

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection

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What are the varying roles that norms play to either enable or constrain violence in armed conflict settings? The article examines this question by drawing on experiences from communities and armed groups in Colombia and Syria. It begins by presenting an explanation of how norms of violence and nonviolence may arise within communities and influence the behavior of civilian residents, reducing the chances of them becoming involved with armed groups. It then considers how civilian communities can transmit those same norms, shared understandings, and patterns of interaction to the ranks of illegal armed groups and subsequently shape their decisions about the use of violence against civilians. The author argues that civilians may be better positioned to promote the principles codified in International Humanitarian Law than international humanitarian organizations because they have closer contact with irregular armed actors and are viewed with greater legitimacy. The analysis illustrates that to better understand civilian protection mechanisms it is essential to study the interactions between communities and armed actors.

Is there a role for ideas about violence and norms of behavior among 'illegal' armed groups in 'irregular' conflicts? The production of violence and the protection of civilians are often variably conceived of as processes that are either rational and strategic or rooted in indiscipline and abuse. In other words, civil conflicts are fought among armed, violent actors who behave according to ubiquitous 'logics of consequences' or, alternatively, have no logic. This article argues that this is not always the case. There is growing evidence that norms or 'logics of appropriateness' (March and Olsen 1989) about the use of violence can influence the behavior of belligerents in important ways. This article explores armed groups' understandings of their interests and strategies, how these understandings vary

across time and from group to group, and how they function to 'construct' or shape behavior.

The influence of norms on armed groups in civil conflicts differs significantly from how norms affect states. States ratify treaties such as those pertaining to the Laws of War, while subnational armed groups do not.¹ International law applies to such groups but contains ambiguities and is not uniformly well-publicized, internalized, or enforced. Those who wish to rein in armed groups, such as humanitarian organizations, must therefore largely rely upon informal mechanisms and communication to persuade armed groups to behave appropriately.² While these efforts have met with some success, they are unfortunately also prone to failure because of poor access to belligerents, inconsistent presence, limited local legitimacy, and difficulties in conflict monitoring. Furthermore, robust international interventions to protect civilians are rare.

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By contrast, locally-led civilian peace movements and self-protection efforts have been increasingly garnering attention (e.g., García Durán 2006; Hancock and Mitchell 2007; Humanitarian Practice Network 2012). In line with these approaches, this article documents an alternative process by which civil society actors can effectively transmit norms of protection, good conduct, and responsibility to armed groups in civil conflicts. Civilians, with their greater access to local armed groups and greater legitimacy, can organize to take advantage of the social dynamics and fissures within armed groups.³ Civilians themselves can *nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein 2009) armed groups to change how they conceive of using violence. In some instances, civilians are able to do this more effectively than mainstream civil society and international governmental organizations.

Civilians are able to promote norms of protection in the face of violence and abuses through collective protest and direct communication with armed groups. Although some civilians in conflict settings may covertly or overtly provide support to belligerents (e.g., Wood 2003 on El Salvador), civilian communities generally prioritize survival and the avoidance of harm and frequently hold life-respecting norms, which they may seek to externalize when facing violence.⁴ They are able to stand up to armed groups—even groups that use violence—and persuade them to respect civilians with special credibility through collective action. Collective protests against transgressions make stronger impressions on combatants and create common knowledge about civilians' discontent. They are therefore harder to ignore than individual complaints.

Protests and common knowledge may provide reassurance to 'swing' combatants within armed groups who are ambivalent about the victimization of civilians and induce them to start debates within their groups about their behavior. This cascade of norms can lead to rebellions within the rebellion: latent norms held by reformers may spread to more rank-and-file members and encourage them to

stand up to transgression-prone commanders, ultimately producing a broader internalization of these norms and reshaping the culture of the group. In sum, civilians, by providing key reformers within armed groups with 'normative cover,' can 'nudge' or tip these groups back toward the 'default' of rights-respecting behavior. This model is supported by qualitative evidence from field research in Colombia and additional evidence from Syria based on first-hand accounts and secondary sources.

This argument changes the way that we understand civilians, rebel groups, violence, and norm diffusion. First, it treats civilians as important actors that have agency even in high-risk settings of armed conflict. Second, it reinforces the idea that rebel groups are not immutable but rather that, while their behaviors may settle into patterns, they can also be quickly destabilized and even improved. These shifts are most likely observed under particular conditions: among armed groups facing organized civilian communities, with internal contention over the use of violence, and that display moderate amounts of discipline. Nudging is less influential among purely benevolent groups or extremely hostile *genocidaires*. Third, the nudging model suggests that direct approaches to reach armed groups may not always be the most successful. Instead, the broader diffusion of norms through training and education for civilians may be a pathway to ultimately improve armed group behavior by leveraging this alternative process of norm transmission. Fourth, this paper calls for rethinking norm diffusion, since this bottom-up process of norm diffusion contrasts with state and elite-led processes documented in international relations. It differs, for example, from the promotion of the norm of the 'Responsibility to Protect,' which was first espoused by intellectuals.⁵ Fifth, the argument suggests that scholars studying civilian protection and civilians' efforts to retain their autonomy when facing armed groups should focus on specific mechanisms of protection and how they

affect armed groups—the very perpetrators of violence.

In the rest of the paper, I first review the literature on the role of laws and norms in wartime that govern the use of violence. In doing so, I consider explanations of violence and rebel organization and discuss how groups stray from norms of good conduct. I then develop a theory of norm transmission, which explains why humanitarian organizations may try but fail to reestablish norms of protection, and how civilian communities are able to effectively ‘nudge’ and transfer these norms. I then present evidence on norm shifts based on interactions between civilian communities and FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) rebel fronts in Colombia. I then discuss the transmission of norms of conduct to insurgent groups in the civil war in Syria as additional evidence from a particularly brutal and intractable conflict. Lastly, I conclude with a summary of scholarly and policy implications.

