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Defending against Extermination: A Comparative Approach to Self-Defense in the Case of Mass Atrocity

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Introduction

Can October 7th be framed as an act of self-defense by Hamas for the Palestinian population of Gaza? An immediate response is that acts of mass atrocity, like this, fail to meet various ethical and legal tests for legitimate self-defense. The targeting of civilians is a war crime and specifically a crime against humanity when it comes to targeting particular groups. The attack, killings, and hostage taking by Hamas and those affiliated with it, in the context of South Africa vs. Israel are potential breaches of international humanitarian law. Yet, the aim of this comparative paper is to delve into the subjective mobilizations of claims and methods of self-defense that demonstrate the complexity of multidirectional violent conflict.

This paper is a comparative study of three contemporary cases of self-defense in the context of mass atrocity. I define self-defense as violence deployed by armed groups as non-state or quasi-state actors to preserve life and social group integrity. This definition acknowledges power relations as complex and violence as multidirectional. Actors include informal defenders, civilians, military actors each overlapping with varying interests. I pose the research question: *what is legitimate self-defense in the context of mass atrocity, and how is it presented in the public sphere, regionally and internationally for the purpose of political support or sympathy?* In doing so I address the claims of mass atrocity, and the methods of violence used and the targets of this violence used in to self-defense. Answering these questions in this explorative paper are data from three comparative cases focused on a specific year of self-defense actions in each: Hamas in Gaza during 2023; Artsakh Defense Forces (ADF) in Artsakh or Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020; and, Twirwaneho in Congo in 2021.

The paper first offers a sociological framing identifies key terms of violence as mass atrocity and self-defense, and the connections of existing research between the two. Here I aim to highlight the legal norms of self-defense, its presence in literature of mass atrocity, and the inherent ethical and strategic challenges of self-defense. I discuss the cases, their selection and parameters. I note how I use social media posts (Twitter/X) as measurable data for claims of self-defense. This is chronologically aligned with conflict data (ACLED) to understand the methods used during times of heightened claims of self-defense. Analysis of these data is offered with a discussion of results and indication further research.

I argue that self-defense claims can appeal to international audiences either deemed to be sympathetic or who are normatively seen to be actors in positions of power to intervene. Claims consistently identify senses of legitimacy and with possible connections to the chosen methods. The range of methods waged simultaneously to claims of self-defense against extermination shows an escalatory feature of self-defense in multidirectional conflict.

Sociological framing of violence and self-defense

The research this paper covers a broad array of interlinked phenomena not often considered in tandem. I address in this section the framing of violence and self-defense. Violence is discussed for the purpose of this paper and examination of self-defense as mass atrocity, which encompasses genocide and other forms commonly captured in as crimes against humanity, such as forced removals or sexual violence targeting a group. Self-defense in this context focuses more precisely on groups mobilizing to fight, aiming to deter, limit, or stop such violence, but who are not immune from engaging in similar acts. I address these two pillars (violence and self-defense) within the broader theoretical notion of social constructivism. I define the latter relationally as the ongoing co-creation of social worlds simultaneously by different groups and overtime. These worlds are agentially formed and reformed by actor groups creating environments to act in (Crossley, 2010).

Mass atrocity has increasingly become a widely used shorthand for mass violence including genocide. This is not without its own baggage, even going back to Raphael Lemkin's original envisioning which mobilized temporarily, culturally situated ideas of national belonging and favoring certain types of mass violence over others (Moses, 2021). In this research I apply a critical genocide studies approach in seeing the variety of social death-oriented harms to a social group leading towards its destruction (Hinton, 2012; Short, 2016). I also argue for the importance of sense the subjectivity of how groups, be it victims, survivors, or perpetrators mobilize perceptions genocide and claims of such violence.

Examination of multidirectional violence in mass atrocity and other insurgent or civil war type settings is a helpful framing for the context of self-defense (Davey, forthcoming; Verdeja, 2012). The case studies selected for this research help explicate how multidirectional violence is relational in a socially constructed world. The following example helps underscore this approach. The October 7th massacre across the Gaza border into Israel progressed from dismantling border security, attacking IDF posts, or killing civilians and taking hostages. The situated nature of these actions demonstrates an immediate as well as wider multidirectionality.

