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In Syria now, it is only about the major powers in the world.
It is not about what the Syrian people want or don't want.[1]

Introduction

When asked about prospects for justice in his home country after seven years of war, one Syrian man—an artist, father, and refugee living in Jordan—described the marginalization of local voices in the sobering words above. Like millions of other Syrians, he fled an oppressive regime and atrocious violence, leaving almost everything behind. Though deceptively simple, his statement raises complicated questions for a variety of experts regarding how local voices and perspectives can better inform atrocity prevention policy, practice, and scholarship.

We examine two contemporary case studies of mass atrocities, leveraging historical hindsight and key informant interviews to consider lessons learned from local efforts to prevent and recover from mass atrocities. First, we examine atrocity risk early warning in Ukraine, where prescient local expertise at the meso-level failed to influence international responses prior to a major escalation in mass atrocities. We explore what went wrong and what more can be done to meaningfully incorporate local expertise into early warning analyses by policymakers, practitioners, and academics. Second, we explore how local efforts at atrocity crimes[2] documentation and justice-seeking in Syria have sought to fill the accountability gap left behind by failures at the national and international levels. We examine the lessons learned from attempts to pursue transitional justice especially pertaining to the interactions between local and international justice actors, the role of diaspora voices in justice-seeking, and methods of gauging and balancing the preferences of various stakeholders when designing justice processes. Through these case studies, we support applied scholarship approaches that emphasize how atrocity prevention efforts cannot focus solely on top-down solutions. Rather, learning and listening to meso-level tactics and strategies, ranging from local expert knowledge to societal mobilization and grassroots efforts, must be prioritized.

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[1] Interview with a Syrian refugee, conducted in Amman, Jordan, 2018.

[2] We utilize the definition of "atrocity crimes" suggested in the United Nations' *Framework for Analysis of Atrocity Crimes*: "The term 'atrocity crimes' refers to three legally defined international crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. The definitions of the crimes can be found in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols, and the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, among other treaties." See United Nations, "Framework for Analysis of Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention," (New York: United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, 2014), accessed April 20, 2023, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/about-us/Doc.3_Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes_EN.pdf.

We follow Rachel Jacobs' and Scott Straus' conceptualization of the meso-level as "the space that lies between 'macro' (national) and 'micro' (individual) dynamics."[3] Importantly, the meso-level includes consideration of both geographic locations smaller than the nation or state, as well as actors who serve as "intermediaries between the national-level decision-makers and the on-the-ground perpetrators and victims."[4] Importantly, we extend this definition to consider how international efforts also occupy the macro-level and may be separated from national and sub-national dynamics. Purposefully broad in this conceptualization, we have designated these boundaries to elicit otherwise hidden linkages between the local and the national or international atrocity prevention. In general, we treat meso-level approaches as encompassing local levels of leadership and advocacy across bottom-up processes, grassroots efforts, victim-led activism, and civil society mobilization to capture various interpretations of these spaces.

Looking to our case studies on Ukraine and Syria, we explore two interconnected research questions. First, what practical guidance about effective atrocity prevention can be gleaned from local perspectives in these recent cases of mass atrocities? Secondly, how can genocide prevention scholars and practitioners better engage meso-level actors to bridge the gap between macro-level and micro-level strategies, thereby creating a more holistic approach? While the field of genocide studies has a long history of examining the micro-level dynamics of actions like participation in killings or rescue during mass atrocities, fewer research efforts have sought to connect this knowledge to overarching macro-level national and international prevention strategies. Consequently, we argue that the key to better atrocity prevention lies in acknowledging and leveraging the expertise of local actors who can inform and engage in prevention processes. We first address this gap to contextualize the necessity for meso-level approaches.

Bridging Micro- and Macro-Dynamics in Genocide Studies and Prevention
Mass atrocities often have profound geopolitical ramifications, as in Syria, Ukraine, and many other locations. The international reverberations of such crises—as well as the diplomatic, economic, and even military clout often required to deter perpetrators—frequently center international governments and multilateral organizations like the United Nations as key responders to unfolding atrocity crimes. To support better policymaking decisions at these levels, much existing atrocity prevention knowledge—whether drawn from academic research or practitioner-oriented insights—focuses on high-level de-escalation and response actions like preventive diplomacy, sanctions, and international intervention.[5] However, given failures to gain the political will to utilize macro-level prevention tools in recent years and mixed reviews of their effectiveness,[6] we argue that policymakers and practitioners must think more holistically about strategies of atrocity prevention, primarily by looking to the meso-level. To do so, they should incorporate a wider array of local expertise about how atrocities unfold at the local level and how prevention and justice-seeking efforts can be bolstered by individuals and communities.

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[3] Rachel Jacobs and Scott Straus, "Meso-Level Dynamics of Atrocities," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atrocity Crimes*, eds. Barbora Hola et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 236.

[4] Ibid., 237.

[5] For overviews of prevention approaches, see: Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington, DC: U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016); Ernesto Verdeja, "Predicting Genocide and Mass Atrocities," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 9, no. 3 (2016), 13–32.

[6] Verdeja, *Predicting Genocide and Mass Atrocities*; Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*.

A broader research push within the peacebuilding field has similarly emphasized elevating the role of local expertise in conflict and atrocity-risk settings.[7] Many justifications for the incorporation of local expertise have relied upon normative commitments like inclusion and the importance of local ownership to sustainability. Further, important applied research has emerged through conversations with individuals impacted by atrocities, who face haunting questions of how to effectively prevent atrocities in their communities. This trend has also exposed important ontological blind spots within genocide studies regarding issues of knowledge production, related to questions of "best evidence" (what counts as meeting sufficient evidentiary standards) and inclusion (whose voices are included as experts in shaping conversations of evidence) beyond Western contexts.[8] The urgency of answering such questions has led to extensive recordkeeping of practice-based expertise. Still, problems remain with such locally grounded knowledge meaningfully influencing macro-level policies, as well as theory-building more broadly within the field.

At the same time that there has been a push towards local approaches to peacebuilding, much genocide studies work has focused on either micro-level (e.g., individual or interpersonal) or macro-level (e.g., national or international) dynamics, without necessarily engaging with the meso-level in-between.[9] Specifically, studies of micro-level dynamics account for how individuals make choices about whether to participate in or resist atrocities, often examining factors like personality, biographical availability, personal beliefs, and social ties.[10] Alternatively, macro-level studies often focus on how political elites design and implement genocidal policies, or on how national-level contextual factors, like political insecurity or economic crises, increase the overall risk for atrocities.[11] However, recent work on the sub-national dynamics of violence during mass atrocities has illuminated the need for more granular risk assessments that do not simply assume that national policies translate completely or consistently across diverse communities.[12]

Drawing on this trend, some genocide scholars have emphasized the need to focus on meso-level actors and their influence on the commission of atrocities.[13] These works often point to local leaders, whose influence at the community-level shapes how orders to commit atrocities are

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[7] See Susan H. Allen, "Who Rebuilds? Local Roles in Rebuilding Shattered Societies," in *Rethinking Humanitarian Intervention in the 21st Century*, eds. Aiden Warren and Damian Grenfell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 268–287; Séverine Autesserre, "International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2017), 114–132; Timothy Donais, "Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes," *Peace & Change* 34, no. 1 (2009), 3–26; Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013), 763–783; Thania Paffenholz, "International Peacebuilding Goes Local: Analyzing Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory and its Ambivalent Encounter with 20 Years of Practice," *Peacebuilding* 2, no. 1 (2014), 11–27; Thania Paffenholz, "Unpacking the Local Turn in Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment Towards an Agenda for Future Research," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015), 857–874.

[8] Michael Sweigart, et al. "Locally Useful Evidence: Re-Centering Knowledge Creation for Local Peace Work," in *Are We Making a Difference: Global and Local Efforts to Assess Peacebuilding Effectiveness*, edited by Stacey Connaughton and Jasmine Linabary (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 61–70.

[9] For an overview, see Evgeny Finkel and Scott Straus, "Macro, Meso, and Micro Research on Genocide: Gains, Shortcomings, and Future Areas of Inquiry," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 7, no. 1 (2012), 56–67.

[10] For example, James E. Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[11] For example, Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20th Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[12] For example, Hollie Nyseth Brehm, "Subnational Determinants of Killing in Rwanda," *Criminology* 55, no. 1 (2017), 5–31.

[13] See Finkel and Straus, *Macro, Meso, and Micro Research*; Jacobs and Straus, *Meso-Level Dynamics*.

implemented (or resisted) on the ground.[14] This intersects further with literature on the role of civilians[15] and civil society[16] in collective mobilization toward violence or resistance. Some scholars have begun developing models that link macro- and micro-level interactions to better understand participation in genocidal violence.[17] Together, these studies emphasize that atrocities (and thereby their prevention) cannot be adequately explained by looking at the drivers of decision-making among political elites or ordinary individuals alone, but rather must consider the local powerbrokers, influencers, groups, communities, initiatives, and connectors who traverse between these levels. In short, a meso-level approach is needed to bridge the atrocity prevention gap.

Conceptual Framework: Implications of a Meso-Level Approach to Atrocity Prevention
We situate our investigation of meso-level approaches within the broader literature on genocide and mass atrocity prevention. In particular, we follow Waller's characterization of genocide prevention within three overarching categories: upstream (before the onset of atrocities), midstream (as atrocities are unfolding), and downstream (after atrocities have occurred).[18] Beginning with upstream prevention, these strategies generally focus on implementing early warning processes and mitigating the common risk factors of mass atrocities, which have been identified by numerous empirical studies.[19] Midstream prevention broadly addresses the tools available to policymakers to convince or compel perpetrators to cease the commission of atrocities. Knowledge about such upstream and midstream prevention strategies is largely drawn from a body of research that centers on understanding *genocide causality* and its normative implications for prevention. Two broad inquiries animate this literature, namely: (1.) what are the processes by which genocides and mass atrocities ignite and unfold; and (2.) who participates in and orchestrates atrocities (and thus, who might be well-placed to halt such violence).

Downstream atrocity prevention, on the other hand, focuses mainly on transitional justice, or the variety of mechanisms through which societies reckon with a history of past atrocities and attempt to transition toward a more peaceful future.[20] While much of this research focuses on justice within the judicial sphere—built on assumptions about prosecution as a means of deterring future perpetrators and the enforcement of the rule of law as the basis for normative

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[14] For example, on Rwanda, see Hanna Schieve, "Kingpins of Contention: Local-level Dynamics of Mobilization in the Rwandan Genocide," in *The Concept of Genocide in International Criminal Law*, eds. Marco Odello and Piotr Łubiński (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 38–63; On the Holocaust in Poland, see Tomasz Frydel, "The Polish Countryside as a Gray Zone: Village Heads and the Meso Level of the General Government, 1939–1945," *East European Politics and Societies* 37, no. 1 (2022), 202–228.

[15] Zachariah Mampilly et al., "The Role of Civilians and Civil Society in Preventing Mass Atrocities," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, July 2020, accessed August 2, 2024, https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/TheRoleofCivilians.pdf.

