/19/opinion/19iht-edtutu.1.10186157.html>; Donald Steinberg, 'Responsibility to Protect: Coming of Age?', *Global Responsibility to Protect* 1, no. 4 (2009): 432–41. For the most comprehensive account to date see Elizabeth Lindenmayer and Josie Lianna Kaye, *A Choice for Peace? The Story of Forty-One Days of Mediation in Kenya*, International Peace Institute, Aug., 2009.

When genocide and mass atrocities erupt, the degree to which global actors can make a difference depends on whether local and national leaders are willing to reach compromises and pull their followers back from violence. Do they believe, for instance, that their reputations and futures could be adversely affected by escalating violence? When they do not care what others think, have very different value systems, see their choices in existential terms and/or are highly resentful of external interference, the range of options for international action narrows markedly. Very often, decisions about whether to prolong or terminate atrocities are driven by domestic politics and personal ambitions. In practice, political leaders tend to be swayed more by what their political allies and financial backers are telling them than by the protests of outsiders. If major trading, economic, political or security partners are capable of making—and are prepared to make—perpetrators pay a significant price for bad behaviour, they will weigh their options differently. Such partners can, of course, act as spoilers instead. Whatever focus we take, more attention needs to be paid to how and why leaders choose to prolong or terminate mass atrocities.

Conclusion

When it comes to understanding mass atrocities and their prevention, leadership and individual responsibility are crucial. The intent and receptiveness of national leaders is of uttermost importance. Intransigent leaders can incite and perpetuate violence, block international action, refuse to implement agreements, stir up distrust and animosity towards the United Nations. Consensual preventive measures tend to have limited effect when leaders are intransigent. Receptive leaders, however, can negotiate and peacefully resolve crises, are open to persuasion, and are more likely to implement agreements.

In this essay we have begun to sketch out a typology of the roles that leaders can play as a first step towards a more detailed understanding of leadership and, critically, of how leadership can be used to support the prevention of mass atrocities. Our central argument is that the emerging field of atrocity prevention must pay far greater attention to questions of human agency than it hitherto has. As this avenue of enquiry develops, three critical sets of questions will need to be addressed.

First, we will need to develop more comprehensive accounts of the relationship between leaders' agency and the social, historical, institutional and normative structures they inhabit. We have proposed here that leaders typically have sufficient agency to make fateful choices but clearly the degree of agency they have is bounded by context. To better understand the extent of agency that leaders enjoy, we will need a more differentiated account of how different contexts impact and shape agency. We have also suggested that leaders are not passive recipients of social context, but often play a determining role in shaping that

context. Once again though, greater specificity is needed to understand the different roles that different sorts of leaders play.

Second, and following on from this, we will need to develop frameworks for better understanding different leadership types, drivers and causal influences to afford us sharper analytical and predictive tools.⁹³

Third, we might also look for leadership in different places. For example, in 2013–14, the Nobel Prize-winning Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet comprising civil society organisations representing organised labour, the private sector, the legal profession and human rights advocates, navigated the country peacefully through a political transition that contained all the portents of violence and atrocities. Similarly, in 2013, KEPSA—a Kenyan Private Sector Alliance—played a pivotal role in supporting atrocity prevention activities that helped the country avoid a repeat of the violence resulting from elections from 2007 to 2008.

When it comes to understanding and preventing mass atrocities, leadership matters. In this essay we have explored some of the different ways in which it matters, but this is a field of exploration that has a long way yet to go.

⁹³ A useful start is Bruce W. Jentleson, *The Peacemakers: Leadership Lessons from Twentieth-century Statesmanship* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018).