Hamas leadership enacted its own agenda of pushing back on Israeli government's military and settler civilian targeting, as well as seeking to put Palestinians back on the international forum, albeit in a devastating way. In the West Bank, even prior to the escalation of October 7th, settler violence reached its highest recorded levels in August 2023, including the raid on the Jenin camp

(Crisis Watch, 2024). The latter fed continued recruitment of self-defense groups, with brothers, cousins, taking the place of fallen martyrs by joining militias in support of protecting against the next IDF raid (Aljazeera, 2023).

Multidirectionality does not imply parity of force, nor the murkiness of moral equivalents for Hamas' actions on October 7th, just as any other isolatable act or series of acts of violence. From this keyhole view we can see the immediate forms of escalation by various parties. With a deeper analysis just of the dozens of days prior to the day of October 7th, there would be a catalog of actions, though inherently asymmetric against Palestinians in this case.

Self-defense then, in the context of mass atrocities, takes a potent place in the mobilization and development of multidirectional conflict. In the broadest terms self-defense of a group features in the United Nations' Chapter VI, article 51, "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security" (UN Charter, 2016). Yet, on this final clause hinges the impracticality of this starting point: the UN security council (UNSC). All three of the case studies proposed in the paper have had their time or an attempt of unsuccessfully voicing claims made at the UNSC to no avail (UNSC, 2024).

The notion of self-defense in the face of mass atrocity is present in international law debates. The 1967 Congress for the Prevention of Genocide, is reported to have "affirmed that prompt, defensive measures are the most effective means for the prevention of genocide" (Stanciu, 1968). In a discussion reflecting on more recent acts of self-defense by Darfuri militias during a genocide in the early 2000s, such collective action is potentially "firebreaking". Meaning, force is used to create immediate protection of civilians. Kopel, Gallant, and Eisen assert that arms embargoes to areas undergoing ongoing mass atrocity, "prevent genocide victims from acquiring and using defensive arms. Any interference-including interference under color of law with the self-defense rights of genocide victims constitutes a grave violation of the most fundamental of all international and moral laws" (Kopel, Gallant and Eisen, 2006, 1346). Furthermore, such prohibition of arms, if targeted against self-defense actors may even constitute genocide.

Within the orbit of Responsibility to Protect, acknowledgement has been offered to the role non-state actors can play in preventing atrocity. Adrian Gallagher and Helena Hinkkainen most recently make recommendations for states' interaction with armed groups (Gallagher and Hinkkainen, 2023). In the context of provision of international assistance in cases of states compromising their own sovereignty through targeting civilians, the authors do state that "if the government is perpetrating mass atrocities and armed groups are seeking to provide protection, then issues of legality and ethics need to be tackled. . . such aspects underline the fact that armed groups are predominantly viewed as a threat as opposed to potential protectors and in turn,

assistance is not even raised” (Gallagher and Hinkkainen, 2023, 11). I aim to address this identified gap across R2P and wider international legal discourse. What, then, is the historical record for armed groups preventing mass atrocity? Various examples, including Yazidis in Iraq and Armenians in the Ottoman empire, show that whilst self-defense save lives in immediate circumstances, it offers no holistic, long-term protection, nor do they remove threats (Mayersen, 2020). Targeted civilians are still at the mercy of international actors, leaving the question open as to whether the determining factor of communal protection and self-defense being more about size, scale, and organization of the armed group claiming defense. Conceptions of “civilian protective agency” acknowledge risks and dividends for groups in terms of political power and actual protection of communities. Protection of civilians by armed groups may appear as patronage or even as providing a public good, yet also can in the long-term reproduce some of the initial drivers of conflict (Krause, et al, 2023).

In turning to traditional Western conceptions, and peer ideas in global cultures, of justification for war (*jus ad bellum*) and conduct of war (*jus in bello*) limited framings for what often become messier facts/violence on the ground are offered. Christopher Finlay measures the wider, potential right of legitimate self-defense in terms of proportionality and reasonable chances of success (2015). The violence waged against unjust institutions or oppression need to be measured with a *jus in bello* proportionality. The justness of the overall *jus ad bellum* itself linked to larger human rights claims with a duty to “defeat oppression and replace it with something more just; and to defend innocent persons from state violence while doing so” (Finlay, 2015, 314). This ideal type of resistance puts self-defense on a national scale, inherently complicating the more localized efforts of protection, where national level replacement of institutions is not necessarily the goal or even outcome (Schuberth, 2015).

