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Prevention Is Better Than Cure:
Good Practices to Prevent
Religious Discrimination

International Institute
for Religious Freedom

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Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
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Prevention Is Better Than Cure: Good Practices to Prevent Religious Discrimination

Abstract

In recent years both academic and advocacy institutions have documented religious discrimination with increasing sophistication which has improved our understanding of the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. The sophisticated documentation has inspired responses by a wide range of actors, including faith-based groups and governmental entities. While their efforts are extremely valuable, these actors often become engaged after sometimes violent acts of discrimination against religious groups have been perpetrated and the damage is already done. Conflict certainly merits this engagement, yet considerably less attention is given to the prevention of religious discrimination, an underexplored phenomenon. Although understandable, we argue that the implicit preference for the resolution or transformation of religious conflicts over their prevention is not in the interest of vulnerable religious communities. It also ignores the valuable initiatives to prevent religious discrimination that religious groups themselves are already implementing. We posit that vulnerable religious groups are better served by increased attention on prevention. This focus on prevention is in line with analogous developments inspired by the human security paradigm in related areas, such as peacebuilding. Actors involved in the mitigation of religious discrimination have yet to make this shift to prevention, perhaps due to the underexplored nature of this domain. Religious freedom endeavors also create space for cultural production and protecting meaning making space through reducing violence or building peace. Following the assumption that efforts to prevent conflict are more effective than efforts to cure, we develop a methodology to document good practices of the prevention of religious discrimination. This is critical as many violent incidents and mass atrocities happen outside of known conflict areas or news reports. Good practices can be thought of as as embodied and institutional knowhow. We justify our focus on good practices by using the Cynefin framework of sense making. We also draw on conflict prevention literature, and preliminary findings distilled from an exploratory sample of initiatives that have effectively prevented religious discrimination in Vietnam, Iraq, Nigeria, Colombia, and Mozambique. These initial sites were chosen for their religious, political, and geographical diversity. This paper offers a contribution to academic discourse by integrating the documenting of good practices to prevent religious discrimination, based on initial findings, into gaps with existing literature. We also expect that this methodology and frame will allow us in the future to build a database of good practices that religious groups can use and adapt to prevent religious discrimination in new contexts. The knowhow we present is the good practices, which we document and communicate through this project.

Introduction

Until recently, the social sciences were largely dominated by secularization theory, which regarded religion as inconsequential and predicted its decreasing societal significance, leading, among other things, to a neglect of religious freedom or religious discrimination as an area of study. This resulted in a self-reinforcing spiral, as scholars did not research religious freedom, and therefore, no significant violations were identified, further discouraging research. However, this impasse began to dissolve due to the empirical evidence contradicting the secularization theory's central claim (Berger 2009).

Pioneering academics, such as Jonathan Fox[1] (1999) and Paul Marshall[2] (1997), were among the first to take an interest in religious discrimination. As a part of this growing field of religious freedom research, faith-based groups such as Open Doors International had begun to develop rudimentary data collection tools. In 2005, Brian Grim and Roger Finke established the groundwork for the Pew Research Center's Global Restrictions on Religion reports (Grim 2005; Grim and Finke 2011). During this time, Thomas Schirrmacher and Christof Sauer founded the International Institute for Religious Freedom, which has grown into a community of academics dedicated to gathering dependable data on religious freedom violations worldwide. Now, even the highly reputed Varieties of Democracy dataset also includes a question on religious freedom (see Klocek & Petri 2023).

Following Fox (2018), religious discrimination can broadly be defined as any type of restrictions placed by state and non-state actors on the religious practices or institutions of religious groups. The intensity and severity of religious discrimination can range from barely noticeable prejudice to mass atrocities. In this chapter we focus on the latter, but it is important to realize that religious discrimination occurs on a broad spectrum.

All the research on religious discrimination has given the topic increased visibility. This was very instrumental to garner attention at the policy level, first in the United States and later in other Western countries, some non-Western countries, and the United Nations (Hertzke 2004, 2015; Petri & Buijs 2019). Indeed, the sophisticated documentation of religious discrimination has inspired responses by a wide range of actors, including faith-based groups and governmental entities. While these efforts are extremely valuable, these actors often become engaged after acts of discrimination, sometimes violent, against religious groups have been perpetrated and the damage is already done. Conflict certainly merits this engagement, and yet considerably less attention is given to the prevention of religious discrimination which may contribute to disrupting social conditions that allow mass atrocities to take place.