Literature on Norms in Wartime

Rich and growing literatures on norms of political behavior and international law indicate that while norms are present in conflict settings in various forms and have played beneficial roles, they also often have limited reach. Norms are a central tenet of the constructivist approach to international relations and are defined as ‘shared (social) understandings of standards for behavior’ (see Klotz 1995; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). A primary source of norms is International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the just war theory precepts that it enshrines (e.g., Walzer 2006). The relevant treaties for the treatment of civilians in war are the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocols I and II of 1977 for the protection of civilians, prisoners and the wounded in subnational wars.

States have come to ratify IHL conventions and follow various norms and parts of international law (*jus in bello*, *jus ad bellum*, distinction between combatants and civilians, etc.). Morrow (2007) finds that international law

can have restraining effects on belligerents of international conflicts, so long as agreements are reciprocally ratified. In the realm of civil conflicts, the United States’ military increased its restraints on the use of force in Afghanistan to avoid collateral damage that would alienate the population and host-nation government by reducing the use of air strikes and night raids against suspected terrorists and insurgents (Filkins 2009). Similar concerns are also included in counterinsurgency doctrine and the US FM-23 manual for both instrumental and normative reasons. Over the past decade there has also been a growing call for states to promote and live up to the norm of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), whereby the international community will intervene to protect civilians in countries where governments are unable or unwilling to do so themselves.

The role of norms in regulating violence in civil conflicts and among non-state actors is less apparent, where the use of violence has variably been considered either rational and strategic or irrational and thoughtless. Kalyvas (2006) details how armed actors use violence to strategically coerce support based on degrees of territorial control and access to local information about suspected collaborators. Valentino (2004) similarly argues that mass killing (and genocide) is used as a ‘rational’ strategy when no other strategies are seen as feasible for dealing with an insurgency or an undesirable or scapegoated identity group. By contrast, Weinstein (2006) argues that available resource bases determine whether some rebel groups are born more ideological, such as the FMLN in El Salvador as documented by Wood (2003) and other scholars, or with organizational pathologies that lead to indiscipline and abusive behavior toward civilians. In sum, conventional views state that violence is used because it achieves particular goals or is haphazard.

Contrasting with this conventional wisdom, a variety of actors have been shown to adopt and follow various norms of behavior relating to violence, protection, and the

use of force across various conflict settings. In conflicts at least as early as the U.S. Civil War scholars have identified a role for local identity norms, which influenced the desertion of soldiers (Bearman 1991). Gastil (1971) finds a correlation between Southern traditions and homicides in the U.S. Ellis (2001) and Muana (1997) argue that religion, mysticism, and ritual shaped behaviors and uses of violence during the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, respectively. Wood (2009) links norms of behavior among combatants to the prevalence of wartime rape. Miguel et al. (2011) argue that exposure to civil conflict among soccer players leads to patterning of behavior (norms of violence) and is associated with more violent play on the field. Carpenter (2003) shows that not all norms held by humanitarian workers are beneficial, as the norm in Bosnia to protect women and children before men had devastating consequences for the male population. There are also examples of norms of restraint, as Legro (1995) argues the organizational military cultures of Axis and Ally troops produced cooperative behaviors during World War II. Similarly, Thomas (2000) details how the ban on assassination of foreign state leaders became an accepted understanding.

Despite these positive and negative examples of norms relating to violence, in an international anarchic system where power and force are viewed by realists as the main currency, norms may not be easily transmitted or sustained. One need only note the many wartime human rights violations since the 1949 Geneva Conventions to realize that the influence of IHL has limitations. In the international system, the problem of compliance and enforcement exists because there is no supra-national institution that can force states to follow codified international law or customary international law. This problem is exacerbated in the case of subnational illegal non-state armed actors, since they both operate in an anarchic environment (albeit within states in areas where states have little influence to enforce norms) and may also have strong incentives to use irregular

(terrorist) tactics due to power asymmetries. Furthermore, they usually do not feel bound by the rules agreed to by states or are not exposed to them.⁶

The analysis above indicates there is no consistent adoption of norms for protecting civilians among armed groups. Sometimes norms are transmitted to these actors by states or international organizations during peace negotiations but these events may be rare or come too late to do much good. Humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), who would be the main promoters of international norms to protect civilians, also face challenges. An early work to consider norms of violence against civilians is the book *Civilians in War* (Chesterman 2001), which acknowledges these problems. As Lamb (2001) from that book observes, 'Media and human rights monitoring groups were prevented from gaining access to areas in which civilians had allegedly been subjected to numerous human rights abuses.' Lamb (2001) further describes how even if international actors can contact armed groups, they may not be received with respect, 'Methods and mechanisms to encourage belligerent groups to comply with the laws of war—in particular to respect human rights of noncombatants—are in short supply. The groups are secretive and distrustful of outsiders and international pressures....'⁷ An additional problem is the lack of accountability within rebel groups due to disconnects between a group's central leadership and its dispersed fronts. In groups with such disconnects, even if negotiation occurs with the leadership, norms of protection may not reach the soldiers who would most need to apply them.

Preliminary empirical evidence supports the view that humanitarian organizations may be limited in their influence. Bussman and Schneider (2009) characterize IHL as at best a 'porous humanitarian shield.' They find using statistical methods that ratification of IHL treaties, such as the Geneva Conventions and Protocols, and ICRC presence and activities have little effect on state behavior, much

less on violence by rebels who are not parties to these treaties, and may even be linked to increases in killings. As similarly noted by Hafner-Burton and Ron (2009), many diplomats and leaders have internalized human rights norms, but not to a clear effect.