While a right to self-defense is contested, it is claimed on a variety of bases, with focus on supporting human rights at least. However, it typically envelopes wider political goals and social-economic factors behind the armed group itself. Therefore, attention needs to be paid to both claims and methods of a given actor.

Case Selection

Armed self-defense groups in the contexts of legitimacy crises and claims of layered experiences of genocide. Multidirectionality is present in the three cases of Artsakh, eastern DRC and Gaza, contextualize the complexity in the above addressed existing literature and legal framings. These three cases offer contemporary comparison of longer term needs and violence against specific communities, in terms of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, Banyamulenge (Congolese Tutsi) in eastern DRC, and Palestinians in Gaza. Across all three cases group claims of victimhood resulting from mass atrocity or genocide are mobilized. Other cases may well offer similar views of claims and methods.

Method and limitations of data

Following the cotemporary focus of this paper, I selected years of political data in the 2019-2023 range selecting the highest year of violence in each case. The corresponding annual periods of claims and methods of self-defense are to be seen in relation to each other.

Claims are examined in a performative lens in terms of engaging even promoting particular narratives of atrocity and protection in social media. Due to ease of data extraction, data from Twitter/X were used. However due to banning of Hamas from this platform alternative data was sought from the group's affiliated Twitter/X English account, Gaza Now (Harwell and Dvoskin, 2023; Chan, 2023). The account's imagery is intently visceral and conveyed a variety of choreographed visuals from October 7th, as well as depictions of the dead and dying throughout Gaza. Although other Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad accounts were available, Gaza Now represented a strongly aligned platform to Hamas that conveys the logics of the group's claims of self-defense (Sadek and Mashkoo, 2023). Posts from Gaza Now examined in this paper start with October 18th and run to the end of December 2023, a total of 582 posts. This limitation comes with a comparative imbalance where the Artsakh and Congo cases have a full year's worth of posts; however, the focus here is on the point of escalation in October. Hamas' violence from October onwards arguably is deliberate escalation through spectacle inducing violence of (Hartman, 1997).

Accounts for the additional case studies are chosen on their similar official position in representing each group. The use of English across these accounts speaks to the intended humanitarian and international actor audience for all three groups. Translation software has been used for other than English posts. It is crucial to note that material from all three social media accounts contain unverified information and are platforms for ideology and propaganda. Yet, my purpose here is to assess these very claims and explore the alignment and relation to self-defense methods.

The Artsakh data on Twitter/X is the official ADF account. This account started in 2015 and has remained relatively silent as of September 2023. Posts, mostly in English (some in Armenian and Russian) detail, especially over periods of heightened fighting battle movements against Azerbaijani forces, attacks on Armenian civilians, and destruction of building and infrastructure, along with demonstrative photos. The Banyamulenge Twirwaneho's official Twitter/X account has run continuously since 2020. Most posts are in a mix of French, English, and Kinyamulenge (a Kinyarwanda dialect). It is largely maintained by Kamasa Ndakize who is a "coordinator" for the group (Nsengiyumva, 2023). The posted content largely consists of official statements denouncing the Congolese military, government, international actors, and local armed groups. The account is very active in replying to threads and tagging in presumably sympathetic international actors in mobilizing the language of genocide to describe Banyamulenge victimization.

Social media data representing claims of self-defense in the face of mass atrocity are measured around recent higher levels of violent activity, either in escalating conflict, or responding to other actor escalation. The Artsakh period centers on 2020 and provides 317 posts. This year marked a return to ground warfare and an Azeri offensive that would capture significant amounts of land. This attack paved the way for a final offensive in 2023 which resulted in a significant shift in the balance of power in Nagorno-Karabakh toward Azerbaijan (Anglim, 2024). The DRC case centers on the recent height of reciprocal fighting between this group, the Congolese military, and other armed groups in South Kivu in 2021. In this year fighting in other provinces impacted the South Kivu province (Doctors without Borders, 2021; Verweijen and Vogel, 2023; Verweijen, et al, 2021). This year provides 139 posts. In all three cases a year’s worth posts has been open coded for keywords around self-defense, descriptors of mass atrocity (such as genocide, killings, victims) targeting the protected group in question.