Although it is widely accepted that prevention is better than cure, in this chapter we introduce a new approach to address this issue. Our aim is to develop a

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[1] Jonathan Fox took Ted Gurr's Minorities at Risk dataset and adapted it to include religious minorities, which later evolved into the Religion and State Project at Bar-Ilan University.

[2] Marshall's book *Their Blood Cries Out*, co-authored with Lela Gilbert, attracted wide attention.

methodological framework that will enable us to start to fill this knowledge gap. Our building blocks are both theoretical and empirical. After offering some possible explanation for the lack of attention to the prevention of religious discrimination in the current literature on religious discrimination, we begin by exploring how the fields of conflict studies, human security, and peacebuilding can provide valuable insights that can be employed for the prevention of religious discrimination. Subsequently, we propose a methodology based on the Cynefin framework of sensemaking to support our approach by highlighting good practices. Finally, we present some initial findings from pilot research to illustrate the value of this approach. We conclude with a few comments on the anticipated practical outcome of documenting good practices to prevent religious discrimination.

Explaining the gaps in current religious discrimination literature

As discussed in the introduction, most analyses of religious freedom focus on documenting religious freedom violations but give little attention to the responses of religious minorities to these violations. As Daniel Philpott and Timothy Shah, who directed the first systematic study on the resilience of Christians to persecution, *Under Caesar's Sword* (2018), comment, "Far less well understood is how Christians respond when their religious freedom has been severely violated." (2017:2) The resilience of religious groups was the subject of the 2017 issue of the *International Journal for Religious Freedom* (IJRF) which collected seven articles around the topic "Responding to Persecution" (Häde 2017). The 2019 issue of the IJRF laterally looks at the impact of religious freedom research on vulnerable religious communities (Petri & Buijs 2019). Save these examples, academic research projects that investigate the resilience of religious groups are rare. Without a doubt, more research is needed to help religious groups to be better prepared to face pressures.

The focus on intervention after religious conflicts develop is understandable for at least three reasons. First, social events are always unpredictable, and therefore it is not always possible to anticipate events in which religious discrimination will occur. The development of early warning systems and vulnerability assessments has been of interest to some scholars specializing in conflict studies, but it remains very difficult to make any accurate predictions about future conflicts. In addition, the efforts made in this area have rarely been applied to religious conflicts.

Second, for both government agencies and civil society organizations, it is very difficult to raise support for conflict prevention as this often seems less attractive to donors than attending to conflicts that are already manifest. Indeed, there's nothing better than audiovisual materials of suffering people to raise funds. National security services face a similar challenge: they are criticized when they don't manage to prevent terror attacks, but the work they do to prevent such attacks are rarely celebrated. In fact, when they are successful in preventing terror attacks, politicians are often very quick to divert funds to other

policy areas, because the absence of terror attacks gives the false impression that the services of terrorist prevention units are no longer necessary.

Finally, the conflict resolution field has been dominated for a long time by "ripeness theory," which teaches that it is necessary to ensure the maturity (ripeness) of a conflict before starting a mediation process. From this perspective, assessing maturity requires confirming that the parties believe that outright victory is not possible, that they can honor their agreements, and that there is domestic political and public support for peace. The reason for insisting on the importance of the maturity of a conflict is because the antagonism between the parties can cloud the way out of the conflict, or even not show negotiation as a viable alternative (Smith & Smock 2008; Zartman & de Soto 2010).

However, the maturity of the conflict is extremely difficult to determine objectively. In addition, the insistence on waiting for the maturity of a conflict carries the risk of a tautological argument: if a mediation fails, it is very easy to claim that it was because the conflict was not mature, and if it was successful, then it can be concluded that the conflict was ripe. Perhaps even more importantly, while waiting for conflict to become ripe, its destructive humanitarian consequences may continue (Bremner 2022). This is the main reason why we consider that investing in prevention is worthwhile and potentially benefit religious communities more than interventions aiming to solve or transform religious conflicts, which are also necessary.

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Insights from adjacent fields

Even though actors involved in the mitigation of religious discrimination have yet to make the shift to prevention (Payne 2022), we can draw upon analogous developments in other fields, specifically conflict theory, human security, and peace building.