[16] Erica Chenoweth and Evan Perkoski, "A Source of Escalation or a Source of Restraint? An Empirical Investigation of How Civil Society Affects Mass Killings," *Harvard Kennedy School*, HKS Working Paper No. RWP19-027, September 10, 2019, accessed August 7, 2024, https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/source-escalation-or-source-restraint-empirical-investigation-how-civil-society.

[17] For example, see Olaoluwa Olusanya, "A Macro-Micro Integrated Theoretical Model of Mass Participation in Genocide," *British Journal of Criminology* 53, no. 5 (2013), 843–863; Elizabeth M. von Briesen et al., "Modeling Genocide: An Agent-Based Model of Bystander Motivations and Societal Restraints," in *Proceedings of the 2019 International Conference of The Computational Social Science Society of the Americas,* eds. Zining Yang and Elizabeth von Briesen (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 95–119.

[18] James Waller, *Confronting Evil: Engaging our Responsibility to Prevent Genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[19] For an overview, see Verdeja, *Predicting Genocide and Mass Atrocities.*

[20] The United Nations defines transitional justice as "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past violations and abuses to ensure accountability, serve justice, and achieve reconciliation." See United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General, The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies*, August 23, 2004 (UN Doc. S/2004/616).

change[21]—the field has grown to consider the preventive impacts of reconciliation programs, memory initiatives, educational reform, and other victim-centered, non-punitive measures.[22] This shift coincides with policymakers and practitioners increasingly grappling with what justice means within local contexts and what mechanisms are best suited to deliver desired outcomes.[23]

To build our case for how to engage meso-level actors meaningfully in prevention at various stages, we will focus on case studies which illustrate lessons learned regarding upstream (Ukraine) and downstream (Syria) prevention. Before introducing the specifics of these case studies, we will address how the research on both atrocity early warning and transitional justice has profound implications for understanding prevention options available at the meso-level.

Mass Atrocities as a Process: The Need for Locally Informed Nuance in Early Warning
The incorporation of local expertise is essential when viewing the commission of mass atrocities as a complex, multifaceted process that can spike and decrease at different moments over the course of its long-term unfolding. More than fifteen years ago, Straus recommended a long view of genocide by using Rwanda as a case study, urging the field to move away from analyzing only the crescendo of violence from April to July 1994 to examining the full range of dynamics beginning in 1990.[24] We build on this approach to elucidate the necessity for locally informed nuance in early warning processes.

Such a perspective is also consistent with calls for mass atrocities to be more fully integrated into the broader peacebuilding literature.[25] It is further linked to Maureen S. Hiebert's overview of three broad categories of the literature on mass atrocity causes.[26] Despite wide ranges in disciplinary orientations and methodological approaches, Hiebert divides the literature based on relative emphasis on: (1.) individual or group agency, (2.) structural factors, or (3.) processes of identity construction in accounting for the origins and unfolding of genocide. With respect to this third category, we support a shift from focusing exclusively on the processes of identity construction in sparking atrocities to a broader approach that views mass atrocities as a dynamic process fueled by actors and structures across individual, community, regional, national, and international levels. The view that genocides and mass atrocities are dynamic, social phenomena has gained significant traction over the past decade, as the field has moved away from older emphases on genocide as a premeditated crime, which tended to result in static, discrete event-focused modeling.[27] Accordingly, a key research topic of genocide scholars—intent—should be disaggregated over time and space, with the recognition that genocidal intent often emerges, rather than is a pre-given condition, in a process Ernesto Verdeja terms "cascading radicalization."[28]

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[21] For example, Hun Kim and Kathryn Sikkink, "Explaining the Deterrence Effect of Human Rights Prosecutions for Transitional Countries," *International Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2010), 939–963; Brandon Stewart and Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm, "The Quantitative Turn in Transitional Justice Research: What Have We Learned About Impact?," *Transitional Justice Review* 1, no. 5 (2017), 97–133.

[22] For example, Ervin Staub et al., "Healing, Reconciliation, Forgiving and the Prevention of Violence After Genocide or Mass Killing: An Intervention and Its Experimental Evaluation in Rwanda," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2005), 297–334; Kerry Whigham, "Remembering to Prevent: The Preventive Capacity of Public Memory," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 11, no. 2 (2017), 53–71.

[23] Hollie Nyseth Brehm and Shannon Golden, "Centering Survivors in Local Transitional Justice," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 13 (2017), 101–121.

[24] Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[25] Ernesto Verdeja, "The Political Science of Genocide: Outlines of an Emerging Research Agenda," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (2012), 307–321; Verdeja, *Predicting Genocide and Mass Atrocities*.

[26] Maureen S. Hiebert, "Theorizing Destruction: Reflections on the State of Comparative Genocide Theory," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 3, no. 3 (2008), 309–339.

[27] Scott Straus, "'Destroy Them to Save Us:' Theories of Genocide and the Logics of Political Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 4 (2012), 544–560.

[28] Verdeja, *The Political Science of Genocide*, 316.

A process-oriented approach to mass atrocities opens several theory-building possibilities. In justifying his call for genocide to be more fully integrated into wider literature on violence and conflicts, Verdeja notes that a variety of dynamics within high-violence contexts are connected, reinforced, accelerated, and/or impeded by one another.[29] This argument is consistent with Raul Hilberg's interpretation of the Holocaust as a sequential process taken at the initiative of countless decision-makers across a constellation of bureaucracies and institutions.[30] Diverse literature has similarly highlighted that decisions to commit mass atrocities most frequently arose over time in response to unexpected events, failures of previous decisions, "black swan" contingencies, and the real and perceived actions of the perpetrators' adversaries.[31] While it has long been noted that a process-oriented view of genocide can help to identify ripe moments to push elites toward de-escalation, we further suggest that this approach can reveal important moments for meso-level actors to exert significant influence.

With mass atrocities viewed as a process that can shift across discernable patterns of violence,[32] local perspectives are critical to capturing such changing, nuanced dynamics. Atrocity tipping points are still poorly understood in the genocide literature.[33] Yet, we argue that the knowledge of local experts—particularly diverse meso-level leaders attuned to the concerns of their respective constituents and citizens—is critical in bridging the known gaps in structural assessments of mass atrocities and early warning modeling. Local knowledge gathered from more diverse voices and areas of expertise can capture the nuances of rapidly deteriorating risks. Their knowledge of the subtleties of their contextual circumstances is also needed to interpret the important link between the idea of justified group destruction and the underlying logic of colonialization and empire.[34] As a dynamic, process-oriented approach to mass atrocities emerged in the 2000s, we acknowledge that bridging the gap between the micro- and macro-levels relies heavily on this area of theory-building.[35]

Transitional Justice as Atrocity Prevention: Responding to Local Needs
At the same time, the recovery from mass atrocities and future reduction of risk should also be conceptualized as a process, namely, transitional justice. Transitional justice efforts include the use of various mechanisms—undertaken independently, sequentially, or concurrently—like trials, truth commissions, reparations, documentation, and memory initiatives.[36] Rather than a discrete event, transitional justice encompasses a complex combination of efforts, interactions, and choices unfolding over time that cumulatively seek to address past harms.

We agree with James Waller and other genocide scholars who classify transitional justice not simply as post-conflict recovery but as atrocity prevention, whether it be through deterring future perpetration or undermining societal risk factors for atrocities through justice-based solutions.[37] In theory, pursuing accountability for past crimes deters future human rights

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

[31] Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation-State: The Rise of the West and the Coming of Genocide* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005); Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Martin Shaw, *What Is Genocide?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Straus, *Destroy Them to Save Us*; Valentino, *Final Solutions*; Kristina Hook, "Pinpointing Patterns of Violence: A Comparative Genocide Studies Approach to Violence Escalation in the Ukrainian Holodomor," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 15, no. 2 (2021), 10–36.

[32] Kristina Hook, "The Information Revolution and New Opportunities for Multitrack Diplomacy in High Violence Situations: The Increasing Importance of Data Organization and Local Input for Policy Shaping," *Ottawa Dialogue Policy Brief* 1, no. 2 (2021), 1–12; Hook, *Pinpointing Patterns*; Straus, *Destroy Them to Save Us*.

[33] Verdeja, *Predicting Genocide and Mass Atrocities*.

[34] A. Dirk Moses, ed., *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (London: Berghahn Books, 2008).

[35] Hiebert, *Theorizing Destruction*.

[36] Waller, *Confronting Evil*.

[37] Ibid.

abuses by creating the credible threat of punishment vis-à-vis would-be perpetrators, as well as by enhancing collective norms against the commission of grave crimes.[38] However, transitional justice is not limited in its capacity to contribute to atrocity prevention only after crimes have occurred. Indeed, efforts to document ongoing atrocities, including human rights investigations and reporting, can create leverage to pressure perpetrators, through threats of future prosecution and/or through information campaigns to delegitimize them by broadcasting their transgressions. These latter activities can play a direct role in reducing the capacity (i.e., the *means*) of perpetrators to wage future atrocities—one of the key aims identified for atrocity prevention—along with dissuading the *motives* to commit atrocities.[39] As such, we see transitional justice as an important lens through which atrocity prevention is defined and enacted in various contexts.

Though the study of transitional justice is generally traced back to the post-Holocaust Nuremberg Trials, recent transitional justice scholarship has shifted from the study of international, top-down mechanisms like such tribunals. Instead, scholars have increasingly considered localized, participatory mechanisms that emphasize survivors' agency and civil society involvement.[40] Many frame the transition toward local approaches in terms of increasing effectiveness by tailoring transitional justice policies to fit local cultural norms, rituals, conflict resolution processes, and memory efforts. Yet, another compelling reason for the turn toward local mechanisms has been the failure of high-level approaches to deliver justice in a timely or satisfactory manner, as we argue here.

Scholars have also studied the complex, multi-level interactions between various actors that produce transitional justice. For example, Elin Skaar and Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm argue that domestic and international actors within a given context engage in contestation as they advocate for different justice preferences motivated by their values, interests, and capabilities.[41] Their model helps scholars and practitioners conceptualize justice-seeking as a dynamic process that is determined by a constellation of relevant stakeholders. Paul Gready and Simon Robins go further in challenging the transitional justice field to move beyond universal, legalist approaches by conceptualizing "justice in transition," which "seeks to understand how individuals and communities engage with needs, rights, custom, community, agency, and mobilization, and how they contest continuities of injustice and seek justice in their local environment and with regard to the state."[42] In promoting this context-based and active process of justice-seeking, Gready and Robins focus specifically on the role of civil society actors, who operate in the spaces between individuals and governments.[43] These efforts dovetail with calls within the transitional justice field imploring scholars and policymakers to shift their focus to meso-level actors, which we further explore in our case studies.

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[38] Kim and Sikkink, *Explaining the Deterrence Effect*. First mentioned in note 20; Stewart and Wiebelhaus-Brahm, *The Quantitative Turn*. First mentioned in note 20.

[39] Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*. First mentioned in note 4.