In sum, the literature on the intersection between norms and armed conflict indicates some potential for norms to adhere and to restrain the behavior of belligerents. Yet, as Chesterman (2001) observes, 'The challenge for the international community, then, is not so much to develop new international norms or new regimes but to make those global norms relevant to local contexts.' Chesterman's observation remains a challenge since there are still few mechanisms available to international actors to transmit and maintain norms. However, such early works did not consider whether civilians might be most able to transmit those norms.

A different literature on civilian-led peace movements and community self-protection documents how civilians have promoted norms of peace and nonviolence including such notions as a 'culture of peace' (e.g., García Durán 2006; Hancock and Mitchell 2007; Humanitarian Practice Network 2012). But, it has rarely been articulated how these understandings function as causal mechanisms that affect violence or how they may affect armed groups—the key actors who may perpetrate violence against civilian populations. The next section develops a theory of how civilians in the crossfire can themselves succeed where international actors do not.

A Theory of Nudging Armed Groups

I outline a theory of how civilians can influence or 'nudge' armed groups to internalize and abide by norms of protection. The term 'nudge' is used by Thaler and Sunstein (2009) to describe how choice sets can be actively shaped so that actors are more likely to select certain options and strategies than others. When Thaler and Sunstein talk about shaping behaviors, they are really talking about the previously developed concepts of norms and norm transmission as described in the

literature referenced above. The theory of civilian nudging of armed groups describes how civilians are able to solve the dual problems of norms not reaching armed groups and norm believers within those groups being weak or marginalized.

The process begins with norms that exist within civilian communities. Many accounts of civil conflict observe that most civilians are not extremists and instead are largely trying to survive periods of instability and protect their livelihoods (e.g., Kriger 1992; Nordstrom 1992; Kaplan 2010). Civilians are therefore likely to adhere to life-respecting (and even pacifist) norms and favor the peaceful resolution of disputes more deeply than individuals who have left civilian communities to take part in armed conflicts. Such shared understandings may derive from various sources, including religion and mysticism, and even exposure to violence itself. These norms can help civilians avoid entanglements with armed groups and thus avoid violence. There is also the possibility that they can be transmitted to armed groups.

Armed groups' norms about violence and other behaviors develop from roots in their societies or through iterated practices, political or religious ideologies, trainings, and interactions with other actors. In the face of abuse and transgressions by rebel (or even government) troops whose norms are either weak or eroding, civilians have been known to collectively protest or engage in non-cooperation to voice their grievances and call for adherence to norms against civilian victimization.⁸ These kinds of protests, 'weapons of the weak' in conflict settings (Scott 1985; Kaplan 2010), are not uncommon. They may occur, for instance, when armed groups call community-wide meetings with civilians to (in their minds) most efficiently extort them and coerce them into supporting their causes.⁹ At these occasions, for reasons of security and influence, there are frequently diverse cadres present, ranging from one or more mid-level commanders, to their bodyguards, to additional foot soldiers, and even to civilian collaborators.

The diversity of actors present creates the opportunity for civilian actions to generate common knowledge among members of armed groups (Chwe 2001). When the fighters later return to their camps, there is the potential for the witnesses of protests to have discreet conversations as they attempt to interpret the civilian actions and search for shared understandings. As rumors quietly circulate, the seeds for collective action among the more restrained troops are planted. Depending on the power structures and command and control institutions of rebel or paramilitary organizations, these norms can influence combatants' beliefs and behavior. Where armed groups are comprised of individuals with diverse beliefs about the appropriateness of the use of violence toward civilians, the information transmitted by civilian messages and collective actions can trigger (or re-trigger) debates within armed groups about how they should behave.

It is theorized that there can exist particular 'swing' combatants within armed groups that are most susceptible to the messages of these protests and are more likely to initiate debates over norms.¹⁰ These are individuals who may believe in the group's cause but disagree with unrestrained means to achieve those aims (e.g., Shannon 2000). Many individuals within armed groups may prefer that the group's shared understandings be shifted toward greater respect for civilians' rights but are hindered from acting by the problem of being unable to coordinate.¹¹ They may fear taking action alone to change the understandings, voice dissent, or stand up to commanders for fear of retaliation or simply of being nonconformist. This may be especially true when preferences about the use of violence are hidden and individual combatants do not know the preferences of others in the group (e.g. Kuran 1991).

With the reassurance provided by the common knowledge generated by civilians' protests, these actors can become 'norm

entrepreneurs' and start 'norm cascades' (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), causing the norm to spread among members of the group and be internalized. As in Mackie's (1996) analysis of the convention of foot-binding, to end harmful norms, alternative practices must be established and communicated, and a coordinated shift must be managed. Once internalized, norms reset a group's 'default' behavior (Thaler and Sunstein 2009) and create a shared understanding about what kind of behavior is a transgression and will not be tolerated (e.g., see Weingast 1997 on citizens' opposition to ruler transgressions and Gelpi 1997 on international crisis bargaining).

This process is similar to the process of the spreading of equality norms against Apartheid in South Africa outlined by Klotz (1995). Moderate US Republican congressmen were influenced by these norms and cast key swing votes to pass legislation enacting economic sanctions. The process is also seen in the Quakers' ability to promote the abolition of the slave trade via the influence it had as a swing bloc in nineteenth century British politics (Kauffman and Pape 1999). Echoing Sharp's (1973) analysis of autocracies, armed groups are not monoliths but are instead political entities and depend on particular 'pillars of support,' including particular group members and civilian populations. Civilian nudging is a means of swaying the 'pillars' of armed group support to gain protection.