In comparison to this claims data, methods data has been used also from the cases’ respective annual periods. This is drawn from ACLED data set for each country (Armenia/Azerbaijan, DRC, and Israel/Palestine) and group along with similarly coded affiliates. In asymmetric conflicts such as these, single group rarely operates insularly and rely on alliances and external support where available, be it political, diasporic, or material (Staniland, 2014; Schuberth, 2015). I incorporate the ACLED data into this analysis utilizing the set’s coding. This includes a parent child system of top-level violence as political or then strategic developments, down a level to battles, violence against civilians and explosion/remote violence (ACLED Codebook, 2021). Using this data, I glean insights into the methods used to enact claims of self-defense during the key years of contemporary conflict in each case.

Analysis of claims and methods

The following section addresses each case in turn starting with Gaza and then onto Artsakh and DRC. The open coding discusses claims as types of violence and the connected framing of self-defense. Overall, I address the public representation of genocide, the evidence asserted and the intended audience identifying then perpetration and any connections to past violence. The methods of self-defense, or the violence used in the period of claimed self-defense is then shown with the types used, focusing on the targeting of civilians. ACLED descriptions will refer to Table 1, offering a year summary of violent events.

Table 1: ACLED conflict data per case/year

	Artsakh Defense Forces (2020)	% of grand total	Banyamulenge armed groups (2021)	% of grand total	Hamas Movement (2023)	% of grand total
Political violence	3082		142		867	
Battles	2830	91%	129	89%	395	45%
Explosions/Remote violence	249	8%	0	-	432	49%

Violence against civilians	3	0%	13	9%	40	5%
Strategic developments	30	1%	3	2%	17	2%
Grand Total	3112		145		884	

Hammas

Given the above noted limitations of the Hamas sample, this data only reflects the post-October 7th period in terms of claims. Methods are represented in line with other cases’ one years’ worth of data. Across Gaza Now references to genocide/genocidal and massacre were the most common descriptors of mass atrocity. Throughout the sample genocide (29) is used as the main signifier of general violence, with massacre (51) referring to specific acts of violence. The visceral display of violence is a horrific array of bodies, injury and death. Images and videos, depicting especially children underscores the dominant popular discourse of genocide and massacre as physical killing. However, the deficit of aid in Gaza is highlighted on October 26th as a way of preventing genocide. The “free peoples” of the world (appearing as national flags of the Global South) are addressed, “To all the free people of the world . . . Today is your day to say your word everywhere: ‘Stop the genocide in Gaza, and open the Rafah crossing for aid to enter the hospitals and the population.’ ‘Here there is no medicine, no water, no food, no electricity, no fuel.’ To all the free people of the world, Go out today everywhere, and do whatever you want to support us”. In other posts the absence of utilities, such as electricity is also folded into destruction of people and place. “Israeli occupation” is frequently referred to as a context for violence. November 16th post cites the occupation of Al-Shifa hospital as a “pretext for genocidal war against Gaza and its hospitals”.

Hospitals, in this period constitute a key link to the need for self-defense, especially in terms of appealing to international audiences. The UN and its bodies are called on to fulfil what are termed as obligations of protection for civilians. Gaza Now director Mustafa Ayash’s death in November is marked with a post making this connection (UN Human Rights Office in Occupied Palestinian Territory, 2024). It reads “The network strongly condemns the random targeting and killing of innocent civilians in Gaza, urging urgent international intervention to halt these brutal attacks and protect innocent lives. . . The Israeli military targeted a house in Al-Nuseirat camp, central Gaza, resulting in casualties, including the family members of Mustafa Ayash.”

Hamas as a defensive actor is a core theme, along with Hamas government civil defense units who are similarly featured as targets and active on the ground. One video, taken by a civil defense worker, presumably attached to a fire and rescue vehicle, show the crew being shot and injured after a crash. The logic of self-defense and portrayal of armed actors comes strikingly in a three-paneled cartoon. First a child is show crawling out of the rubble of an Israel bombing. Second the child is standing with a slingshot, offering some inflection to historical youth resistance (Zeidan, 2013). Third the child is now an adult armed with an assault rifle and wearing a martyr’s headband. The cartoon by Mikail Çiftçi, a Turkish artist, posted by Gaza Now on the

same date of its release is entitled “Cause & Effect” (Çiftçi, 2023). While not likely intended as a propaganda piece for Hamas, it was posted with the following comment “The children will grow up to become men who will defend Al-Aqsa Mosque, their country, their land, and their people”.