Conflict theory has contributed significantly to the field of conflict prevention and early warning by providing insights into the causes and dynamics of conflict. Three schools can be distinguished that offer concurrent interpretations for civil conflicts, which include ethno-religious conflicts: the first explains conflicts as a result of 'grievance' or 'relative deprivation' (Gurr 2016; Stewart 2008; and Cederman, Gleditsch & Buhaug 2013); the second explains them as a result of 'greed' (Collier & Hoeffler 2004); the third favors an approach in terms of 'opportunity' (Collier, Hoeffler & Rohner 2009; Fearon & Laitin 2009). Notwithstanding the arguments both within and between these schools with regard to what is the best statistical predictor of civil conflicts, for the purpose of this research, we simply take them as complementary interpretations that can shed light on the vulnerability of religious minorities. This conclusion is in agreement with Ballentine & Sherman (2003), Weinstein (2007) and Collier himself through the Conflict Triangle framework, which identifies the interplay between greed, grievance, and opportunity in fueling conflicts. This is also what Johan Galtung proposes when he analytically distinguishes between "value conflicts" and "interest conflicts," with the former referring to conflicts over resource scarcity and the latter to conflicts over ideological disagreements (1969).

One of the main contributions of this literature is the identification of the root causes of conflicts, which include structural factors such as poverty, inequality, and exclusion, as well as political factors such as governance and power-sharing arrangements. The literature has also identified the role of identity and ethnicity in conflict, highlighting the importance of addressing issues of identity and belonging in conflict prevention efforts. Another important contribution of the conflict studies literature to conflict prevention and early warning is the development of frameworks and models for analyzing and predicting conflict. For example, Edward Azar and Johan Galtung, have developed models that focus on the underlying structural causes of conflict and the need for structural change to address these causes.

The conflict studies literature has emphasized the importance of early warning and prevention in addressing conflicts. Scholars such as John Paul Lederach and John Darby have emphasized the need for conflict prevention strategies that address the root causes of conflicts and involve local actors in the process. Additionally, the literature has highlighted the importance of early warning systems that can detect early signs of conflict and trigger early intervention to prevent escalation.

Most of the work on conflict prevention in the conflict studies literature has focused on the development of early warning systems, with the explicit aim to predict conflicts. This field of research is growing and shows great promise. Indeed, the better we can predict conflicts by identifying early warning signs, the more we inform conflict prevention efforts. This being said, despite an ability or inability to predict conflict, one should not stop efforts to prevent conflicts.

Taking a different approach, the human security paradigm, introduced in 1993 by the United Nations Development Program, is a more holistic way to look at security and represent its multiple dimensions. Among other things, it constitutes an invitation to pursue the protection and empowerment of individuals rather than states by providing a more comprehensive framework to address various threats to human well-being in contemporary global politics.

The paradigm shifting nature of human security is not limited, however, to the security field as such; it also challenges the traditional approach to humanitarian intervention, which often involves military action by powerful states in response to human rights violations or other forms of violence. Glasius (2008) argues that such interventions are often driven by political and strategic interests rather than genuine concern for the well-being of those affected. Moreover, military interventions can have unintended consequences, such as exacerbating conflict or causing civilian casualties.

Instead, Glasius advocates for a more holistic approach to human security that addresses the root causes of insecurity, such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. This approach would involve working with local communities and civil society organizations to build sustainable, inclusive societies that prioritize human well-being over narrow political or economic interests. Glasius' work also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the agency and diversity of individuals and communities affected by insecurity. She argues that human

security policies should be shaped by the needs and perspectives of those affected, rather than being imposed from outside by powerful states or international organizations.

In other words, Glasius' work on human security invites us to move away from the traditional approach to humanitarian intervention, to focus on prevention by addressing the structural determinants of conflict (as well as its humanitarian consequences), and in a way, make humanitarian interventions truly humanitarian.

This "shift away from humanitarian intervention," as Glasius calls it, has inspired changes in the field of peacebuilding. Traditional peacekeeping involves the deployment of military personnel to troubled regions and is typically utilized when two states are involved in a conflict, and multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN) seek to contain the situation through third-party military forces that monitor a peace agreement. In contrast, complex or multidimensional peacekeeping activities seek to respond to conflicts within a state, such as civil war and ethno-nationalist conflicts. These are typically cases where the state has not requested UN assistance, and the conflict has already escalated.

Complex peacekeeping missions are designed to be more holistic. They do not only attempt to attend to the humanitarian consequences of a conflict by going further than traditional peacekeeping missions that are limited to maintaining law and order by aiding in civil administration, policing, and rehabilitating infrastructure. Complex peacekeeping includes an important prevention component in that they seek to avert future conflicts by responding to the underlying problems that caused the conflict in the first place (Call 2015).

Peacekeeping has had both successes and failures over the years. For instance, Namibia's transition from war to cease-fire and then to independence is seen as a success, while Rwanda's experience of genocide and the need for humanitarian protection is seen as a failure. Unsurprisingly, complex peacekeeping missions are generally considered to have been less successful, mainly because they are more ambitious (Mingst, Mckibben & Arreguín-Toft 2019). This being said, the move toward complex or multidimensional peacekeeping is significant and can inspire analogous developments in interventions that seek to respond to religious discrimination, including mass atrocities.