This process of collective protest has a greater likelihood of producing a shift in the norms of armed groups than individual civilians who alone complain or protest their treatment. This is because belligerents' threats against or extortion of individuals are usually carried out by smaller teams of insurgents. There are several reasons why, compared to a village meeting, less common knowledge is generated in these incidents involving individuals: there is likely greater control over troops, and any resistance offered by the civilian is more likely to

be shrugged-off. Therefore, upon the cadres' return to camp, they are less likely to discuss the incident or take action.

There are many reasons for internalizing beliefs about violence after a shift in norms. According to a moral argument, individuals would believe it is simply *wrong* to commit wanton acts of violence. More instrumental reasons could be related to concerns of legitimacy (to win over the population) or reputation (fear of drawing attention from the military or media, or facing backlash and greater resistance from other populations). Groups may also restrain their behavior after interacting with resisting civilians if a bargain can be arranged, such as for a beneficial exchange of information about enemy collaborators.

As in Klotz (1995), a norm movement led by activists may be initially motivated by a set of moral reasons (global racial equality or, in this case, ideas about nonviolence and protection), while target actors, be they states, politicians, or in this case, armed groups, may eventually be swayed by the same social movement for a different set of reasons. Even though these second-stage reasons may be strategic or instrumental, including the reputational and political costs of disregarding mobilized activists, they may still end up resetting group defaults about what is appropriate, moral, or acceptable behavior. As Hausman and Welch (2010) observe, nudges are not necessarily intended to benefit those whom they nudge. It is therefore also possible that armed groups may sometimes not be aware that their norms are being subtly changed. What may begin as the normative and moral stances of civilians can later be internalized or interpreted by armed groups in light of their 'interests.'

This theory of civilian nudging is expected to apply to civil conflicts and armed groups under particular scope conditions. Norm shifts are most likely to occur among armed groups facing organized civilian communities, that are composed of combatants with

a mix of preferences over the use of violence, or that display moderate amounts of discipline. These groups may commit moderate amounts of violence or, in some instances, even extreme violence, but are not so far gone that they cannot be nudged to reform. Norm shifts are less likely to be relevant for groups that Guevara (1961) would describe as 'angels' (who would already hold protection norms) or extremely hostile *genocidaires* (where many members might be fervently dedicated to employing violence). Furthermore, changing a group's default about using violence does not mean that the group will never use violence. Rather, it means that resorting to violence will not be their first impulse (their 'default'), and that they may pursue other strategies to achieve their aims.¹² Groups may still employ violence in desperate times or for strategic aims, but using violence simply comes to mind less often because it is not the main way they think.

How Civilians Nudge Armed Groups in Colombia

In Colombia, although humanitarian organizations have had only mixed success at inculcating IHL norms among armed groups, in various instances civilians acting on their own have successfully filled in the protection gaps. The ICRC pressed armed actors to adhere to IHL, but it did so only sporadically, with IHL norms often being adopted in name only. Even with ICRC contact, many groups' default behaviors frequently remained to kill or harass civilians without asking questions. The author document evidence for the alternative civilian processes of promoting norms of protection based on case studies of experiences of villages in the western part of the department of Cundinamarca.

Data on the processes of norm transmission in Colombia comes largely from interviews with ex-combatants. The author fielded 28 total interviews with ex-combatants in August 2009, with three-quarters from

guerrilla groups and one-quarter from paramilitary groups and including three female participants.¹³ The ex-combatant subjects varied according to their roles and ranks within the armed groups and their experiences with civilian populations.¹⁴ The participants ran the gamut from informants, to 'razos' or foot soldiers, to middle commanders and had varying amounts of contact with civilian populations.

Former Colombia ICRC director Pierre Gassmann's (2001) account of how his organization interacted with armed groups and the Colombian public forces shows some achievements by the ICRC but also limitations. The ICRC had relatively extensive presence and direct contact with organizational leaders and front commanders of illegal armed groups. However, the description also highlights the challenges that an organization such as the ICRC faces, even in a country as hospitable to and aware of IHL and international rights norms as Colombia. Although the ICRC operated out of 17 offices throughout Colombia and eventually had relations with 150 guerrilla fronts and self-defense paramilitary blocs as well as local military units, they required 'more than a decade' to build the necessary trust with all belligerents to be able to work in conflict zones. This is partly because each time they wanted to enter an area they had to negotiate access with all the local parties—the military forces and any illegal armed actors present (a problem exacerbated by turnover of group leaders and members as they are transferred, exit the conflict, or are killed).

The ICRC has apparently had greater success working with the Colombian government than with illegal armed actors. The Colombian government ratified the additional Geneva protocols in 1994 and steadily increased training in human rights for Colombian military forces over time. Some of the armed groups shared some of these principles at least on paper, as the FARC platform for instance includes language to protect civilians (Ferro and Ramón 2002), as do the statements of various paramilitary blocs.

The ELN (National Liberation Army) has also been somewhat receptive to ICRC entreaties and reportedly made some improvements in behavior (Gassmann 2001). However, the more common response is illustrated by Gassmann's following assessment of the FARC, whose commanders, 'Are generally reluctant to engage in discussions on compliance with international humanitarian law' because, as a FARC representative stated, 'to abide by the norms set forth in a pact, one should have participated in its drafting' (Gassmann 2001: 81).'