[40] Erin Baines, "The Haunting of Alice: Local Approaches to Justice and Reconciliation in Northern Uganda," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1, no. 1 (2007), 91–114; Pamina Firchow and Yvette Selim, "Meaningful Engagement from the Bottom-Up? Taking Stock of Participation in Transitional Justice Processes," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 16, no. 2 (2022), 187–203; Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern, "Whose Justice? Rethinking Transitional Justice from the Bottom Up," *Journal of Law and Society* 35, no. 2 (2008), 265–292; Bridget Moix, "Turning Atrocity Prevention Inside-Out: Community-Based Approaches to Preventing, Protecting, and Recovering from Mass Violence," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 9, no. 3 (2016), 59–69; Nyseth Brehm and Golden, *Centering Survivors*. First mentioned in note 22; Hugo Van Der Merwe and Maya Schkolne, "The Role of Local Civil Society in Transitional Justice," in *Research Handbook on Transitional Justice*, eds. Cheryl Lawther et al. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017), 221–243.

[41] Elin Skaar and Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm, "The Drivers of Transitional Justice: An Analytical Framework for Assessing the Role of Actors," *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 31, no. 2 (2013), 127–148.

[42] Paul Gready and Simon Robins, "Rethinking Civil Society and Transitional Justice: Lessons from Social Movements and 'New' Civil Society," *International Journal of Human Rights* 21, no. 7 (2017), 957.

[43] Ibid.

Methodology

We explore local approaches to atrocity prevention using two relevant case studies: Ukraine (beginning in 2014) and Syria (beginning in 2011). These cases share certain characteristics which make them valuable to consider together, which are detailed further in our case studies and summarized here. First, evidence in both cases indicates the commission of widespread mass atrocities, including documented crimes against humanity within the context of war. Second, international responses in both cases have been stifled by the Russian Federation's use of its veto power within the United Nations Security Council, while Moscow itself has actively committed and/or facilitated atrocities in both cases. Third, both cases illustrate the powerful impact of local leaders and civil society in preventing and mitigating atrocities under the harshest conditions. Due to the differences in the onset and temporal escalation of atrocities between these cases, they further allow us to analyze local approaches at various phases of atrocity prevention, including upstream and downstream prevention.[44] Specifically, we refer to the Ukraine case to illustrate how upstream prevention efforts failed without effectively incorporating local expertise into early warning systems. Our consideration of the Syrian case enables us to address downstream prevention by examining the role of local actors in transitional justice efforts. By placing these case studies side-by-side, we argue that local expertise is critical for enhancing the effectiveness of atrocity prevention efforts whether before and after atrocities onset.

This article is based on several complementary sources of data collected through two IRB-approved research projects carried out by each author respectively. Analysis of the Ukraine-Russia context is based on 100 interviews conducted by the first author in 33 locations across Ukraine from 2015 to 2024. We focus on reconstructing the first phase of the Russia-Ukraine war, dating from Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and the sparking of armed conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014, to Moscow's nationwide escalation in Ukraine in February 2022. This interview data was further complemented by 2.5 years of ethnographic fieldwork by the first author in Ukraine from 2015 to 2024, including detailed anthropological field notes, extended participant observation with the stakeholders quoted in this article, and other primary source data. This qualitative data was collected, organized, and evaluated using the data analysis methods proposed by numerous social scientists, including clinical interviewing.[45] The stakeholder groups identified for interviews and participant observation included Ukrainian national leaders in political, legal, legislative, civil society, and academic fields; for this analysis, only data from civil society and academic fields were consulted, with political and legal actors excluded due to their clear role in Ukraine's macro-level political system. Throughout this multi-year interviewing process, stakeholder groups across professional and perceived ideological divides were recruited to contrast potential variation driven by either political differences or occupational training. To further support a variety of viewpoints in this long-term project, interviews were conducted across three languages (Ukrainian, Russian, and English) by the first author and a trilingual research assistant trained in ethnographic translation.

The Syrian case study in this article was based upon a review of secondary sources and consultations with experts reporting on the state of justice in Syria, as well as eight interviews conducted by the second author with Syrians in Jordan in 2018. Security and access restrictions limited the capacity for an American researcher to conduct interviews within Syria; however, in 2018, about 650,000 Syrian refugees were registered in Jordan.[46] The second author primarily recruited interview participants through local non-profits serving Syrian refugee communities,

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[44] Waller, *Confronting Evil*. First mentioned in note 17.

[45] H. Russell Bernard et al., *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2016); Gery W. Ryan and H. Russell Bernard, "Data Management and Analysis Methods," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000), 769–802.

[46] Jordan INGO Forum (JIF), "Syrian Refugees in Jordan, a Protection Overview," *Relief Web*, 2018, accessed August 2, 2024, https://reliefweb.int/attachments/f26f201d-95f6-3454-bc77-4807fa41128d/JIF-ProtectionBrief-2017-Final.pdf.

following snowball sampling procedures as has been preferred by other scholars of the Syrian crisis.[47] Semi-structured interviews generally lasted one to two hours and focused on participants' experiences and perceptions of the Syrian civil war. In particular, the interviewer asked participants what justice meant to them and to describe what could be done for the victims of violence, before proceeding to ask for participants' opinions about a range of specific transitional justice mechanisms, including the death penalty, trials, reparations, truth commissions, and amnesties. Given the importance of precise language for interpretation in qualitative analysis, interviews were conducted with the assistance of an Arabic-speaking translator and were transcribed by a native Arabic speaker of Syrian background. These interviews were conducted with "ordinary" Syrians (not explicitly occupying leadership roles) to elicit bottom-up justice preferences. These translated interviews were analyzed using qualitative coding software to identify key themes among participant responses, aligning with best practices in qualitative methods. Recognizing the various social, political, and economic vulnerabilities of both populations interviewed, each author took the utmost care in ensuring the privacy, sensitivity, and confidentiality of these interviews, including de-identifying participant descriptions in the quotes provided in the following case studies.

Incorporating Local Expertise into Early Warning: The Case of Ukraine
Beginning with Ukraine, this context profoundly highlights how local knowledge can detect emerging atrocity risks long before commonly used atrocity assessments that focus on macro-level dynamics. In Ukraine, a variety of diverse meso-level leaders—including religious leaders, teachers and textbook authors, artists and musicians, anticorruption activists and human rights defenders, and university academics—repeatedly warned about the possibility for violent conflict escalation following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, including the possibility of the large-scale atrocity crimes now being carried out by Russia against Ukrainians. Their prescient warnings prompt questions about the structures and dynamics that prevented their alarm from being addressed by policymakers until it was too late. As will be detailed in this case study, a reconstruction of the timeline between 2014–2022, as well as accounts from meso-level leaders during this period, reveal significant blind spots within the field of atrocity prevention and genocide studies itself, underscoring the need for local expertise and regional knowledge in the field.

Reconstructing the Timeline of Atrocity Risk Escalation in Ukraine
While Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 garnered significant global attention, this armed conflict began eight years earlier. In February 2014, the Russian Federation annexed the Crimean peninsula and sparked armed conflict through proxy forces in eastern Ukraine.[48] These origins are directly linked to student protests targeting the action of Kremlin-leaning President Viktor Yanukovych, specifically his reneging of a promised European trade agreement that could have paved the way for closer political and economic ties with Western countries.[49] After peaceful student-led protests were met with state-initiated force by the now disbanded *Berkyt* police forces, Ukrainian citizens turned out in mass to protest police brutality against mainly young protesters.[50]

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[47] Wendy Pearlman, "Narratives of Fear in Syria," *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 1 (2016), 21–37.

[48] Elizabeth Cullen Dunn and Michael S. Bobick, "The Empire Strikes Back: War Without War and Occupation Without Occupation in the Russian Sphere of Influence," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 3 (2014), 405–413; Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2019), 181–204.

[49] David R. Marples and Frederick V. Mills, eds., *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Analyses of a Civil Revolution*, Vol. 138 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[50] Marci Shore, *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Richard Marcantonio and Kristina Hook, "The Environment in Warfare-Related Policy Making: The Case of Ukraine," *Small Wars Journal*, October 25, 2020, accessed August 2, 2024, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/environment-warfare-related-policy-making-case-ukraine; Emily Channell-Justice, *Without the State: Self-Organization and Political Activism in Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022).

As President Yanukovych tried to maintain his power over the following months, his Party of Regions parliamentary bloc, forced through a series of ten draconian laws restricting freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and the activity of civil society organizations, devoid of any regularized parliamentary procedures, public debate, or the creation of an official public record.[51] Known in Ukraine as the "laws on dictatorship" passed on "Black Thursday," these laws were criticized loudly by Western governments at the time for their antidemocratic nature.[52] The historian Timothy Snyder characterized these laws in January 2014 as ushering in "dictatorship" and a "violation of human rights and a rather sad imitation of Russia."[53]

By early 2014, the protests had transformed into broader public expressions of discontent with President Yanukovych's escalating authoritarianism, dating back to his falsified presidential victory that triggered the Orange Revolution from 2004 to 2005.[54] Between November 2013 and February 2014, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians participated in the Euromaidan protests, referred to as the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, primarily concentrated in Kyiv but also with similar demonstrations across Ukraine.[55] Writing for *Newsweek* magazine on February 18, 2014, journalist Lecia Bushak wrote:

> EuroMaidan has grown into something far bigger than just an angry response to the fallen-through EU deal. It's now about ousting Yanukovych and his corrupt government; guiding Ukraine away from its 200-year-long, deeply intertwined, and painful relationship with Russia; and standing up for basic human rights to protest, speak, and think freely and to act peacefully without the threat of violence.[56]

The following day, the now-disbanded police special forces fired on the civilian crowd, killing more than 100 people and wounding scores.[57] The shock and brutality of these events prompted enough members of President Yanukovych's party to flee or to defect to alternative parties that the Party of Regions lost its parliamentary majority. With the required quorum now reached by the opposition bloc, Ukraine's parliament passed a series of laws that canceled anti-protest governmental operations, removed the police from the areas of the state-initiated shooting, freed political detainees, restored the 2004 national constitution, and removed

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[51] Timothy Snyder, "Ukraine: The New Dictatorship," *New York Review of Books*, January 18, 2014, accessed August 2, 2024, https://www.nybooks.com/online/2014/01/18/ukraine-new-dictatorship/.

[52] Reuters, "Ukrainian President Approves Strict Anti-Protest Laws," *Guardian*, January 17, 2014, accessed August 2, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/17/ukrainian-president-anti-protest-laws.

[53] Snyder, *Ukraine*.

[54] The Orange Revolution had also sparked widely covered civil society protests that resulted in a new vote count in which the democratically-oriented candidate Viktor Yushchenko prevailed after being poisoned in September 2004 with his blood dioxin levels much higher than the normal baseline. Persistent accusations have pointed to the Kremlin and Russia-aligned actors since this event nearly twenty years ago. See, Mykola Riabchuk, "Ukraine: Lessons Learned from Other Postcommunist Transitions," *Orbis* 52, no. 1 (2008), 41–64; Serhy Yekelchyk, *Stalin's Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the Soviet Historical Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Serhy Yekelchyk, *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[55] Steven Pifer, "Ukraine: Six Years After the Maidan," *Brookings Institution*, February 21, 2020, accessed August 2, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/ukraine-six-years-after-the-maidan/.