Methods of violent self-defense used throughout 2023, certainly reflected the multidirectional and asymmetric nature of this conflict. The majority of Hamas’ self-defense violence in this year is almost evenly represented between battles (45%) and explosions (49%) (including drones, rockets, and other devices). Although only 5% of the total violence included civilian targeting, this includes October 7th. To give context for the concentration of the violence used by the movement, 97% of their actions in 2023 are in the last three months of the year.

Artsakh Defense Forces

After being dormant for nearly two years the ADF Twitter/X account came back to life on October 6th 2020, with this post, “Since September 27, we are fighting against the triple alliance of #Turkey, #Azerbaijan, and #terrorist organizations. We will defend Artsakh civilians from any military attack and terror.” Accompanied by an Armenian Defense Forces image of a soldier firing an artillery round just a few days earlier (Reevell, 2020). This post largely sums up the language used by the ADF to identify the enemy (a Turkish alliance) as terrorists and the civilian protective nature of their efforts. This post demarcates the short but crucial fighting between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and smaller forces between them in Nagorno-Karabakh from September 27th to November 10th. During this period the decades long conflict over the contested region was reignited by summer border skirmishes turning into full-scale fighting, the largest since 1994 (Crisis Watch, 2020). Although ending with a Russian brokered ceasefire in November, this crucial phase saw the return of the Artsakh fighters, supported by Armenia, and the installation of Russian soldiers to back the ceasefire.

Of the 317 posts during 2020, most are centered in the war period citing defense against terrorism. This includes occasionally discrediting opponents as “mercenary (or) foreign terrorists” attacking the security of an Artsakh homeland. Phrasing of mass atrocity is not used. However, posts like this from November 3rd indicate similar ideas, “We strongly condemn attempts whereby communities are subjected to #terrorism, civilians are targeted on ethnic or religious grounds, those inciting hate crime; violence are justified. #Artsakh is determined to contribute to the fight against terrorism. #ViennaAttack”. Similarly, this post claims further attacks against Armenians as an indigenous group, “For the people of Artsakh this is a struggle for life and freedom, for Azerbaijan and its totalitarian leadership this is a war to strengthen grip on power and annihilate indigenous people of Artsakh. Artsakh is destined to prevail over death and hatred.” A narrative of defense as a legitimate homeland is threaded throughout this sample. In this series of tactical and political statements updating the blow by blow of the conflict, international actors or humanitarian organizations are not tagged in any posts.

The pattern of methods in exercising self-defense sees a marked shift from battles (91%) occurring monthly throughout 2020, but then dropping off in October to November where explosions and remote violence peak with 249 events (8%). Targeting of civilians is minimal with only three events, all falling outside of the main conflict in late 2020. Notable though, and the civilian impact here is unverified, were dozens of counts of shelling and artillery by both sides, but especially by Artsakh forces against Azerbaijani border areas. Such widespread use of fire added displacement inevitably added to the 5,527 casualties (on all sides) in this brief period (ACLED, 2024).

Twirwaneho

Fighting throughout 2021 in the highlands of South Kivu is part of a longer reciprocal and multidirectional conflict. In this year fighting escalated compared to other years in the wider 2019-2023 period. This is partly due to the increased tension resulting from the more Northern focused government ordered state of siege (Congo Research Group, 2022). Increased attacks on Banyamulenge civilians in the highlands resulted in the uptick in Banyamulenge self-defense militias (Davey, 2022). This includes the mutiny of several key Banyamulenge Congolese military officers back to their home areas to train, organize and lead smaller scale group in full scale attacks against other local armed groups and the army (Davey, forthcoming).

Frequent reference is made in the years' worth of posts to a "Banyamulenge genocide" that is simultaneously denied both nationally and internationally. This example comes from September 10th, "BANYAMULENGE GENOCIDE: In Bijombo, Banyamulenge civilians are arbitrarily arrested by the @FARDC_off and detained in mass graves. In Uvira, the houses and churches of the Banyamulenge are destroyed by young people sent by the Mayor of the town. @Presidence_RDC". Tagging both the Congolese President and the army's account this post offers familiar echo of the perceived dynamics of claims of violence and responsibility. Another, without using genocide states, "The role of the Congolese state in the uprooting and ethnic cleansing of the Banyamulenge in the Highlands of Fizi, Uvira and ITOMBWE. @Presidence_RDC @AssembléeN_RDC @FARDC @MONUSCO @UNOSAPG @genocide_watch @KivuSecurity @7sur7_cd @laprunellerdc @actualitecd". This sweeping post calls in additional actors including the UN mission, national assembly, NGO Genocide Watch, conflict reporting organization Kivu Security Tracker, and media outlets among others. 27 of the posts refer to either genocide, killing, victims, or cleansing.

