



POLICY BRIEF 2/2019

Involving civil society in atrocity prevention: Input from the MENA region

In the field of mass atrocity prevention, there is a need to connect the research on risk assessment and early warning with civil society actors who work on the ground in conflict-ridden societies. These actors can potentially contribute to the research on atrocity prevention due to their intimate knowledge about how conflicts evolve. Also, they may contribute to early warning by using indicators identified in the field as reference points in their own analyses and advocacy.

On this background, Minority Rights Group International (MRG) and the Minority Network at the Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies decided to jointly organise a workshop to bridge gaps between civil society organisations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and existing research in the field of atrocity prevention. The discussions addressed some selected early warning indicators and the Peoples under Threat (PUT) index by MRG. This report presents the main points from the workshop discussions, and assesses the potential of mutual knowledge-sharing between researchers and local civil society actors.

Workshop on risk assessment and early warning, Tunis, 1 October 2018

Participants in the workshop included NGO representatives from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco. The workshop was structured around presentations from researcher Ellen E. Stensrud from the Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies and program director Carl Soderbergh from Minority Rights Group International. Participants engaged in plenary and group discussions on the topic. The workshop was moderated by Ingvill T. Plesner, project manager of the Minority Network at the Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies.

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Risk assessment (RA) and early warning (EW)¹

In the broad field of mass atrocity prevention, researchers and civil society groups have developed sets of indicators or warning signals that can be divided into the subfields of risk assessment (RA) and early warning (EW). The most systematic and well-established RA and EW systems refer to the gravest forms of atrocities, such as genocide and large-scale political mass violence (“politicide”).

RA indicators usually refer to structural features of a country that seldom change quickly, and give an overall picture of risk, but does not tell whether, when or why atrocities will occur. The most central RA indicators include instability and armed conflict; ideology of a transformative or exclusionary nature; and prior discrimination and unpunished violence against a potential victim group. Together, these factors help single out cases where genocide or mass atrocity is most likely to occur.

EW indicators refer to escalation or tipping points once a conflict is underway, in countries that are usually already on the RA radar. These indicators may change quickly, and are often context-specific. EW indicators can be used to look more closely at countries already considered at risk of mass atrocities, to gain a more precise picture of the risk and possibly to advocate for efforts to prevent them.

Regarding EW indicators, there is less agreement and certainty among researchers and fewer systematic efforts to evaluate their capability to predict or mass atrocities. The list of potential EW indicators is long, and centres around topics related to polarisation or violent changes in the leadership and regime; increased discrimination and hateful rhetoric; and escalating conflict dynamics.

The manifestations of EW indicators will vary from case to case and over the span of a conflict. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that civil society organisations (CSOs) on the ground in affected societies can play a role in informing and utilising EW indicators. CSOs could provide expert knowledge on the periods preceding atrocities, thus contributing to further developing these indexes. Further, if CSOs are aware of existing EW indexes, they can use these when they report on the situations in their countries.

On this background, MRG and the Minority Network at the Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies engaged the participants at the workshop in Tunis in a discussion of the relevance of RA and EW. We chose to focus on two EW indicators that were both relevant for the region and possible for CSOs to report on and advocate for, and thereby potentially relevant for the organisations’ work:

- Rhetoric that increases risk of violence
- Impunity for past and ongoing crimes

Experiences from the ground: The relevance of EW indicators

Reporting here is separated between Iraq (the largest group of participants) and other countries. The responses illustrate how the selected EW indicators resonated with participants’ own experiences, but also the difficulties of distinguishing smaller-scale abuses from warning signals of mass violence.

Iraq

Participants from Iraq noted that regarding rhetoric, three different types of actors must be addressed. Regarding impunity, they noted that this is a vital challenge for Iraq:

Hateful rhetoric:

- Religious actors who sometimes use hateful rhetoric in Friday sermons in mosques. Sermons delivered in mosques should be respectful.
- Political actors promote racism and encourage violence against minorities. There should be laws that limit hate speech. Existing legislation against hate speech is not implemented.
- Media actors who spread hate speech. There is a need to monitor media actively.

Impunity:

- The judiciary and other branches of power are not independent, but rather controlled by political parties.
- Many criminals in the case of the Yezidis have not been punished. This increases the lack of trust in government and creates problems for the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs).
- When criminals are not punished, they create more insecurity. Iraq needs transitional justice. There is currently no investment in reconciliation.

Other countries

Hateful rhetoric:

- Lebanon: there is discriminatory rhetoric against Palestinian refugees and foreign workers by political leaders.
- Syria: a speech in 2011 described demonstrators as spies, viruses, etc. Another described Kurds as illegal immigrants.
- Morocco: religions other than Sunni Islam have been denounced in numerous speeches.
- Egypt: hate speech comes directly from the government, against Copts as well as civil society and activists.