[56] Lecia Bushak, "Kiev's Minstrel of the Street Revolution," *Newsweek,* February 18, 2014, accessed August 2, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/2014/02/21/kievs-minstrel-street-revolution-245532.html.

[57] Marples and Mills, eds., *Ukraine's Euromaidan*. First mentioned in note 48; Euan MacDonald and Brian Bonner, *Ukraine: Witness to Revolution: How Kyiv Post Journalists Saw Euromaidan* (Kyiv: Kyiv Post, 2016).

President Yanukovych from office.[58] After the massive, highly-publicized police shooting, European diplomats hurried to Kyiv, brokering an overnight settlement between opposition leaders and Yanukovych. Although Yanukovych signed the agreement, he subsequently fled the country for Russia.[59] On February 22, 2014, Ukraine's parliament appointed an acting Prime Minister and acting President, assigning snap elections in three months and declaring their intentions to begin an ambitious domestic reform agenda centered on European integration.

The Russian Federation concurrently began its invasion of Ukraine, and by February 27, 2014—only five days later—had captured strategic military locations across the Crimean peninsula.[60] After installing a puppet government and staging a falsified referendum, the Russian Federation initially denied its involvement but formally incorporated Crimea on March 18, 2014, with President Vladimir Putin stating in 2015 that plans to incorporate Crimea began weeks before the staged referendum.[61] During the same period, Moscow began transferring financial and military equipment to proxy forces and local volunteers (many of whom had ties to organized crime) into eastern Ukraine's two provinces collectively referred to as the Donbas. In a ruling released in January 2023, the European Court on Human Rights declared beyond reasonable doubt that the Russian military forces were active in Ukraine from (at least) April 2014.[62] The Court further ruled that the held-territory in Ukraine's Donbas region—a territory larger than Switzerland, the Netherlands, or Denmark—was under Russian jurisdiction since (at least) May 11, 2014, with large-scale deployment of Russian troops in Ukraine legally established since August 2014.[63] In total, the United Nations estimated that more than 13,000 lives were lost; 30,000 were wounded; and 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) were created from 2014 to 2019 alone.[64]

Although information about these escalating atrocity risks was readily available at the time, international responses suffered from political will vacuums, ineffectiveness, and susceptibility to Kremlin disinformation.[65] Despite the presence of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) on the ground as the official conflict monitor, Russia continued to perfect its blending of overt and covert activities in Ukraine—a factor essential to understanding these vacuums and blind spots. Russia's disinformation success with this form of

[58] Max Fisher, "Ukraine's Parliament Just Threw President Yanukovych Under the Bus. That's Great News," *Washington Post,* December 1, 2021, accessed August 3, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/02/20/ukraines-parliament-just-threw-president-yanukovych-under-the-bus-thats-great-news/; Marples, and Mills, eds., *Ukraine's Euromaidan*. First mentioned in note 48; MacDonald and Bonner, *Ukraine: Witness to Revolution*.

[59] Pifer, *Ukraine*. First mentioned in note 54.

[60] Serhy Yekelchyk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[61] "Putin Says Plan to Take Crimea Hatched Before Referendum," *Reuters*, March 9, 2015, accessed August 3, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/putin-says-plan-to-take-crimea-hatched-before-referendum-idUSKBN0M51DF/.

[62] See, European Court of Human Rights Grand Chamber Decision, *Case of Ukraine and the Netherlands v. Russia, Applications Nos. 8019/16, 43800/14 and 28525/20*, Strasbourg, France, November 22, 2022, accessed August 8, 2024, https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%2522itemid%2522:%5B%2522001-222889%2522%5D%7D.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ukrainian Independent Information Agency of News, "Donbas War Death Toll Rises up to Nearly 13,000—UN," *UNIAN*, April 17, 2020, accessed August 3, 2024, https://www.unian.info/war/10416549-donbas-war-death-toll-rises-up-to-nearly-13-000-un.html.

[65] Fostered by Russia's strategy of plausible deniability, the West passed some sanctions, released condemning statements, and never recognized Russia's *de facto* control over Ukraine's southern or eastern regions. Still, a demonstrated lack of political will is best exemplified through the German government's continued commercial and energy deals with the Russian Federation, including construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline despite years of international, and particularly Ukrainian, warnings. See Judy Dempsey, "Scholz's Tank Decision Upends Germany's Long Affair with Russia," *Carnegie Europe*, January 25, 2023, accessed May 07, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/01/scholzs-tank-decision-upends-germanys-long-affair-with-russia?lang=en&center=europe.

hybrid warfare[66] may explain the lack of international knowledge regarding the escalating risks of Russian mass atrocities in Ukraine over many years, as well as the downgrading of Ukrainian warnings in this regard. The brutality of Russian forces during their 2022 nationwide onslaught against Ukraine adheres closely to well-established Russian military tactics displayed in Syria, Georgia, and the first and second Chechen wars since the 1990s, while many regional experts note connections to earlier periods of Russian imperial and Soviet violence against Ukrainians.[67] These patterns raise important questions about the muted concern expressed regarding the potential for Russian atrocities in Ukraine by many global analysts from 2014 to 2022.

Meso-Level Perspectives of Emerging Atrocity Risks in Ukraine
A more explicit incorporation of Ukrainian expertise could have remedied misconceptions about atrocity risk from the early days of Russia's invasion in 2014 by correcting such errors and by sharing local concerns regarding a steady escalation of Kremlin priming of dehumanizing tropes about Ukrainian identity.[68] For example, in an interview with the first author, an exhibitions curator of a national museum dedicated to the Ukrainian Holodomor[69] clearly identified the risks that later unfolded. Speaking in May 2017, she stated:

> I am a child of independent Ukraine [i.e., born after 1991]. When Yanukovych escaped [i.e., fled to Russia], it was so unexpected. And this Russian occupation of Crimea and the war in Donbas were so unexpected for me. But when I remembered the history of the Holodomor…, I understood that Ukrainians should have foreseen this…
>
> What is now happening in Donbas and in Crimea is not the end of Russian encroachments toward Ukraine. Because nowadays Russian president denies the fact of the Holodomor as a genocide, actually he denies the existence of the Ukrainian nation as such. We all understand that the Holodomor occurred because Soviet authorities were afraid to lose Ukraine; they did not want it to stop being a part of the Soviet Union.
>
> The Russian president [Putin] denies the existence of the Ukrainian modern state. They are constantly trying to take away our history…. Such attempts to take away our history are

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[66] Russia's military activities in Ukraine from 2014-2022 have been described as operating "through a mixture of kinetic violence and subversive tactics to destabilize while avoiding retribution," exploiting loopholes and blind spots in international law by blending state, non-state, and criminal factions. See Kristina Hook, "Hybrid Warfare Is Here to Stay: Now What?," *Political Violence at a Glance,* December 12, 2018, accessed August 3, 2024, https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2018/12/12/hybrid-warfare-is-here-to-stay-now-what/; Andreas B. Munoz Mosquera and Sascha Dov Bachmann, "The Legal Framework of Hybrid Warfare and Influence Operations," *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, 7 (2017), 63–87; Reid Standish, "Inside a European Center to Combat Russia's Hybrid Warfare," *Foreign Policy*, July 25, 2019, accessed May 6, 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/18/inside-a-european-center-to-combat-russias-hybrid-warfare/.

[67] Kristina Hook, "'When the Ukrainian World Was Destroyed': Genocidal Narrative Convergence and Stakeholder Interactions during National Crises" (PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2020).

[68] Clara Apt, "Russia's Eliminationist Rhetoric Against Ukraine: A Collection," *Just Security,* April 18, 2024, accessed August 3, 2024, https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/.

[69] The Holodomor ("killing by hunger") refers to an artificially induced famine under Joseph Stalin in 1932–1933 that killed at least 3.9 to 5 million Ukrainians and is increasingly suggested by subject matter experts as a willful act of genocide. See Oleh Wolowyna et al., "Monthly Distribution of 1933 Famine Losses in Soviet Ukraine and the Russian Soviet Republic at the Regional Level," *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 3 (2020), 530–548; Andrea Graziosi, "The Soviet 1931–1933 Famines and the Ukrainian Holodomor: Is a New Interpretation Possible, and What Would Its Consequences Be*?" Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 27, no. 1/4 (2004), 97–115.

> very dangerous because in this case we have a situation when one identity is put on another identity, and as a result, one identity assimilates the other one.
>
> We have to stand on our ground. We do not have the right to forget about the Holodomor because it will take us to another genocide.[70]

Such sentiments did not occur in isolation among the civil society representatives interviewed by the first author but rather, they represent larger trends detected across respondents for this long-term project beginning in 2015. Nor were such concerns limited to only one type of meso-level leader. Speaking in June 2017, a Ukrainian academic and history professor also interjected when speaking about the region during an interview with the first author:

> I want them [international citizens] to understand how we suffered as the eastern part of Europe on the border with Russia. Because Russia wants to spread its influence. It wants to move to Europe. Here [in Ukraine], we are protecting ourselves but at the same time, we are protecting Europe.[71]

These concerns regarding the modern Russian Federation embodying older forms of violent imperialism toward Ukraine were also echoed by meso-level leaders across age ranges and genders. Similar sentiments were repeated by the youngest participant in this long-term interviewing project, a law school student aiming to work in her nation's parliament. Also speaking during a June 2017 interview, she similarly urged for more Europeans and international observers to pay attention to the events unfolding in Ukraine, saying:

> Actually, before the events of the Euromaidan, people abroad didn't know who Ukrainians are. They thought we were a part of Russia or something like that. It is necessary to study how awful Russia was with its totalitarian regime and that it still remains faithful to this tradition. I want people abroad to understand and to realize what was going on here. And I want them to understand that nowadays, Russia is still the same evil as the Soviet Union was.[72]

Atrocity Early Warning Blind Spots and Lack of Local Expertise
How did international atrocity prevention efforts fail to incorporate these local early warnings? Significantly, the presence of Russian forces in Ukraine since 2014 failed to break through mainstream genocide studies early warning systems or long-term assessments of structural risks. From the early days of the war in 2014, reporting of localized atrocity crimes in Russian-controlled areas of Ukraine encompassing both the Crimean peninsula and the Donbas region has been released by organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.[73] However, such reporting was not translated into a broader recognition of escalated atrocity risk in Ukraine by mainstream atrocity forecasters.

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[70] Lightly condensed for brevity. Interview conducted by first author, May 2017, Kyiv, Ukraine.

[71] Interview with first author, June 2017, Kyiv, Ukraine.

