# Follow up questions for Dr. Oliver Kaplan from his webinar presentation, "How Communities Use Nonviolent Strategies to Avoid Civil War Violence."

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To learn more or to view a recording of this presentation, visit http://nonviolent-conflict.org and click on "Learning and Resources"

**Question 1**
**From: Laura I.**

I am from Colombia and knowing a little bit about the development of armed conflict in my country I agree with Dr Kaplan in regarding the importance of non violence resistence from some communities mostly in the center and the south of the country.

However, the reason of the existence of a conflict in many countries such as Colombia is a historic dispute between illegal armed groups and the State; and as he mentioned in the presentation, many nonviolent demonstrations take place in remote territories usually with absence of the State in terms of economic support, health services and education. Does he consider the success of these self-sustaining and neutral communities is precisely that they might be outside of the presence of the State and largely supported by NGOs?

**Answer 1**
**From: Oliver Kaplan**

Dear Laura,

Certainly there is variation in the success of non-violent movements, but a more accurate statement is probably that it is very difficult to know with what frequency such movements are successful, which further depends on how one defines success. This is because it is difficult to measure the prevalence of such movements in relation to how many people are victimized or displaced. However, some movements are successful at achieving aims such as increased stability and safety for communities. State presence or absence can have varying effects on the prospects of local peace movements. If the state is highly abusive and violent, it may be better that they have weak reach. In cases where the state is responsive to local populations, it may be better that the state is present, say compared to violent and undisciplined paramilitary forces. As I mentioned, I believe NGOs can play important roles to support communities, especially where the state is unable or unwilling to do so. This is a question that still poorly understood and requires much further research. In theory NGOs can aid communities with resources, information, and human rights monitoring, but it is not clear yet how consistently useful

this is and whether, in some cases, the possibility of receiving NGO support creates harmful incentives and expectations for communities to remain in dangerous areas where they might actually be better off displacing to safety.

Thanks again and best wishes,

Oliver

**Question 2**
**From: Alexandra V.**

My name is Alexandra V, and I am from Romania. On January 30, I attended your webinar and found the presentation very stimulating and informative. The question I tried to ask online was related to an intriguing paragraph I found in the outline of your dissertation on "Civilian Autonomy in Civil War", where you provided additional research summaries. The paragraph I am referring to is "Testing the Theory of Civilian Autonomy in The Philippine Conflict", where you briefly presented the premises of comparison between the Colombian case and the Philippines one.

Several months ago, I read several interesting materials about the civil war in the Philippines, the New People's Army and its nationwide support - especially in the rural areas -, and about the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. My question invited you to elaborate on the case of the civil war in the Philippines, and on the civilian autonomy organizations existing there. Did these organizations deal in any way with the New People's Army and the Moro Front? If yes, to what extent was this interaction similar to the Colombian "pattern"?

**Answer 2**
**From: Oliver Kaplan**

Dear Alexandra,

Thanks very much first for tuning in and second for your very kind message.  I'm glad you enjoyed the talk.

The question of how Philippines compares to Colombia is a good one. I was in the Philippines in May to begin looking into this topic. While I am still conducting my analysis, it appears there are a number of similarities as well as some differences. Many of the local movements in both cases have heavy Church involvement and formal declarations of local peace organizations and movements. However, in some respects, the Philippine movements appear to be more formalized, better documented, and in some case revolve more around resolving inter-religious differences within communities than signaling political neutrality. They also appear to have slowly won greater formal acknowledgment from the government.  While I can't speak directly to the breadth of popular support that may be enjoyed by the MILF and NPA (how comparable these groups may be to the FARC and paramilitaries in Colombia), local peace movements

have arisen in diverse parts of the country, including in regions where both of these groups operate. One question I am currently studying is what effect the various peace zone strategies had on the use of violence against civilians by these groups. Thanks again for this excellent question.

Best wishes,

Oliver

**Question 3**
**From: Sharon S.**

When civilians use information about who is collaborating with other armed groups, are they feeding the wolf at their doorstep by feeding them people to kill, and thus winning their gratitude?

**Answer 3**
**From: Oliver Kaplan**

Dear Sharon,

What civilian investigations mechanisms are really doing is buying people second chances to reform their behavior and avoid transgressing against a particular armed group. Often times, community organizations absolve themselves from protection if individuals disregard warnings and then continue providing aid to armed groups. Community organizations that use investigations usually have the position that they are always for protecting the lives of civilians, but that if an individual continues mis-behaving, there is only so much they can do. So it's not quite that they are "feeding them people to kill", but rather buying people second chances and trying to dis-incentivize others from participating in the conflict. The point here is that armed groups must not mainly be blood-thirsty, but rather care more about limiting individuals from providing aid their enemies (and where they prefer doing this through less costly non-violent means).