Impunity:

- Lebanon: political leaders are predominantly former warlords. They participated in the civil war.
- Syria: the international community has ensured that Assad, the main criminal, remains in power. War criminals have been freed by the president. Impunity should be stopped.
- Egypt: impunity starts in the courts. Impunity can lead to vengeance; victims may take justice into their own hands.

The Peoples under Threat (PUT) index by Minority Rights Group ²

Minority Rights Group International has established the Peoples under Threat index, which aims to identify countries which face the greatest risk of genocide, mass killing, or systematic violent repression. The PUT index has resulted in annual rankings and an interactive map showing the countries most at risk. The main findings of the PUT are summarised in a list of the top 10 countries most at risk and the 10 “major risers”. In 2018, the countries highest on the list of peoples most under threat were: Syria, Somalia, South Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Yemen, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Libya and Nigeria. Information on the PUT index can be found at peoplesunderthreat.org/.

The workshop with CSOs discussed the PUT index as one example of a RA and EW system. It was an opportunity to initiate a conversation about the indicators, to learn about any gaps based on experiences of CSOs and to see whether MRG can take steps to address them.

Peoples under Threat indicators:

Conflict indicators

- 1 Self-determination conflicts
- 2 Major armed conflict
- 3 Prior genocide/political mass killing

Indicators of population flight/group division

- 4 Flight of refugees and IDPs
- 5 Legacy of vengeance – group grievance
- 6 Rise of factionalised elites

Democracy/governance indicators

- 7 Voice and accountability
- 8 Political stability
- 9 Rule of law

Economy

- 10 OECD country risk classification

Experiences from the ground: The relevance the PUT index

Taking the Peoples under Threat (PUT) index from Minority Rights Group as a starting point, the workshop addressed whether the indicators that form the PUT index reflected participants' experiences of what may be early signs of atrocities against civilians, and whether other factors should be included that better capture the risk of violence that civilians face.

Overall, the workshop discussion revealed that the PUT indicators resonated well with the participants' own experiences of unrest, discrimination and repression in their countries. Again, this illustrates the challenge of separating the countries most at risk from those displaying discrimination on a smaller scale, particularly when moving from the quantitative, aggregated level to an in-depth but less systematic discussion of a few cases.

Iraq

Participants from Iraq pointed out that other indicators should be added to the PUT list:

- Religious extremism, exclusionary rhetoric and hate speech.
- Presence of armed groups and militias in bordering territories.
- Presence of non-state armed groups.
- Weakness of state institutions, social injustice poor quality of services.

Syria

Discussing the relevance of the PUT indicators to their country, participants from Syria argued that:

- The absence of social justice was important.
- The absence of accountability, political stability and rule of law go a long way to explaining the situation in Syria.
- The indicator on economic development was perhaps less relevant, since it had been a middle-income country prior to the conflict.

Egypt

Discussing the relevance of the PUT indicators to their country, participants from Egypt argued that:

- For Copts, there is no self-determination conflict.
- Egypt is not safe for all religions.
- Egypt ranks no. 18 on the PUT country list, but participants feared it may worsen in the future.
- Civil society activists are facing major threats in Egypt. Political “genocide” by government?
- If we consider political Islamism as a minority oppressed by the state, then a political mass killing has already taken place.

Morocco

From Morocco, it was argued that:

- All minorities suffer from discrimination.
- Newspapers give coverage to extremists, and state officials have also practiced hate speech.
- Complaints from minorities are ignored in courts.
- Police asks minorities to change their identity.
- Activists are arrested.
- Christians in Morocco are threatened. Other religious minorities are also oppressed.

Notes

1 A more thorough presentation of the field was given at the workshop as background for discussions, and is presented in written form in the policy brief “Mass atrocity prevention: An overview of risk assessment and early warning” by Ellen E. Stensrud. Please refer to this policy brief for the references used to develop this presentation. A central source for the section “Risk assessment (RA) and early warning (EW)” is Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016).

2 This section is an abridged version of Carl Soderbergh’s presentation at the workshop. He presented the background for the PUT survey, the indicators in the survey, the countries most at risk of mass violence and the “major risers”. For more information on MRG’s most recent PUT survey, see <https://peoplesunderthreat.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Peoples-under-Threat-briefing-2018.pdf>. For background information on the index, see *State of the World’s Minorities 2006. Events of 2004-5*, Minority Rights Group International, 2005. <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/old-site-downloads/download-118-State-of-the-Worlds-Minorities-2006.pdf>. The interactive map can be found at <https://peoplesunderthreat.org/>.

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The project

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The Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies is a research, education and documentation center in Oslo focusing on the Holocaust, other genocides and the situation of minorities in contemporary societies.



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