The contacts the ICRC could establish were not sufficient to get armed groups to consistently internalize IHL norms. According to Gassmann, 'Both government and guerrillas, and now the autodefensas, are regularly tempted to use IHL *selectively* to further their own political aims' (Gassmann 2001: 79, emphasis added). These actors may cite and agree to international humanitarian law for political and rhetorical reasons even if later they do not abide by the 'propaganda.' They may also agree to norms only if there is reciprocity and other actors do so as well. National level agreements and commitments made with the central rebel leadership may also not trickle-down to or be upheld by local front commanders.

Shifting the focus from humanitarian organizations to civilians, one finds examples of civilian protests that led FARC fronts to rethink their use of violence. There were broad-based movements to 'humanize' the war, including the 1997 Citizens Mandate to respect IHL and many more local movements in response to armed group transgressions. I analyze civilian protests and armed group reactions from the late 1990s through 2003 among the FARC's 22nd and 42nd fronts. I describe these fronts' unsteady relationship with the FARC's central command structure; growing abuses; coercion and threats against civilians in village meetings and resulting protests; internal debates; and eventual shifts in both thinking and behavior about civilians and violence.

According to members of these fronts, the FARC's central command structure, the Estado Mayor, has some influence with local fronts, and these fronts would remit part of their kidnapping and extortion revenue to the Estado Mayor each month as payments.¹⁵ The Estado Mayor would also distribute pamphlets about how to treat civilians¹⁶ and each killing would require permission from the Estado Mayor (to behave better than the paramilitaries).¹⁷ Commanders sometimes complied with these directives, but they also viewed them as mere 'propaganda.'¹⁸ FARC fronts generally view themselves as autonomous and local commanders make their own decisions and have discretion, in part because communicating with the central Estado Mayor can be a logistical challenge.¹⁹

F42 was formed when it split from F22 around 1995. The early leaders were seen as 'reasonable,' but around 2000, new and more powerful commanders came who favored a 'mano dura' (iron fist) approach and were 'brutes.'²⁰ As one fighter recalled, a first commander, Comandante Paulo, was easier with the *campesinos* and investigated cases of suspected enemy collaboration whereas the commander El Campesino, who came after Paulo, was especially brutal.²¹ There were rules about the treatment of civilians, but when the guerrillas became abusive they had stopped complying with their own rules.²² From 2000 onwards, they did not investigate threats well and made 'errors' and killed civilians either because of less patience or laziness.²³ As one guerrilla noted, they had civilians 'pinned with fear.'²⁴ Some subjects mentioned the existence of disciplinary structures,²⁵ but discipline was inconsistent.

According to one former guerrilla, foot soldiers like him were conflicted about abuses but were cowed into acquiescence.²⁶ He never agreed with abuses committed by the FARC, but he also never wanted to 'betray the group.' A female combatant noted that their fighters would stay in people's homes and put civilians in danger, or would go to town parties dressed as civilians, which had

previously been prohibited. She reportedly opposed these activities as well as other forms of guerrilla abuses of civilians.²⁷ This dissonance may arise more frequently among forcibly recruited members of a group and when there is inequality within fronts or groups, since powerful commanders and mid-commanders may order the rough treatment of civilians or not punish such treatment yet dissatisfied lower-ranking members may be unwilling or unable to oppose it.

According to a bodyguard to a commander, the guerrillas would call village-wide meetings to exert control over residents. At these meetings they would say, 'We're from Front 42 of the FARC, and we're here to take control of this village. Tell us who are the thieves and people abusing the community.'²⁸ These meetings would typically be run by a diverse set of combatants, including mid-level commanders, their bodyguards (such as interview subject Exc#1), and other soldiers and militia members.

However, in various cases, civilians would not let the guerrillas enter their villages and tell them, 'We don't want you here.'²⁹ They united based on their historically harmonious social relations and experience cooperating in community councils, with public works projects, and in conciliating disputes. They would say things like, 'This is our community. You're going outside the *'parameters'* and need to cleanup.'³⁰ According to a female ex-combatant, when the guerrillas became more abusive, people responded by saying they were afraid to collaborate (it no longer guaranteed protection) and tired of 'indiscipline.'³¹ The civilians would collectively negotiate with the guerrillas and say, 'You [guerrillas] are committing mistakes. You're here today but may leave tomorrow. Clean up your act, your indiscipline. We *campesinos* pay for your errors.'³² Civilians would also invoke rhetorical traps, calling-out armed actors on inconsistencies between their behavior and their stated (pro-peasant) ideology.³³ The surprise of the civilian protests would help plant a seed among armed

group observers, causing them to wonder whether there might be a better way.

Many of the ex-combatants referred to the centrality of the backing and support of the entire community to have an impact on their thinking. A former FARC mid-level commander and infiltrator explained using the poetic saying, 'Una sola golondrina no hace verano,' or, 'One swallow [bird] does not make a summer.'³⁴ This is to say that a single individual—a single swallow—will not signify or bring much change but a group, a flock of swallows, means something. The commander continued, 'If one sees a strong social structure, it can change the way a group *thinks*. To kill one or two [resisting] people is one thing, but to kill a whole [resisting] community is too far' (emphasis added to again highlight norm-oriented thinking). There are moral considerations that distinguish between killing 'two versus two hundred.' The guerrillas were more prone to selective violence against lone individuals or small groups who resisted.

The FARC fronts would debate abuses and what to do with civilians in their internal assemblies in response to civilian protests, at times exhibiting splits over what course of action to take.³⁵ A plausible interpretation is that civilian pushback activated particular concerns and provided 'normative cover' that empowered more dovish commanders over their hard-line or abusive counterparts within the group.³⁶ They saw that the people 'made sense'³⁷ and 'saw their errors and tried to change their ways.'³⁸ Exemplifying these tensions, one commander might declare, 'I won't work with this other commander because he is undisciplined.'³⁹ Some commanders eventually faced sanctions by the group for their 'errors' and abusive practices were tempered.⁴⁰ There was reportedly some decrease in killings, and less use of civilians' houses and going into town (which would stigmatize civilians as supporters in the eyes of the military or paramilitaries and potentially make them targets).⁴¹ These changes would probably have been less likely without civilian pushback.