[72] Interview with first author, June 2017, Kyiv, Ukraine

[73] "Ukraine: Mounting Evidence of War Crimes and Russian Involvement," *Amnesty International,* September 7, 2014, accessed August 3, 2024 https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/09/ukraine-mounting-evidence-war-crimes-and-russian-involvement/; "Ukraine: Rebel Forces Detain, Torture Civilians," *Human Rights Watch*, August 28, 2014, accessed August 3, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/28/ukraine-rebel-forces-detain-torture-civilians.

Although addressed in small corners of Ukrainian studies or related fields, significant blind spots within the atrocity prevention literature regarding Ukraine existed. As an illustrative sample, we analyzed all annual atrocity risk reports from 2014–2022 released by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Early Warning Project.[74] We selected this source as this project has pioneered some of the field's most sophisticated methodological approaches to early warning that blend quantitative modeling and an expert crowdsourcing forecasting survey. To their credit, the Early Warning Project has long clarified that for "practical" methodological reasons, their tool "only forecast[s] mass killings within countries."[75] Still, with this definition in mind, we carefully noted each mention of Ukraine in the seven annual risk reports that have been released since Russia first sparked armed conflict with Ukraine in 2014, with the results revealing significant implications and limitations for the field to consider. The results are summarized in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. All Mentions of Ukraine in Early Warning Project Statistical Risk Assessments, 2014–2022

Year	Report Commentary	Top-30 Countries At Risk	Heat Map
2014	No mention	n/a	n/a
2015	*"Ukraine ranked among the many countries worldwide with negligible risk going into 2014, but the abrupt ouster of its president in February and the eventual outbreak and escalation of a civil war in the east pushed it all the way up to twentieth in this year's assessments."*	n/a	n/a
2016–2017	No mention	n/a	1-2%
2018–2019	No mention	Did not make list	Orange
2019–2020	No mention	Did not make list	Orange
2020–2021	No mention	Did not make list	Yellow (*lowered*)
2021–2022	No mention	Did not make list	Yellow (*remained low*)

The lack of attention paid to Ukraine reveals several significant challenges to the atrocity prevention field. The most obvious challenge is a methodological focus on internal killings.[76] While appropriately clarified in the Early Warning Project definition, the Russian escalation of atrocity crimes in Ukraine in 2022 should spark a reconsideration of this approach and renewed researcher focus on measuring interstate risks. An internally-focused conception of mass killings appears increasingly inappropriate for current global trends, namely neo-imperial, settler colonial, or other expansionist ideologies promoted by powerful perpetrator

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[74] U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and Dartmouth College, "Countries at Risk for Mass Killing, 2022–2023 Statistical Risk Assessment Results," *Early Warning Project*, November 2022, accessed August 3, 2024, https://earlywarningproject.ushmm.org/storage/resources/2634/Early-Warning-Project-Statistical-Risk-Assessment-2022-23.pdf.

[75] As of the time of this writing, this definitional language is repeated in each annual release of the Early Warning Project risk list. For recent citing, see U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and Dartmouth College, *Countries at Risk*, 4.

[76] While we note the table above reflects the Early Warning Project's stated goal of flagging internal mass killing risks, the Simon-Skjodt Center itself clarified in 2022 that they are "committed to identifying the risks and providing early warning of mass atrocities that may fall outside of the definition of mass killings." See U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and Dartmouth, *Countries at Risk for Mass Killing*, 12.

states like Russia and China. In historical retrospect, Russia's armed conflict in Ukraine since 2014, coupled with its domestic persecutions of its Ukrainian minority during the same period,[77] positions this case as one of the twenty-first century's biggest forecasting omissions.[78] While the Early Warning Project's usage of the definition for "mass killing" was designed to expand prevention capabilities, these failures to recognize risks in Ukraine serve as a critique of this category's stated explanation as a "closely related but broader concept that covers *all* of the violent episodes that most observers would consider to be genocides, along with many others."[79]

Beyond forecasting misses, challenging questions linger as to whether this concept instead clouded atrocity assessments. A 2014 article by the Early Warning Project correctly noted the abuse of genocide narratives on the Russian side,[80] which is significant as such language eventually evolved into Moscow's specious charges of "de-Nazifying" Ukraine as a justification for their 2022-present mass atrocities.[81] Yet, when analyzing the data in Figure 1, potential civilian harm is portrayed by the Early Warning Project as possible from the post-Euromaidan Ukrainian government but not the Russian government, a dynamic linked to its methodology but that missed the most acute source of risk. As Figure 1 shows, Ukraine is mentioned only once (2015) in language containing three propagandistic narratives that the above historical reconstruction clearly dispels using real-time citations that pushed back on such false claims as events unfolded. The framing of President Yanukovych's ouster as "sudden" belies his involvement in sparking the decade-earlier democratically oriented Orange Revolution in 2004, while "ouster" denies the extensive and fair usage of Ukraine's legislature to follow the country's judicial procedures in appointing acting heads of state until snap elections deemed free and fair were held. This framing also denies Yanukovych's own role in seeking to reorient the Ukrainian political system toward expansive authoritarianism and orchestrating the mass killing of civilians on Ukraine's Independence Square, indicating that his removal likely lessened atrocity risks by the Ukrainian government rather than escalated them. Perhaps most significantly, the 2015 Early Warning Project report frames Russia's unfolding invasion of Ukraine as a "civil war," demonstrating a susceptibility to Russian disinformation prevalent at the time but nevertheless pushed back in real-time by Ukrainian subject matter experts and by Ukrainian experts themselves.[82] Now, as Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine unfolds as a direct escalation of the previous eight years of armed conflict, Figure 1 reveals that such narratives in major atrocity risk early warning tools were never corrected. In fact, the growing risk of atrocities in Ukraine was never significantly addressed again in these reports,

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[77] Sonya Savina,'"It's Not Safe to Admit You're Ukrainian' How Putin's Domestic War on Ukrainian Culture Began Years Before the 2022 Invasion," *Meduza*, January 26, 2023, accessed April 28, 2023, https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/01/26/it-s-not-safe-to-admit-you-re-ukrainian?utm_source=email&utm_medium=briefly&utm_campaign=2023-01-26.

[78] Some analysts further argue that the failure to prevent atrocity crimes and genocide in Ukraine are even more stark as they exploded in the European neighborhood, thus "bump[ing] up close against a set of legal, academic, cultural, and media institutions" designed in the aftermath of the Holocaust to highlight and stop them. See, Peter Pomerantsev, "Ukraine Is Our Past and Our Future," *Time Magazine*, April 6, 2022, accessed April 24, 2023, https://time.com/6164810/ukraine-is-our-past-and-our-future/.

[79] U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Why We Assess Risks of Mass Killing Rather Than Genocide," *Preventing Genocide Blog*, August 5, 2014, accessed August 3, 2024, https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/blog/why-we-assess-risks-of-mass-killing-rather-than-genocide?from=page-prev-link.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Apt, *Russia's Eliminationist*. First mentioned in note 67.

[82] In particular, the Ukrainian civil society organization Inform Napalm (as well as a variety of other Ukrainian and international open-source intelligence organizations like Bellingcat) meticulously tracked and documented the presence of extensive Russian heavy weaponry in Ukraine that could not have been in the country except if transferred externally. See, Alina Maiorova, *Donbas in Flames: Guide to the Conflict Zone* (Lviv: Prometheus, 2017).

despite years of active warfare and civilian targeting that have now led to credible allegations of crimes against humanity and even genocide after Russia's 2022 escalation.[83]

The lack of warnings about Russian violence in Ukraine from 2014–2022, and the failure to correct false narratives of a Ukrainian civil war, appears linked to a lack of local expertise and contextual knowledge. Despite the Early Warning Project's essential, laudable work in other cases during this same time period, the 2022 report implicitly acknowledges this lack of knowledge regarding escalating risks flagged by Ukrainian meso-level leaders in education and activism from 2014–2021, noting that their 2022 report was "based on available data reflecting conditions as of the end of 2021."[84] Ukrainian meso-level warnings from this same period, as detailed above, supported by earlier documentation from organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, could have strengthened this tool in these preceding years, allowing them to issue an early warning separate from the internally-focused mass killing concept. In a 2022 follow-up, the Early Warning Project report clarified its commitment to "identifying the risks and providing early warning of mass atrocities that may fall outside of the definition of mass killings."[85]

Lessons Learned from Local Early Warning Expertise in Ukraine
Reconstructing these missed opportunities for atrocity prevention early warning reveals three key findings. First, Ukraine's meso-level leaders overwhelmingly identified the risks and pathways of Russia's ongoing atrocity crimes against them well in advance of external genocide experts. Yet the sociopolitical and normative power of the civil society movement[86] unfolding during the 2013–2014 Euromaidan events in Ukraine, and the accompanying possibility of an extremely violent reaction by Vladimir Putin toward the emergence of a former Soviet state's successful democratic efforts, were largely missed by atrocity prevention early warning specialists. The misinterpretation of the war in eastern Ukraine as a civil war also contributed to forecasting failures to track the emergence of eliminationist language by influential Russian politicians and propagandists long before February 2022,[87] as well as the long-standing structural efforts by the Russian state to target Ukrainian identity domestically and externally.[88] These blind spots within comparative genocide studies indicate that deeper integration between this field and regional Eastern Europe and Eurasian studies is needed, while also indicating the powerful role that disinformation can play in cloaking emerging atrocity risks.

Deep, long-term engagement with diverse networks of local actors is an important corrective step. In the Ukrainian context, the alarm bells of emerging atrocity risks rang loudly precisely because many different and even rivaling voices in Ukraine's lively, divided political context were sharing similar concerns about the possibility of a substantial Russian escalation of violence.[89] Also significant, the alarm raised by meso-level leaders was not in response to traditional atrocity early warning tools or structural risk assessments, but rather in the context of interviews on other events like the 1930s Ukrainian Holodomor. A combination of long-term ethnographic presence, elicitive listening, clinical interviewing, and reflexivity was essential to generating these insights that other atrocity prevention tools missed. While not every genocide

[83] Antony J. Blinken, "Crimes Against Humanity in Ukraine—United States Department of State," *U.S. Department of State*, February 18, 2023, accessed August 3, 2024, https://www.state.gov/crimes-against-humanity-in-ukraine; Yonah Diamond et al., "An Independent Legal Analysis of the Russian Federation's Breaches of the Genocide Convention in Ukraine and the Duty to Prevent," *New Lines Institute*, January 19, 2023, accessed August 3, 2024, https://newlinesinstitute.org/rules-based-international-order/genocide/an-independent-legal-analysis-of-the-russian-federations-breaches-of-the-genocide-convention-in-ukraine-and-the-duty-to-prevent/.

[84] U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and Dartmouth, *Countries at Risk*, 5.

[85] Ibid., 12.

[86] See Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[87] Apt, *Russia's Eliminationist*. First mentioned in note 67.

[88] Savina, *It's Not Safe*. First mentioned in note 76.