Thanks again and best wishes,

Oliver

**Question 4**
**From: Patrick V.**

Have you done any work or can you recommend any work in the context of genocide?

**Answer 4**
**From: Oliver Kaplan**

While most of my field work has been in the countries of Colombia and Philippines where genocide has not really taken place (although some might say the persecution of certain political and ethnic groups in Colombia constitutes genocide), I have thought about what are civilians' (non-violent) prospects for protection in contexts of genocide. In general, I don't think they're very good. That said, in some cases of genocide (or extreme violence), it appears that some populations, such as ethnic or religious minority populations that have managed to avoid being drawn in to the 'macro-conflict' through high levels of social cohesion and strategies of neutrality (Muslims in Rwanda come to mind). In these and other instances, civilians have also been able to successfully operate to rescue, protect, and hide would-be genocide victims. There are also examples of civilians arming for protection (e.g., from WWII), with mixed success. In those cases, arming is a last resort, but its effectiveness may again depend on the depth of civilian cooperation and organization.

Thanks again and best wishes,

Oliver

**Question 5**
**From: Adrian F.**

Thank you for an illuminating presentation. It looks like civilian strategies are not independent of but endogenous to armed actors' territorial control and organizational characteristics. Civilians have rational incentives to respond differently to 'roving bandits' versus 'stationary bandits.' Could you speak more about that?

**Answer 5**
**From: Oliver Kaplan**

Dear Adrian,

I greatly appreciate your insights about territorial control and the application of Olson's different types of 'bandits.' However, I do not entirely agree with your characterization of the situation. On the one hand, yes, I agree that armed actor interests and motivations-- some of which result from dynamics of territorial control--strongly determine their uses of violence and willingness to tolerate or acquiesce to civilian demands of restraint. On the other hand, there are also many cases where the extent of armed group control fails to explain violence against civilians or the lack thereof. In other words, across communities within similar zones of control, there can still be variation in violence. I believe some of this variation can be explained by what the civilians are doing and how organized they are--that is to say, independent of the characterization of the balance of armed group control. If stationary bandits are willing to provide public goods and protection, civilians may be rational to ally with them. However, there are cases where

control may not be stable, in which cases civilians' more rational strategy may be to avoid entanglements to avoid future retaliation in the case that the 'out' armed group returns and targets enemy collaborators. In sum, the effects of civilian organization and autonomy strategies on armed actors may be partially endogenous to armed actors' strategies (since they are obviously responding to their environment), but not entirely so. Again, great question.

Thanks again and best wishes,

Oliver

**Question 6**
**From: Yao J.**

Considering of the fact of current condition in Syria, do you think NGO's participation is a good idea?

**Answer 6**
**From: Oliver Kaplan**

Dear Yao,

Given the brutality of the Syrian conflict, I think NGO participation probably is a good idea, if they have the risk-tolerance to operate under such dangerous conditions. NGOs can provide needed humanitarian aid as well as training, information and resources for self-protection. However, civilians should freely choose whether to remain in dangerous areas, so NGOs should be mindful not to raise expectations of safety where such expectations may be misleading.

Thanks again and best wishes,

Oliver

**Question 7**
**From: Jesse R.**

Based on your field experience, what is your personal view on whether or not more contentious strategies provide greater protection for communities?

**Answer 7**
**From: Oliver Kaplan**

Dear Jesse,

I can think of certain cases where civilians were victimized despite (or perhaps because of) contentious protest strategies. So there are certainly cases and conditions where no

matter how organized and forceful a non-violent movement may be, the population may still suffer retaliation (consider cases of genocide, for example--contentious strategies may be used out of desperation and may also be ignored/ irrelevant). That said, there is not yet very solid empirical research on this point. In my view and from my experience, the effectiveness of more contentious strategies depends on the depth and breadth of the social organization behind it. For example, when there is broad support and legitimacy behind a protest, it is costlier for armed groups to transgress against the population, no matter how harmful the protest might be to their public image. Among some indigenous groups in Colombia, contentious mass actions have been effective at staving off threats against individuals and recovering kidnap victims.