We suggest that a focus on studying good practices for reducing religious discrimination is a further theoretical step suggested by a human security approach and the complex peacekeeping. Studying good practices can also be holistic in nature, look beyond state centered approaches, and foreground truly humanitarian efforts done by local actors who must be a part of any sustainable effort.

Methodology to document good practices

In order to address the gaps mentioned above, we are proposing and justifying a research initiative using case studies to document good practices. The case studies will aim to generate descriptions of practices that might be profitably

adopted by religious groups in different contexts to promote the cause of religious freedom. These cases will focus on individuals (Yin 2018) who are embedded in their wider contexts. This qualitative approach is exploratory in nature and adopts a pragmatic snowball sampling approach (Berg, 2001) with an emphasis on areas of conflict or potential conflict.

The methodological decision to focus on good practices is closely linked to the nature of the problem. In a complicated world with extremely diverse political contexts, historical conflicts, ethnic or religious tension, and varying economic opportunities, it is impossible to justify a specific set of practices as universally applicable.

The Cynefin framework is well suited to offer pathways forward while also adjusting to unknown factors. Originally proposed as a conceptual framework for decision making, the cynefin framework is used in sense-making, knowledge management, organizational learning, and analysis. This framework has been used in fields as diverse as public health (Van Beurden et al. 2013), biomedical research (Kempermann 2017), information science (McLeod & Childs 2013), and analytical modeling (French 2013).

The term Cynefin, which originated with David Snowden (Snowden 2021), comes from a Welsh word for habitat and describes five different domains. Each of these domains has a different methodological approach that fits with what is known about a problem and what is unknown. Each domain, or habitat, has unique characteristics on a continuum that moves from a known and defined problem to one that is completely unknown. The Cynefin framework articulates domains which are clear, complicated, complex, chaotic, and confused. For the purposes of this chapter, we will describe the first three of the domains to clarify our choice of the term good practices.

In the clear domain the constraints are rigid and fixed with a clear relationship between cause and effect. Given these attributes, the methodology to be applied is to sense areas of problem, categorize them, and respond with action. Much is known about the entire context and problems in this domain are described as dealing with the "known knowns". Given the level of what is known in this type of system and the clear connections between cause and effect, we can expect to discover best practices that arise from the responses to the problem.

The complicated domain is differentiated from the clear domain by the increasing amount of unknown factors. Cause and effect are indeed present but require refined judgment and expertise to determine an appropriate action. With fewer boundaries the methodology applied to this domain is to sense the problems, analyze the context further, and respond with action. This domain is defined by dealing with problems that have "known unknowns." Given that this domain is unclear on the relationship between cause and effect, it is not reasonable to expect a clear set of best practices. Activities and practices can be judged as good insofar as they add insight and reduce the level of unknown factors. Over time, a problem in the complicated domain can be explored and analyzed to

the point that connections between cause and effect become clear. This would then move this entire problem set into the clear domain.

The next domain on the continuum, named the complex domain, requires an entirely different approach. In this domain we find "unknown unknowns." There are no right answers and cause and effect can only be determined in retrospect. The methodology proposed for this arena is to probe, sense, and respond. One might not have enough information to determine whether a specific practice is good, much less a best practice. Instead, the cynefin framework anticipates describing an emergent practice. As with the complicated domain, this domain can be mapped and studied in order to increase clarity. After enough probing, problems in the complex domain can move into the complicated domain. With further work these problems might also transition to the clear domain.

Our proposal of documenting good practices to prevent religious discrimination acknowledges that there are a tremendous amount of "unknowns" and that a whole host of activities might contribute to ameliorating religious discrimination and mass atrocities. We feel this Cynefin framework justifies our adoption of a case studies approach. By researching and documenting good practices, we contribute to a knowledge base around preventing religious discrimination. Increased awareness of good practices being done in diverse regional contexts assists in mapping the problem of religious discrimination and can empower minority religious communities to advocate for themselves or act on their own behalf. This dovetails with conflict prevention literature and is illustrated through findings from preliminary case studies.

Preliminary findings from case studies

We have tested this methodology with pilot research in five contexts through qualitative interviews with actors from Vietnam, Iraq, Nigeria, Colombia, and Mozambique. The political climates, minority communities and religious contexts vary widely between these contexts and, as a result, have a wide variety of practices. Of these various case studies developed through pilot research, Nigeria has the greatest number of mass atrocities and is given greater space. The Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa has done extensive research totaling the number of both Muslim and Christians killed at both the national and sub-national level.[3] There are many groups claiming genocide in Nigeria and the US Commission of International Religious Freedom regularly recommends Nigeria be added to the list of the Countries of Particular Concern.