[89] Hook, *When the Ukrainian World*. First mentioned in note 66.

scholar can conduct long-term fieldwork, the field must remain integrated with disciplines that can, like anthropology. As a first step, locally oriented questionnaires that gather qualitative data should be deployed in potentially at-risk contexts with freedom built in for respondents to identify additional themes of concern. In the Ukrainian case, externally opaque narratives surrounding the generations-ago Ukrainian Holodomor were more accurate at generating the insight needed to predict Russia's 2022 escalation than traditional atrocity prevention tools. The field must therefore grapple with both expanding the local experts consulted and the types of questions asked (again, allowing local experts to guide this).

Finally, the Ukraine case underscores that not all macro-level leaders possess the same degree of power and influence, adding an additional layer of nuance to the framing that we have deployed in this article. Intellectual humility remains essential for both scholars and policymakers representing powerful nations. For many years, Ukrainian and other Central European, Eastern European, and Baltic voices were far too easily dismissed for being "emotional;" in other words, culturally divergent from Westernized norms. Calls for Western deterrence of increasing atrocity risks posed by the Russian Federation were also frequently dismissed or played down when coming from Ukrainian national leaders, as exemplified by a December 2020 appeal from Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba urging the world to examine Russian war crimes in Ukraine.[90] These power differentials involving Global South and other formerly colonized voices must be incorporated into an attempt to connect micro-, meso-, and macro-level approaches to atrocity prevention.

Supporting Local Efforts in Transitional Justice: The Case of Syria
Like in the context of Ukraine, the Syrian civil war presents a contemporary case where failures at the international level to prevent atrocities have led to an increasing focus on local and civil society actors taking prominent leadership roles in reconceiving approaches to prevention. While the national Syrian government is directly implicated in the perpetration of atrocity crimes, including widespread war crimes and crimes against humanity, the international community has also failed to halt this severe targeting of Syrian civilians.[91] As a result, Syrian civil society and grassroots actors have taken up efforts aimed at prevention. While civil society has been active throughout the Syrian conflict in areas like humanitarian assistance and rescue,[92] we will focus here on the notable and extensive grassroots efforts to seek justice for atrocity crimes as a case study in meso-level atrocity prevention.

Atrocity Crimes and Accountability Gaps in Syria
The Syrian civil war began amidst the regional Arab Spring uprisings, as a mass protest movement demanding the removal of Bashar al-Assad's regime emerged in early 2011.[93] What began as a broad, nonviolent coalition devolved into a fragmented insurgency by late 2012, battered by ruthless violence at the hand of the Syrian army and pro-regime militias, and divided by differing ideologies and foreign backers.[94] After over a decade of civil war, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been killed and millions more displaced. While levels of violence have subsided in recent

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[90] Dmytro Kuleba, "International Investigation into Ukraine War Crimes is Kremlin's Worst Nightmare," *Atlantic Council*, December 17, 2020, access August 3, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/international-investigation-into-ukraine-war-crimes-is-kremlins-worst-nightmare/.

[91] Van Schaack, *Imagining Justice for Syria*.

[92] Wendy Pearlman, "Civil Action in the Syrian Conflict," in *Civil Action and the Dynamics of Violence*, eds. Deborah Avant et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 35–63.

[93] Reinoud Leenders, "Collective Action and Mobilization in Dar'a: An Anatomy of the onset of Syria's Popular Uprising," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (2012), 419–434.

[94] Adam Baczko et al., *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Anne Marie Baylouny and Creighton A. Mullins, "Cash is King: Financial Sponsorship and Changing Priorities in the Syrian Civil War," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no. 12 (2018), 990–1010; Uğur Ümit Üngör, "Shabbiha: Paramilitary Groups, Mass Violence and Social Polarization in Homs," *Violence: An International Journal* 1, no. 1 (2020), 59–79.

years, the Assad regime—assisted by its international allies, especially the Russian Federation—appears positioned to remain in power, as most territory remains under government control and countries in the region have begun to normalize relations with the Syrian state.[95]

Since a perpetrator regime remains in power, little political will or incentives exist at the national level to address atrocities over the course of the civil war in Syria. While the regime has enforced local deals packaged as "reconciliation," such frameworks are not designed to address intergroup conflict or to meaningfully deal with past grievances.[96] Instead, they have been used as a mechanism for re-establishing the regime's control and for disempowering local opposition governance and civil society.[97] These deals have also resulted in the forced demobilization and displacement of opposition forces, while leaving pressing issues like the fate of the disappeared and property/housing rights unaddressed.[98] For many victims of atrocity crimes, these deals do not constitute an authentic form of justice-seeking and do not create opportunities for pursuing acknowledgement and accountability.

At the international level, vetoes from several of the UN Security Council's permanent members have stifled the ability to establish an independent tribunal or to refer Syrian regime officials to the International Criminal Court.[99] In the absence of an international justice mechanism specifically for Syria, several countries—mainly in Europe—have relied on the principle of universal jurisdiction to hold perpetrators of atrocities in Syria accountable in their domestic courts.[100] Such prosecutions have resulted in the convictions of several Syrian government officials, although the cases involve predominantly Islamic State affiliates, and many government officials implicated in atrocities are out-of-reach of such courts. Although not a criminal case, Canada and the Netherlands brought a case against Syria to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2023 for violations of the Convention Against Torture, leading to a court order for the Syrian government to prevents its officials from committing acts of torture.[101]

At the same time, international organizations have also mobilized to collect evidence and documentation with the aim of supporting future prosecutions of atrocity crimes in Syria. These include initiatives like the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI)[102] and the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM),[103] which often rely on local civil society actors to collect material and provide witness testimonies. Other notable organizations based internationally that have specialized in documenting atrocities in Syria include the Commission of International Justice and

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[95] For an overview of the state of the Syrian conflict as of 2023, see Mona Yacoubinm, "Syria's Stalemate Has Only Benefitted Assad and His Backers," *United States Institute of Peace,* March 14, 2023, accessed August 3, 2024, https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/syrias-stalemate-has-only-benefitted-assad-and-his-backers.

[96] Elizabeth Tsurkov, "The Breaking of Syria's Rebellion," *Regional Thinking Forum*, October 7, 2018, accessed August 3, 2024, http://www.regtthink.org/en/articles/the-breaking-of-syrias-rebellion.

[97] Frances Z. Brown, "Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance: The Case of Syria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* October 26, 2018, accessed August 3, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/26/dilemmas-of-stabilization-assistance-case-of-syria-pub-77574.

[98] Fadi Adleh and Agnes Favier, "Local Reconciliation Agreements in Syria: A Non-Starter for Peacebuilding," *European University Institute,* June 2017, accessed August 3, 2024, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/46864/RSCAS_MED_RR_2017_01.pdf.

[99] Beth Van Schaack, *Imagining Justice for Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[100] Syria Justice & Accountability Centre (SJAC), "The State of Justice in Syria 2023," March 2023, accessed August 3, 2024, https://syriaaccountability.org/content/files/2023/03/State-of-Justice-in-Syria-2023-1.pdf.

[101] "World Court Rules Against Syria in Torture Case," *Human Rights Watch*, November 11, 2023, accessed October 1, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/16/world-court-rules-against-syria-torture-case.

[102] "Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," *United Nations Human Rights Council*, accessed March 25, 2024, https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/independent-international-commission.

[103] "International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011," *United Nations*, accessed March 25, 2024, https://iiim.un.org/.

Accountability (CIJA)[104] and the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC).[105] Together, these organizations have compiled massive amounts of evidence in the hopes of bolstering future efforts at accountability should the political will and opportunity arise. In the meantime, in 2023, the United Nations also resolved to create a new mechanism, the Independent Institution on Missing Persons (IIMP), after being pressured by civil society activists—including Syrians among the diaspora—to focus attention on accounting for the disappeared during the war.[106]

Thus, civil society, often closely linked to international organizations and initiatives, has been integral in producing what has been termed "transitional justice without transition" for Syria.[107] While it is beyond the scope of this paper to document the breadth of civil society initiatives involved in justice-seeking in Syria, numerous organizations and individuals engage in open-source documentation, missing persons investigations, advocacy for survivors and their families, and public memorialization and storytelling.[108] When legal accountability has been slow to materialize or obstructed altogether, Syrians have turned to other forms of acknowledgement and redress. For example, scholars have observed how Syrians have pursued artistic expression as an outlet for sharing narratives of justice that prioritize victims' experiences.[109] This demonstrates how individuals have taken it upon themselves to pursue meaningful forms of justice within the void that is left behind at the national and international levels.

Understanding this context, the Syrian case presents ample insights regarding both the limitations and opportunities for localized atrocity prevention through justice-seeking. We will highlight several of these lessons and pose further questions to scholars and policymakers that expand our conceptualizations of local justice as meso-level atrocity prevention.

Harmonizing Local Preferences with International Agendas in Justice-Seeking
As scholars have observed, transitional justice processes are often produced through the complex interactions—and negotiations—between local and international stakeholders over what justice means, how it is best to be pursued, and what its ultimate goals should be.[110] As such, we must first consider how local efforts at justice-seeking relate to international processes. Namely, how can local efforts meaningfully fill the gaps left by an absence of action at higher levels? How do localized justice agendas relate to international agendas, and what happens when they diverge?

The Syrian case presents a complicated picture of the interconnections between these levels. Some have observed how Syrian victims and survivor groups have been successful in shaping the international agenda on justice-seeking, especially with regards to the creation of mechanisms like the IIMP.[111] However, others have argued that international agendas have strongly influenced and even biased the goals and approaches of local initiatives.[112] For

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[104] Michelle Burgis-Kasthala, "Entrepreneurial Justice: Syria, the Commission for International Justice and Accountability and the Renewal of International Criminal Justice," *European Journal of International Law* 30, no. 4 (2019), 1165–1185.

[105] Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC), accessed March 25, 2024, https://syriaaccountability.org.

[106] "Statement on the UN Resolution Establishing an Independent Institution on Missing Persons in Syria," *International Center for Transitional Justice*, July 21, 2023, accessed August 3, 2024, https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/statement-un-resolution-establishing-independent-institution-missing-persons-syria.

[107] Van Schaack, *Imagining Justice for Syria*.

[108] For an overview, see "The State of Justice in Syria 2022," *SJAC*, March 2022, accessed August 3, 2024, https://syriaaccountability.org/content/files/2022/04/State-of-Justice-in-Syria--English-W--1.pdf.

[109] Brigitte Herremans and Tine Destrooper, "Stirring the Justice Imagination: Countering the Invisibilization and Erasure of Syrian Victims' Justice Narratives," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 15, no. 3 (2021), 576–595.

[110] Skaar and Wiebelhaus-Brahm, *The Drivers of Transitional Justice*. First mentioned in note 40.

[111] Brigitte Herremans and Habib Nassar, "Unlocking the Road to Justice in Syria," *OpinioJuris*, January 10, 2022, accessed August 3, 2024, https://opiniojuris.org/2022/10/01/unlocking-the-road-to-justice-in-syria/.