As seen in the portrait above, the ex-combatants gave a mix of both instrumentalist/utilitarian arguments (rationalizations) and normative arguments about harming civilians. They realized transgressions against civilians would be strategically imprudent and cause harm to their perceived legitimacy with the population. They also evinced beliefs that harming civilians was wrong or morally repugnant. The guerrillas did not want to kill all and 'end an entire village'⁴² and cited moral distinctions between limited killings (perhaps for some conceived greater good) versus mass killings (perhaps evoking cognitive dissonance of being for the people and yet committing atrocities).

These events from Colombia show that civilians communicated among themselves about the dangers of the armed conflict and also conveyed these messages to armed actors. These armed actors were faced with doubt and divisions as coalitions shifted within the group and individuals were swayed by similar and very human concerns. This upset patterns of command and control and authority within the group and brought about a reset in their default positions about the use of violence.

Nudging Armed Groups in the Syrian Conflict

Additional examples of the transmission of protection norms by local actors from the Syrian civil war indicate that the process of nudging of armed groups can generalize beyond the borders of Colombia. Many of the rebel fronts of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighting against the regime of Bashar Al-Assad may be more ideologically motivated, revolutionary, and 'for the people' compared to more opportunist groups such as the FARC in Colombia (which strayed into narco-trafficking), but both the FSA and more Islamist insurgent groups have still been accused of abusive behavior (Barnard 2012). There are many apparent differences between Colombia and Syria across such dimensions as geographic region, reasons

for fighting, terrain, religion, and culture. Nevertheless, available evidence indicates that, as in Colombia, local civilian communities and activists in Syria had more success interacting with rebel fronts than well-known global humanitarian organizations that were operating more intermittently and at higher levels of interaction.

Both UN agencies and many international human rights NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), have closely monitored human rights conditions in Syria. They have expressed concerns about civilian victimization at the hands of both government and rebel forces.⁴³ HRW in particular condemned the FSA's abuses and its organizational weaknesses, 'Many of the antigovernment groups reported to be carrying out abuses do not appear to belong to an organized command structure or to be following Syrian National Council (SNC) orders. But Syria's opposition leadership has a responsibility to speak out and condemn such abuses' (HRW 2012). In their in-country activities, HRW also met with rebels inside Syria to persuade them to commit to codes of conduct.

Some of these efforts were reportedly successful, but overall the record is mixed. On March 1, 2012, the SNC created a military bureau to coordinate armed opposition groups, but it is not clear if this was due to pressure from groups such as HRW or simply for greater military effectiveness. As HRW director Kenneth Roth suggested, one problem is that the FSA fronts that are actually willing to talk to them are probably the ones who least need lectures on human rights. And, conversely, the fronts that most need human rights training or to be pressured are probably the least likely to want to meet with Human Rights Watch.⁴⁴ The ICRC, Red Crescent, and other humanitarian agencies have faced similar challenges in accessing conflict zones to provide relief for threatened populations (Barnard 2013).

Research by the NGO the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC 2012) corroborates that, while some codes of conduct were

agreed to by the central FSA leadership, the fractured nature of the group meant that, similar to the challenges in dealing with the decentralized FARC, they did not necessarily reach the local fronts. As CIVIC concludes, 'It has been difficult for the signatories to enforce these codes of conduct.'⁴⁵ For instance, although the FSA's high command issued a 'Proclamation of Principles' in July 2012 pledging their commitment to pluralism, democracy, and international humanitarian law, according to one report, a local commander did not consider the code to be 'binding' (Reuters 2012). A commander of the Al-Ansar Brigades said he had 'no idea of what the Geneva Conventions or any other treaties say,' while an FSA-member in Hama stated, 'Sometimes you cannot apply the rules when no one else does. We lost faith in international laws and policies' (IRIN 2013).

Local level Syrian activists, by contrast, apparently had greater success as interlocutors with local FSA fronts and promoting the deeper internalization of IHL norms. For instance, in the face of FSA transgressions, protestors have called out, 'The people want the reform of the Free Syrian Army. We love you. Correct your path' (Barnard 2012). The efforts of the Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) and other networks of organized activists on the ground have been especially influential. Compared to international actors, these committees are more dispersed, based on grassroots support, and closer in proximity to armed fronts.

With their close access, the LCCs were more likely viewed as legitimate in the eyes of local commanders and were able to persuade FSA commanders to agree to and sign codes of conduct.⁴⁶ Available documents indicate the LCCs got upwards of 25 battalions and brigades to publicly sign on to codes of conduct as of late 2012 (Razaniyyat 2012). As a result, the FSA issued a more detailed policy that refers to IHL and states that they will 'respect human rights in accordance with our legal principles, our tolerant religious principles and the international laws

governing human rights.' While it is a challenge to observe the internal dynamics of these brigades, CIVIC (2012) research confirms that this shift was primarily 'a result of pressure from Syrian civil society activists.'