Similar audiences are tagged in the narrative of self-defense throughout the posts. This post from the end of the year makes a consistent claim of civilian-based self-defense, "@defense_mai @MONUSCO @fardc @GouvSudkivu @FMakyambe @PatrickMuyaya @luchaRDC @DenisMukwege @iubwe2 The Twirwaneho are all civilians. They defend themselves against the attacks of the Maimai genocidaires. It is the Maimai who are destabilizing the highlands, not the Twirwaneho who are only defending themselves." Here Mai Mai armed groups, or local self-

defense groups are noted as aligned with the Congolese government (Brabant, 2016; Stearns, 2022). Tagged persons in these posts, like Nobel Prize winning doctor Denis Mukwege are shamed for not acknowledging the destruction of the group, nor the legitimate nature of Twirwaneho self-defense.

Most of the ACLED events recorded in this period appear under the battles coding (89%) with then 13 events with verified civilian targeting (9%). Of all the events 72% see battles with either Mai Mai or the FARDC. In some instances, in November Twirwaneho also engaged in fighting against co-ethnic militia Gumino. A common occurrence in this period in the process of multidirectional and reciprocal fighting is the burning of homes, looting or re-seizure of property, robbing of civilians and soldiers, abduction as well as outright killing of civilians.

Discussion and further research

The violence of self-defense is inherently messy regardless of the professed claims of legitimacy. Claims and methods of self-defense may however, offer an indication of a positive correlation of severity of language and willingness to engage in multidirectional and civilian targeting violence. For both Hamas and Twirwaneho there is a marked willingness to target civilians, but perhaps for differing reasons. For Hamas the incidence of terrorist-style spectacular violence is apparent, especially given the desire to increase the profile of suffering for the claimed protected civilians, as absurd as the logic seems. For Twirwaneho, as a locally entrenched but semi-professionalized armed group, defense of a territory and seizure of resources, through ransom or looting, is crucial to livelihoods and security through coercion.

The level of claimed legitimacy and even professionalization of each armed actor may also affect the correlation of claims and methods. For ADF the moderate use of language and engagement in more normalized military tactics of shelling, notwithstanding potential civilian casualties indicate a need to avoid direct civilian targeting. This may also speak to the scale of fighting and the material power of an opposing force, which in this case involves the Azerbaijan military's similar use of weapons. Both Hamas and Twirwaneho then create a paradigm for severity of claims and implied threat or ongoing incidence of mass atrocity as a stronger grounding for legitimacy. Such practice relies then on an obfuscation and relegation of civilian targeting or casualties in the name of self-defense. The brief samples of data also contribute to the position of an escalation critique of armed self-defense. The methods described, regardless of the claims, have led to further civilian targeting or at least casualties. Being part of a multidirectional conflict further complicates and often makes violence more severe. For Palestinians, Armenians in Artsakh and Banyamulenge, violence as state-led retaliation continues to remove people from their land. In none of these cases do actors offer a coherent replacement for an oppressive state.

What do claims of mass atrocity justify? And, more centrally for this paper: what is then understood about Palestine and Hamas from this comparison? Legitimacy is something that

armed self-defense groups are attentive to. Yet, this does not translate into using what might be generally determined as legitimate methods. Claims implying severity of destruction sit at the foundation of legitimacy. The latter may then be deployed as cover for more violent deployments of self-defense. The existential struggle of such then draws further extremes of violence, or at least willingness to engage in such, as in the case of October 7th.

Many questions and areas of further research are left out in this brief analysis centered on a years' worth of claims and methods of self-defense during escalated conflict. How are questions of self-defense and claims protected civilian group to be parsed from the armed group's own necessary survival and relevance as a political actor? Attention to linkages between aims and agendas in claims and methods is needed; what can in-depth interviews offer for multi-level perspectives: what do foot soldiers say, versus what do political actors say. Also unanswered are the political and economic or other strategic factors linking claims and methods. Measuring the impact of claims and methods on intended audiences from both social media impressions to influence on wider discourse measured through news media reporting and connections to global actions, such as influence on international bodies or supportive protest movements is also requisite. As attention to mass atrocity in multidirectional conflict increases internationally, there is a compelling need to address the equally protective, but problematic natures of armed self-defense.

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