[112] Sema Nassar and Iavor Rangelov, "Documentation of Human Rights Violations and Transitional Justice in Syria: Gaps and Ways to Address Them," *London School of Economics and Political Science, Conflict Research Programme*, August 1, 2020, accessed August 3, 2024, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/106206/2/Documenting_HR_and_TJ_in_Syria_updated_Nov2020.pdf.

example, as already detailed, international efforts at justice-seeking in Syria predominantly focus on evidence collection for the purposes of future prosecutions. With many local organizations interacting with these efforts, the work of civil society documentation has prioritized future prosecution, limiting opportunities to use documentation for other forms of redress, like meeting victims' needs for housing, land, and property restitution.[113]

Interviews by the second author also revealed that assumptions at the international level that effective justice is produced in the courtroom can cause actors to overlook perspectives on what constitutes meaningful justice within the local context. For example, one Syrian refugee in Jordan spoke about how land access was a critical aspect of envisioning a just future, saying:

> The production of goods in Syria was very strong [before the war]. And there were things the Syrian people did not have access to. They could not reap the benefits of the fruits of the Syrian land. The government should help the people benefit from its land because these are the people of the land.[114]

This view is indicative of contextualized preferences of justice that do not always conform to narrow expectations about judicial redress. Further, when asked specifically about trials as a means of pursuing justice, opinions among Syrian participants diverged. One Syrian interviewee questioned the desirability of trials, saying:

> Even the civilians are involved in the crimes in Syria, even the civilians. So, no one wants [trials]…if crimes of corruption and war crimes were open, it would reach everyone in Syria.[115]

On the other hand, another interviewee saw trials as a necessity, saying:

> It is important that [a perpetrator] be tried…Maybe if, for example, they tried him, the opposing side's hatred may be reduced, perhaps...But if they do not punish him, there would be the possibility for the opposing side to seek revenge from him.[116]

While these two accounts illustrate divergent opinions on the perceived utility of trials for Syrians, it is worth noting that these individuals justified their justice preferences by referring to interactions within the community, anticipating how trials—if implemented—would affect ordinary people, their relationships, and their ability to rebuild a future. This is a perspective which they are especially positioned to provide as the assumed beneficiaries of a prospective justice system, unlike international observers, practitioners, or policymakers who are removed from the immediate consequences of these potential accountability measures.

Participants generally voiced their preference for localized justice—specifically, for measures to be administered by Syrians for Syrians—in the second author's interviews. When asked about who should judge post-conflict trials, one participant said, "There has to be some internal responsibility, someone from inside Syria." Another participant said: "Justice has to be from inside the government, from inside the rule. The people responsible over the people…"[117] These perceptions allude to the desirability for meso-level actors and approaches

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[113] Ibid.

[114] Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

[115] Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

[116] Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

[117] Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

to meet justice needs, while reflecting a broader skepticism of the international community's role in justice-seeking for Syrians.

Although international efforts can fail to incorporate local perspectives in justice-seeking, other scholars have noted the importance of international organizations setting professional standards for documentation quality, preservation, and ethics to reinforce and strengthen the efforts of decentralized, civil society-led initiatives.[118] Collaboration with international institutions may also be the most practical and feasible strategy for pursuing justice, securing the needed resources to do so, and amplifying the agendas of local civil society. Still, challenges have arisen when local organizations are not viewed as partners in crafting policies but rather as simply a source for on-the-ground information and evidence-gathering, as has been observed in Syria.[119] Further, competition between international mechanisms and civil society organizations for limited funding can lead to tensions rather than synergies. Policymakers and practitioners must be sensitive to the dynamics of power that shape the transitional justice process as they seek to fill the justice gap.

Conceptualizing Local Stakeholders: Engaging Diaspora Communities
The Syrian case also raises questions of what role diaspora communities can play in designing and implementing "local" justice efforts. Specifically, when defining what constitutes local approaches to justice, the Syrian case stretches conceptions of conventional boundaries that tend to associate the local with the people actually living in a particular geographic location within the post-atrocity state, often defined by national boundaries. However, because millions of Syrians were forced to flee their country, local perspectives may be better defined as those emanating from Syrians with firsthand experiences of atrocity violence, regardless of their present geographic location.

Some scholars may prefer the use of the term "survivor-centered transitional justice" for this reason.[120] However, in the Syrian case, many refugees—including most of those interviewed by the second author—expressed the strong desire or intent to return to Syria at the same time as they were expressing their justice preferences. Thus, when envisioning a future justice process, they imagined themselves to be back in Syria, occupying geographically local spaces and returned to a former community. Other scholars have also examined how the Syrian diaspora has engaged in such prospective transitional justice, viewing justice-seeking as a means for ensuring a better future in their home country in an imagined post-Assad world.[121]

This, of course, does not negate the justice needs and demands of diaspora communities within their host countries. One interviewee who fled with his family to Jordan emphatically argued for the consideration of diaspora needs in justice-seeking; he said:

> There are people who are studying justice in Syria, but there is
> not [a] focus on the people who left Syria, the people who are
> like me. We got destroyed. We also want justice, more than those
> in Syria. There must be questions or research or organizations
> [inquiring] about the conditions we are in…   There should be

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[118] Brianne McGonigle Leyh, "Changing Landscapes in Documentation Efforts: Civil Society Documentation of Serious Human Rights Violations," *Utrecht Journal of International and European Law* 33, no. 84 (2017), 44–58. However, some civil society actors may consider these standards to be barriers that create dependence on international organizations and justify the existence of the latter.

[119] Noha Aboueldahab, "Writing Atrocities: Syrian Civil Society and Transitional Justice," *Brookings Doha Center*, 2018, accessed April 20, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/transitional-justice-english_web.pdf.

[120] For example, Nyseth Brehm and Golden, *Centering Survivors in Local Transitional Justice*. First mentioned in note 22.

[121] Espen Stokke and Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm, "Syrian Diaspora Mobilization for Prospective Transitional Justice in the Absence of Transition," *Journal of Human Rights* 21, no. 4 (2022), 500–516; Grace Mieszkalski and Benjamin Zyla, *Engaging Displaced Populations in a Future Syrian Transitional Justice Process: The Peacebuilding-Transitional Justice Nexus* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

reparations that have to be paid to us, the ones that left Syria, the
ones that have [had] their lives stopped, their futures halted.[122]

Another participant similarly expressed distress at the loss of their home and the perceived inability of Syrian institutions to provide adequate reparations, saying:

My house was destroyed. Who is going to compensate me?
And the people that were robbed, who is going to compensate
them? The government today is incapable, in my opinion.[123]

The diverse needs of Syrians within and outside of the country—whether they have returned, hope to return, or are unwilling or unable to return—should be seen as relevant and within the scope of transitional justice efforts. Looking beyond Syria's borders to elicit justice perspectives may also be necessary, particularly as local actors who remain in Syria under the Assad regime may face increased danger by participating in transitional justice efforts, especially if they have been victimized by the regime and attempt to speak out against it.

However, Syrians' access to justice mechanisms abroad can vary dramatically based on the countries in which diaspora populations are located, leading to disparities. For example, the universal jurisdiction cases being tried for crimes in the Syrian conflict are largely based in European states,[124] providing greater access to justice to the Syrian diaspora in that region. Policymakers and practitioners must contend with the challenges of listening equitably to Syrian voices in the diaspora. Digital communications technologies, like social media, have enabled Syrian diaspora communities to engage in documentation efforts from around the world.[125] However, other participatory methods like surveys, in-depth interviews, and consultations in various locales can also elicit justice perspectives and provide a meaningful avenue for participation in the justice process. Such tools can assist in crowdsourcing justice and enhancing engagement in justice-seeking across borders to get a wider variety of local voices.

Eliciting Local Justice Preferences and Meeting Diverse Needs in Context
The Syrian case also raises compelling questions of how to gauge justice preferences at the local level, as well as how to balance the competing priorities and demands of local actors when designing transitional justice programs.[126] Some methods for eliciting local perspectives include qualitative interviews with local stakeholders and surveys of affected populations. Ideally, such instruments work to aggregate micro-level preferences on justice in order to inform macro-level efforts, attempting to communicate information across the meso-level space.

Several studies and reports have thus far attempted to gauge Syrians' preferences regarding justice-seeking, many drawing from diaspora populations.[127] For example, Kristin Fabbe and Tolgar

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[122] Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

[123] Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

[124] "The State of Justice in Syria 2023," *SJAC*, March 2023, accessed August 3, 2024, https://syriaaccountability.org/content/files/2023/03/State-of-Justice-in-Syria-2023-1.pdf.

[125] Chris Tenove, "Networking Justice: Digitally Enabled Engagement in Transitional Justice by the Syrian Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 11 (2019), 1950–1969.

[126] Jamie D. Wise, "Syrians Disagree on how to Pursue Justice: So, What's Next?" *Open Global Rights*, 2021, accessed August 3, 2024, https://www.openglobalrights.org/syrians-disagree-on-how-to-pursue-justice-so-whats-next/.

[127] For example, Craig Charney and Christine Quirk, "He Who Did Wrong Should Be Accountable: Syrian Perspectives on Transitional Justice," *Syria Justice & Accountability Centre*, January 1, 2014, accessed August 3, 2024, https://syriaaccountability.org/content/files/2022/04/SJAC_Syrian_Perceptions_2014_EN.pdf; Rim El Gantri and Karim El Mufti, "Not Without Dignity: Views of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon on Displacement, Conditions of Return, and Coexistence," *International Center for Transitional Justice*, 2017, accessed August 3, 2024, https://www.ictj.org/publication/syria-refugees-lebanon-displacement-return-coexistence; Kristin Fabbe and Tolga Sinmazdemir, "Syrian Refugees in Turkey and the Politics of Postconflict Reconciliation," *Review of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 2 (2018), 249–262.

Sinmazdemir conducted surveys of over 1,300 Syrian refugees in Turkey, finding that—although most preferred a unified, peaceful post-conflict Syria—many participants harbored negative attitudes towards regime supporters and participants in violence, favoring punitive measures against them.[128] In another study, Craig Charney and Christine Quirk from the SJAC facilitated 46 interviews with Syrian refugees and Syrians in Syria.[129] Their sample showed that most respondents favored national unity, as well as accountability through the justice system. Specifically, Charney and Quirk found most respondents preferred local autonomy of the transitional justice process, opting for a system centered on "Syrian courts and Syrian judges."[130] Further, Rim El Gantri and Karim El Mufti from the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), in their sample of 37 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, found some respondents cited a lack of trust in the Syrian court system and suggested deferring to local religious, tribal, or village leaders as credible mediators.[131] Rania Al-Jazairi interviewed 30 Syrian refugees in Lebanon in 2014 and found that the majority favored prosecutions, reparations, and the creation of a "deconcentrated" system of governance that would give power to the local community to oversee post-conflict development and reconstruction.[132] These studies represent important efforts to elicit justice preferences on-the-ground from Syrians in order to promote victim-centered justice processes. Importantly, many of their findings echo preferences for the localization of justice with regards to a wide range of mechanisms.