In liberated areas, LCCs and other community level organizations have similarly worked to ensure that armed actors are accountable to local civilian authorities (Amos 2012, Mourtada and Barnard 2013). Similar to the role played by the LCCs, CIVIC notes that local clergy have also been 'increasingly relevant for ethics on the battlefield.' According to their interviews, local sheikhs in Idlib and Aleppo have had influence over the rebel leadership (CIVIC 2012). Nonviolent pro-democracy activists also mounted protests in the town of Saraqeb in Idlib province against rebel excesses (NOW 2013) and in Mayadeen to demand that Jabhat al-Nusra fighters leave town (Khalek 2013). However, civilians may have had greater success at nudging in the early phases of conflict since, as the conflict progressed, fighting intensified, rebel groups became more abusive (HRW 2013), and more communities were displaced, making the task of nudging more difficult.

In sum, the evidence from Syria coincides with the theory of civilian nudging of armed groups and the evidence from Colombia. While some of the Syrian rebel groups were perhaps more clearly benevolent and revolutionary compared to groups operating in Colombia, they too at times strayed in their uses of violence and were not universally receptive to humanitarian pleas from international actors. These groups were nudged to protect civilians by local activists who enjoyed greater access and legitimacy.

Conclusion

This article developed a theory about how civilians themselves are important norm entrepreneurs in conflict settings. This may be surprising at first glance since civilians are unarmed and confront heavily armed and violent actors. Yet, compared to international humanitarian organizations, civilians

frequently have relatively greater interest, access, and legitimacy to promote norms of protection. The article identifies two different ways that norms against violence can operate to reduce violence in conflict settings, both of which are based on well-organized local civilian cooperation and collective action. First, civilians can promote norms of pacifism and harmonious relations within their communities to limit residents' involvement with armed groups and prevent inter-personal disputes from being resolved by armed groups. Second, civilians can transmit these same violence-limiting norms so that they eventually become internalized by armed groups. They can do this through collective protest and by nudging more amenable fighters to unite to collectively oppose abusive individuals within the local front.

Evidence from civilians and combatants supports this theory. In Colombia, civilians were able to promote increased awareness of protection and human rights norms among FARC combatants. The explanation also generalizes beyond Colombia as it is consistent with recent moves by local communities and activists to persuade various rebel fronts in the Syrian civil war to regulate their behavior. In these cases, armed groups adopted norms as a result of interactions with civilians who did nothing more than protest and communicate their demands.

This research provides a more complex and less purely rational or realist view of illegal unarmed groups in civil war. Subnational armed actors have already been viewed as complex organizations rather than purely rational unitary actors. The notion of nudging developed here contributes another explanation of how these organizations can be shaped by leveraging the internal divisions within them and how they can come to hold particular beliefs. These beliefs are shown to arise not solely through a selection or recruitment process based on selective incentives or lootable resources. Rather, these beliefs can also be shaped through interactions with principled (or survivalist) civilian populations

after initial phases of rebel recruitment. This finding calls for a refinement of the conclusions from existing studies that suggest that the behavior of armed groups is destined for an inexorable deterioration (Weinstein 2006). With civilian nudging of armed groups to influence their beliefs, the deterioration in their behavior is not inexorable and can in some cases be reversed.

Future research will be instrumental to better answer questions that could only be peripherally addressed here. These include to what extent norms are actually 'lived by' and affect actual uses of violence (and not just reports of behavior). To do this, future studies should try to determine whether or not changes in armed group behavior are solely due to changes in conflict conditions or resource bases. This is challenging and requires deep knowledge and measurements of beliefs, resources, territorial control, and uses of violence over time for specific geographical areas. The cases from Colombia and Syria could also benefit from further accounting of conflict conditions, but the evidence of the ongoing dangers that civilians faced suggests that the norm shifts did not simply occur because of peaceful conditions or naturally close relations with the populace. Future research should further explore observable implications of this theory about the internalization of norms by armed groups. One of these is that when such groups are exposed to norms by one community they should continue to behave according to those norms even when interacting with other, less-organized or less-resisting villages.⁴⁷

There are also important limits to the ability of civilians to nudge and transmit norms. A main limit is that armed groups must be willing to have meetings with civilians in the first place and these civilians must be organized enough to collectively express their disapproval of violence. Armed groups will not be susceptible to nudging if they are inclined to simply liquidate resisting communities short of dialogue (i.e., the prospects for nudging

improve when employing violence is costly or draws negative attention, or when groups already have basic morals, in which case civilian resistance can push them even further toward respecting rights). It is likely, however, that armed groups will more frequently meet with civilians than with international humanitarian organizations or governments, if for no other reason than to attempt to coerce their support. Perhaps ironically, these occasions at least provide civilians a chance to change armed groups' ideas about the use of violence. Still, attempts at nudging can be overwhelmed and norms may not be successfully transmitted or internalized when communities are fractured or when members of armed groups are predominantly hostile to civilian concerns.

The argument advanced here has an important implication for activists and policymakers concerned about civilian welfare. In addition to pursuing elite level dialogues about human rights with rebel commanders, the nudging process suggests that training and education for civilians and communities in human rights, collective action, and cooperation can also help promote protection through indirect channels. By continuing to study the interaction between civilian community strategies and armed actor preferences we can better understand how widely processes of civilian protection are found and how they work to reign-in potential perpetrators of violence.

Notes

¹ According to Zegveld (2002, 15), 'As armed opposition groups cannot become parties to the Geneva Conventions or Additional Protocols, and are not required to declare themselves bound by the relevant norms, they derive their rights and obligations contained in Common Article 3 and Protocol II through the state on whose territory they operate.'

² Armed groups cannot sign international treaties and may not feel bound by rules they did not participate in creating. Nev-

ertheless, the humanitarian organization Geneva Call has had some success in getting non-state groups to at least commit to a ban on the use of landmines. <http://www.genevacall.org/>

³ IHL does not explicitly define the category of 'civilian' but rather defines it in the negative as someone who is 'not a member of the armed forces of a Party to the conflict' or engaged in 'active hostilities' (Solis 2010, 231, 232, 255, on Article 50.1 of Additional Protocol I).