Thanks again and best wishes,

Oliver

**Question 8**
**From: Mary M.**

What is the line between apathy and a collective action to not participate in an oppressive government, such as the issue with Arab voters in the recent Israeli elections?

**Answer 8**
**From: Oliver Kaplan**

Dear Mary,

Interesting question. I think there is a line between apathy and collective action. Apathy can be helpful to avoid armed conflicts or oppressive governments, but only to a point. After increased pressure or threats of violence, civilians will have to act collectively because individuals who are apathetic and communities that are apathetic usually need a sustainable process to manage relationships with groups. Apathy itself will not limit armed group abuses or prevent such groups from trying to seed divisions within communities to politicize them and win public support (which can be risky if a second group will retaliate). The collective actions are usually to either impose costs or avoid harmful interactions with belligerents. It would seem that the issue of Arab voters in Israeli elections has a slightly different dynamic, since there may not be immediate costs to not taking action (just the continuation of some unfavorable policies).

Thanks again and best wishes,

Oliver

**Question 9**
**From: Jonathan J.**

(A) In the section of your presentation titled, "Why are civilians killed," one of the points has to do with rebels indiscipline and abuse. Are rebels ever disciplined in a context of civil brutality?

(B) What is the most effective strategy to resolving conflict?

**Answer 8**
**From: Oliver Kaplan**

Dear Jonathan,

(A) Yes, in some cases rebels that commit abuses are disciplined. According to one theory ideological groups tend to have greater discipline and a greater ability to limit abuses. In some cases civilians have effectively pressured armed groups to discipline abusive soldiers.

(B) This is a hard question to answer. In many cases the effectiveness of strategies will depend on the context and the organizational capabilities of the civilian communities. Perhaps the broadest conclusion that can be drawn at the moment is that civilians that are more organized and have centrist political preferences (so that they're not interested in partaking in an extremist movement) have the greatest capabilities to adapt strategies to particular settings of armed conflict.

Thanks again and best wishes,

Oliver

**Question 10**
**From: Juan M.**

(A) Are these strategies subject to variation in types of armed conflicts, more concretely, in types of civil war (e.g. conventional, irregular, symmetric non-conventional)?

(B) Have you identified some casual mechanisms mediating between the link you established between "past experiences of collective action/pre-existing organizations" and local organizations for peace/peace communities"?

(C) In framing the puzzle as a collective action/free riding problem I find quite limited to define the collective good as PROTECTION. From different experiences in Colombia and elsewhere, and even from your own work, we know that these communities engange in non-violent collective action seeking for much more than protection (i.e. autonomy from armed groups rule). If we stick to the idea of "protection from armed groups violence" (which is of course important) we could not explain, for example, why

some communities are still in place despite of high levels of selective violence against memebers of the community (e.g. the peace community of San José).

**Answer 10**
**From: Oliver Kaplan**

Dear Juan,

(A) I have a little trouble making sense of the Kalyvas-Balcells categories of civil conflict you reference in your question. That said, yes, I believe the prevalence of the various civilian strategies varies across different conflict dynamics. So this question in a sense is asking about the scope conditions for civilian strategies. Harsher conflict conditions may require more contentious strategies to deal with violence--strategies of last resort-- and therefore such strategies may become increasingly likely as conflict intensifies. An additional dimension of this question has to do with how involved the government is/ how responsive it is to its population/ what type of counterinsurgency strategy is being used.

(B) In response to the second question, I have considered certain causal mechanisms that link prior levels of community organization and the formation of formal peace organizations. The mobilization of formal organizations can occur through various processes, often times in response to violent threats. For instance, in some cases, external actors (especially religious leaders) help organize communities, in other cases organizations and cohesion arise out of collectively experiencing forced displacement, and in still others, the combination of threats and strong pre-existing social ties are sufficient to mobilize for organization before displacement occurs. I'd be curious to hear more about your thinking on this topic.

(C) You are right that the key outcome could be defined in various other ways, including much more broadly. I see autonomy as control of community affairs, and I believe it is reasonable to subsume protection within that  definition. I suppose I limit my definition because I'm interested in explaining the ultimate outcome of violence and not solely enduring collective action in the face of violence (which I'm interested in as well and is interesting in it's own right, just that in my mind it's not as helpful a concept to understand if it doesn't ultimately limit violence). It raises an interesting question: do you view a collective action as 'successful' if it sustained over time but does not ultimately reduce violence? Under those intense conditions of armed group pressure, I think it becomes a tough choice between displacing or suffering violence.

Thanks again,

Oliver