Following along with these studies, the second author's interviews with Syrian refugees in Jordan elicited perspectives on both what justice *means* and what *mechanisms* of pursuing it were seen as most desirable. Taken together, these interviews showed that Syrians conceive of justice at multiple levels, including both the micro-level and macro-level. For example, some participants described how justice is a characteristic of individuals, such as one Syrian who said, in part, "Now, so that there is justice, you need people, as they say, that are themselves just, firstly…." Another participant described how justice is lived out in the interactions between individuals; she said, "What matters to us is that the individual be an ambassador of justice, and between all people, you know. That he not differentiate between person to person and religion to religion."[133] Still, others conceptualized justice as a facet of governance, with the need to enshrine democracy and human rights at the state level. For instance, one participant said:

> So that justice can be applied, there has to be something to help the people. Like, human rights should have high respect in government for example. People should have their basic rights respected. Everyone should be treated as equals…[134]

Another interviewee similarly emphasized equality as the foundation for justice, with reference to Syria's history of corruption in governance:

> Freedom should be applicable to everyone. Like we should all be equal to each other. Not like if someone has a connection that he is better than me. Or if he does not have a connection that he is lower or worse than me. No, but fairness should be among everyone, and everyone should be held accountable for it.[135]

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128 Fabbe and Sinmazdemir, *Syrian Refugees*.

129 Charney and Quirk, *He Who Did Wrong*.

130 Ibid., 38.

131 Gantri and Mufti, *Not Without Dignity*. First mentioned in note 116.

132 Rania Al Jazairi, "Transitional Justice in Syria: The Role and Contribution of Syrian Refugees and Displaced Persons," *Middle East Law and Governance* 7, no. 3 (2015), 336–359.

133 Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

134 Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

135 Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

These examples attest to the importance of a holistic approach to justice across all levels of society in order to align with diverse conceptions of justice. They also demonstrate the multiplicity of definitions of justice that can be elicited from open-ended interview questions and discussions as part of the research process. By asking such questions, practitioners and policymakers can begin to identify a variety of locally-resonant justice goals and strategies, as well as common themes that illuminate context-specific opportunities and challenges.

The second author's interviews continued with discussion of specific transitional justice mechanisms. As mentioned earlier, the opinions of Syrians over the desirability and feasibility of criminal trials diverged. When asked about amnesties and truth commissions as justice mechanisms, Syrians also expressed vastly different reactions. One participant agreed with placing an emphasis on truth-telling even at the expense of punishment, saying about a hypothetical perpetrator:

> Let's say… that I acknowledged and took responsibility, like I did this, honestly. In honesty, I did that, so like that is nice, that he admitted regardless of how severe his punishment is. Or that they removed the punishment, but the important thing is, that I admit what I did. That I talk.[136]

Others were vehemently opposed to pardoning those they believed were most responsible for atrocity crimes in Syria. In the words of another participant:

> These were not an easy seven years. It's been seven years. How many people have had their futures destroyed? How many people have been exposed to violence? How many people have been forced to migrate? How much stress have people been exposed to, mental stress? No, I would not pardon or forgive him.[137]

Taken together, all of the aforementioned efforts to gauge justice preferences on-the-ground raise important questions for practitioners and policymakers, who must determine how to integrate consultations from a diverse range of local actors into transitional justice programs when there is no obvious way to meet all demands. Although the preferences indicated above come from small and selective samples, disagreement and lack of consensus among local stakeholders seeking justice is clear. We suggest that meso-level approaches that utilize participatory methods and create opportunities for multiple ways of conceiving of and engaging with the justice process are critical for effective downstream atrocity prevention.

However, even if justice preferences are elicited meaningfully from affected populations, there is still the risk of a lack of political will or other obstacles resulting in failure to take decisive action. When this is the case, it is the victims who pay the consequences. As one Syrian remarked after our interview, "I hope after you finish it, lots of people take…actions according to the research. Because we need actions, we don't need sympathy…"[138] Researchers and practitioners should remain cognizant of how their methods may generate expectations among and influence those already affected by mass atrocities, ensuring to do no harm. However, during this study, participants also generally expressed gratitude that an outsider from a foreign country took interest in their personal stories and justice for Syria, indicating the impact of such engaged, participatory methods that was also reflected in the first author's Ukraine interviews prior to increased global attention in 2022.

Collectively, these lessons from the Syrian case demonstrate the need to focus on more than just the international levels of atrocity prevention. Many questions remain about the

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[136] Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

[137] Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

[138] Interview with second author, 2018, Amman, Jordan.

effectiveness of local approaches, how they should be implemented, and the relationship between local, national, and international efforts. Future research and policy should address these questions, and in doing so, may begin to move past gridlocked debates about the lack of international leadership and intervention in order to better empower local actors to prevent atrocities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The case studies surveyed in this paper—early warning in Ukraine and transitional justice in Syria—have revealed significant areas of local expertise in atrocity prevention at its various stages. While these cases, unfortunately, exemplify significant failings by national and international actors, they illustrate the encouraging potential for meso-level actors and efforts to bridge critical gaps in atrocity prevention. Following Jacobs' and Straus' conceptualization of the meso-level,[139] we have reinforced calls for the field of genocide studies to adopt a more holistic approach to atrocity prevention by looking to the significant spaces, efforts, and actors "in between" the micro- and macro-levels. Our suggestions align with the recommendations of numerous other scholars and practitioners who have pointed to the necessity for the localization of atrocity prevention, transitional justice, and peacebuilding.[140]

This paper has worked to identify constructive lessons learned to enhance evidence-based practice and genocide scholarship. One key area involves listening, learning, and implementing new sources of local knowledge from meso-level local actors across policy, practitioner, and academic fields. We conclude by summarizing some major implications of our case studies for analytic (Figure 2) and applied (Figure 3) actors in spaces at-risk of atrocities to support evidence-based atrocity prevention.

Figure 2. Implications for Genocide Scholars and Analysts

Especially for Upstream Prevention and Early Warning
- Think more about the interconnections between local, national, and international approaches when theorizing how atrocities occur and how to prevent them.
- Cast a wider network of questions for early warning modeling. Listen to locally derived narratives and consider their significance for atrocity risks, even if they at first seem to be about other topics.
- Remember that academics and other experts can also be direct targets for disinformation campaigns designed to mitigate early warning alarm that could be raised by genocide and atrocity experts.

Especially for Downstream Prevention and Transitional Justice
- Embrace participatory methods that engage local stakeholders on important questions of transitional justice within their own communities, ensuring that conceptions of justice and its goals are context-based and appropriate.
- Center the voices of victims and survivors within the research process, being mindful to avoid incentivizing the social construction of an unconscious victim hierarchy and doing no harm in the research process.[1]

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[139] Jacobs and Straus, *Meso-Level Dynamics*. First mentioned in note 2.

[140] Donais, *Empowerment or Imposition*. First mentioned in note 6; Mac Ginty and Richmond, *The Local Turn*. First mentioned in note 6; Paffenholz, *International Peacebuilding Goes Local*. First mentioned in note 6; Paffenholz, *Unpacking the Local*. First mentioned in note 6; Autesserre, *International Peacebuilding*. First mentioned in note 6; Allen, *Who Rebuilds*. First mentioned in note 6; Baines, *The Haunting of Alice*. First mentioned in note 39; Lundy and McGovern, *Whose Justice*. First mentioned in note 39; Nyseth Brehm and Golden, *Centering Survivors*. First mentioned in note 22; Van der Merwe and Schkolne, *The Role of Local*. First mentioned in note 39; Moix, *Turning Atrocity Prevention*. First mentioned in note 39; Firchow and Selim, *Meaningful Engagement*. First mentioned in note 39.

For All Stages of Atrocity Prevention

- Build on existing work about meso-level actors and civil society's role to better understand the multi-level dynamics of atrocity prevention.
- Recognize that atrocity prevention and/or transitional justice surveys tailored for quantitative assessments may miss important questions. Give serious thought to crafting questionnaires that will capture externally opaque narratives that are very important to local experts. Avoid reproducing existing assumptions within survey instruments.
- When using quantitative or scale-based questionnaires, incorporate sections for qualitative input from local experts. Always ask what they want to share about their context, and examine any shared ideas from local experts who might normally find themselves on opposite sides of societal debates.
- Integrate more fully with regional subject matter experts, especially in locations that are under-represented in comparative genocides studies.
- Be mindful that blind spots can exist in all academic fields and that these can be connected to academic gatekeeping.[2]
- Consider and advocate for the practical recommendations that stem from your work with meso-level actors. Clearly articulate these in policy and practitioner-friendly platforms.

[1] See Jennie E. Burnet, "Whose Genocide? Whose Truth? Representations of Victim and Perpetrator in Rwanda," in *Genocide: Truth, Memory, and Representation*, edited by Alexander Laban Hinton et al. (New York: Duke University Press, 2009), 80–110.

[2] For example, in the wake of Russia's 2022 escalation, the field of Slavic, Eastern Europe, and Eurasian Studies is currently undergoing its own field-wide decolonization conversation as questions are raised about why Russian-oriented scholarship and perspectives often overshadow other countries in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, as well as broader conversations of Russian imperial and Soviet colonial dynamics in the region. See Lydia Tomkiw, "The War in Ukraine Triggered a Reckoning in Universities," *Coda Story*, April 12, 2023, accessed May 07, 2023. https://www.codastory.com/rewriting-history/russian-studies-universities-debate/.

Figure 3. Implications for Genocide Prevention Policymakers and Practitioners

Especially for Upstream Prevention and Early Warning

- Elicit local perspectives through research, consultations, dialogue, and listening sessions to craft context-specific agendas for monitoring atrocity risk and responding to those risks.
- Cast a wider net of experts to speak with and take their expertise seriously. Look to local leaders across various sectors—e.g., academics, students, activists, religious leaders, teachers, museum workers, etc.—to identify early warning signs in-context.
- Avoid dismissing local voices which are "raising the alarm." Maintain intellectual humility and consider how power dynamics affect relations with the Global South and other formerly colonized populations.

Especially for Downstream Prevention and Transitional Justice
- Consult with local experts and the presumed beneficiaries of a transitional justice process when crafting policy frameworks, including diaspora communities affected by mass atrocities or displacement.
- Embrace the plurality of perspectives that may emerge from consultations to gauge local justice preferences, and design transitional justice programs that respond to many diverse needs.
- Work to empower local peacebuilders without overly conditioning their agendas. Instead, support and augment the work of local actors, like civil society organizations, in their atrocity prevention efforts.
- Allow the international agenda within a particular context to be defined and shaped by local interests, not the other way around. Don't assume a one-size-fits-all model for transitional justice and atrocity prevention strategies.

For All Stages of Atrocity Prevention
- Be aware of the importance of key influencers at the meso-level in peacebuilding. If you do not know who these actors are, ask local experts or researchers with a long-term presence in that context. Engage these actors with sensitivity towards the risks they face in-context.
- When speaking with academic experts, engage those who can share data that captures meso-level local expertise.
- Remember that local experts are not just knowledgeable about their own context but also about the areas of their specialization too (e.g., identity-based conflicts, gender, anticorruption).

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