⁴ Indeed, communities may seek human rights protections regardless of their positions vis-à-vis belligerents.

⁵ See the 2001 report by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS).

⁶ One reason armed groups may not feel bound by IHL is the ambiguity surrounding its applicability. According to Solis (2010, quoting Sassoli), 'Determining which armed groups may be accountable is an issue. To be accountable 'they must have a minimum degree of organization, but the exact degree is not settled in law.'

⁷ While Lamb cites the potential for pressure from 'belligerents' foreign backers,' this lever is also not always available or effective.

⁸ Such protests are often facilitated by pre-existing forms of community cooperation, such as social cohesion and the presence of community organizations (see Kaplan 2010). However, in some cases, the presence of organizations such as the ICRC may also create favorable contextual conditions for dialogues. Norms are analyzed here as a mechanism that can have an impact within armed groups apart from other institutional mechanisms that civilians may develop to mediate violence (e.g., Kaplan 2013).

⁹ Individuals within communities that are particularly vocal, respected, have moral authority, or have little to lose are more likely to lead these efforts.

¹⁰ Armed groups with democratic structures or less intra-group inequality where reformers are prevalent may also be correlated with pacifism and benevolent relations with communities compared to hierarchical structures, but these factors may still not be sufficient to eliminate the use of violence.

¹¹ These may be individuals of lower rank who are probably more concerned about ethics but are led by dictatorial and abusive commanders. They may also possibly be mid-level commanders looking to rein in unruly underlings.

¹² The conditions of civil conflict (an absence of credible commitments to rights-respecting governance by the state) embody what North, Summerhill, and Weingast (2000) call 'high stakes,' survival-focused politics. Successful nudging may be more challenging in such circumstances but still be possible if, as Thaler and Sunstein (2009) note, people adhere to a default because they 'think that most other people like it' and decisions are not clear-cut.

¹³ There were two additional interviews that were incoherent and not used. Approximately eight other subjects were invited to participate but did not show up for interviews.

¹⁴ I was aided in the recruitment of subjects by the Colombian government's High Advisory for Reintegration (ACR), which helped me identify and schedule ex-combatants that dispersed after they left the conflict and were living in the capital of Bogotá. The majority of these interviews were conducted in ACR field service centers and were done so voluntarily, anonymously, confidentially and in private. The group of subjects comprises those people who showed up at the service centers to participate in the study. This obviously excludes combatants who had not yet demobilized, been killed, or ex-combatant no-shows.

¹⁵ Exc#12, Bogotá, 8/2009. Exc#1, Quipile, 8/2009.

- ¹⁶ Exc#1, Quipile, 8/2009.
- ¹⁷ Exc#5, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ¹⁸ Exc#1, Quipile, 8/2009.
- ¹⁹ Exc#6, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ²⁰ Exc#1, Quipile, 8/2009.
- ²¹ Exc#17, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ²² Exc#17, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ²³ Exc#20, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ²⁴ Exc#1, Quipile, 8/2009.
- ²⁵ Exc#2, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ²⁶ Exc#17, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ²⁷ Exc#20, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ²⁸ Exc#1, Quipile, 8/2009.
- ²⁹ Exc#1, Quipile, 8/2009.
- ³⁰ Exc#5, Bogotá, 8/2009. Emphasis added—the use of the term ‘parameter’ as recalled by this ex-combatant closely corresponds with reasoning according to norms and standards of behavior.
- ³¹ Exc#20, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ³² Exc#20, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ³³ Exc#5, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ³⁴ Exc#6, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ³⁵ Exc#1, Quipile, 8/2009.
- ³⁶ Commanders might be dovish because of their personal values, background or education; their closeness to the population; or simply because they are rational calculators who tend to believe that moderating the use of violence is a superior strategy for gaining control or extracting more resources from the population.
- ³⁷ Exc#20, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ³⁸ Exc#4, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ³⁹ Exc#20, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ⁴⁰ Exc#20, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ⁴¹ Exc#20, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ⁴² Exc#4, Bogotá, 8/2009.
- ⁴³ Some rebels have referred to the Islamic humanitarian principles contained in Sharia law, although these standards have been inconsistently applied (IRIN 2013).
- ⁴⁴ Remarks by Human Rights Watch Director Kenneth Roth, Resolving Syria Conference, University of Denver, January 11, 2013. Even with civilians’ greater access, it is not clear whether local communities would encounter similar challenges in meeting

with and influencing more opportunistic or Islamist-extremist rebel fronts.

- ⁴⁵ As the CIVIC report continues, ‘Given how fractious and inaccessible much of the opposition landscape is, it is impossible for outside observers to know the extent to which opposition groups are abiding by them. Some FSA rebels were simply unaware of the Proclamation of Principles... For other FSA-aligned rebels, the codes of conduct are abstract documents, which they do not consider binding. One commander said, “We’ve heard of these codes. We of course try to follow what we know of them, but we don’t always take orders from Apaydin [FSA headquarters in Turkey]. They are in Turkey, we are in Syria fighting.”’

- ⁴⁶ Remarks by Rafif Jouejati, Resolving Syria Conference, University of Denver, January 11, 2013. ‘Proclamation of Principles and Code of Conduct,’ Free Syrian Army, Local Coordination Committees, August 2012. Available at: <http://backchannel.al-monitor.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/FSAProclamationofPrinciples-Logo.pdf>.

- ⁴⁷ This implication would distinguish the norms mechanism from other community-based protection mechanisms. Additional observable indicators may include the purging of abusive soldiers and shifts in statements and rhetoric about the treatment of civilians.

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