One of the actors in Nigeria was motivated to do this work following violent riots in 2001 in his home city. Mass killings and destruction in the city dramatically impacted his father's business which led to being displaced from their family home and rebuilding from conditions of poverty. This experience led him to study peace building and get involved in religious freedom work.

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[3] See https://orfa.africa, especially the report on 2019–2022 Nigeria Killings and Abductions.

Kenneth was a part of the project called the Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA). It began in Nigeria and is being implemented in seven countries today. The project promoted FoRB and included Catholic, Islamic, Protestant, interreligious and secular consortium partners, and local partners. The project is focused on intra-religious, inter-religious, and extra-religious dynamics. In the contest of Nigeria many of these killings have a religious component and promoting conversations between religious communities drastically reduced religious discrimination. Yet the process was much broader than simply interfaith dialogue.

The first step begins with intrareligious discussion. The religious communities have internal discussions focused on the experiences, challenges, and issues they are facing. This may include Muslim leaders talking about issues in the Mosque or Christians discussing their concerns in churches. These intrafaith groups work through training materials and discuss challenges or communal difficulties in preparation to for the next step. The idea is that when a religious group understands hinderances in meeting their religious obligations and seeks to address it, they will be prepared to see that need in a different faith community. For example, as Muslims consider concrete issues of worship or burying their dead, they might be better prepared to see valid needs in a Christian community.

This step can go on for as long as it takes, but usually twelve months or less. During this time, the outside teams will do training on tolerance, trauma healing, relationship building, and conflict transformation. It is important to not move to the next step of interreligious discussion too soon. Each community should have an opportunity to thoroughly discuss their intrafaith distinctives and air their grievances before engaging a different faith community. Throughout this process, the facilitators will regularly ask if the specific faith community is ready to meet with the other. A readiness to meet is indicated by a willingness to look at internal faults. The community should also indicate a willingness to forgive, without denying real hurts or problems.

The interfaith groups then begin having dialogue about issues in the community and barriers to peace. Often this second step of knowing the other dramatically reduces conflict opportunities. There are theological red lines in Islam and Christianity that are known through both communities, so neither side is asked to deny their commitments. Instead, both communities have an opportunity to recognize that freedom of religion or belief can create common ground to work together on the third pillar, extra-religious dynamics.

In the context of Nigeria extra-religious dynamic may involve issues of security, the economy or education. Religious groups engage with civil society groups, legislators, and other stake holders. As they develop action plans together, Muslims and Christians face community problems together and build social cohesion.

It is this connection back to society at large that shows the connection between interfaith dialogue and the outcomes described by a human security paradigm.

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An interesting experiment to promote religious freedom was carried out by the municipality of Manizales in Colombia. Osorio argues that urban planning is a crucial tool for conflict prevention and the promotion of FoRB, as it can prevent conflicts over the use of land for religious purposes and ensure that communities have access to places of worship (2019). Osorio highlights the challenges that arise in urban planning for places of worship, including the conflicting interests of different stakeholders, the need to balance the right to FoRB with other rights, and the difficulty of ensuring that planning decisions are not discriminatory. To address these challenges, Osorio proposes a set of guidelines for urban planners to ensure that the planning process is transparent, participatory, and inclusive of all stakeholders. The experiment in Manizales contributes to conflict prevention by emphasizing the importance of urban planning in promoting FoRB and preventing conflicts over the use of land for religious purposes. By providing guidelines for urban planners, it offers a practical approach to ensuring that planning decisions are fair and inclusive, and that all members of the community have access to places of worship.

In the country of Iraq, a collection of actors worked to develop a program called Ambassadors for Peace. This program which ran for over ten years focused on reducing violence by engaging those involved. In these highly religious communities, many of the violent actors were motivated by defending their religion. By gathering together local religious leaders with genuine spiritual influence, those running the program convened gatherings to talk about safety and protecting the vulnerable. Through many discussions over time, community leaders drew on their religious traditions to publicly champion the need for peaceful ambassadors. This idea was regularly promoted through various religious events and celebrations. Through regular meetings, leaders of religious communities began to humanize those different than themselves through an empathic extension of their own desire for safety and to follow their religious convictions. By defining a good religious leader as someone who could also be a hero for peace, the program saw a statistical decline in violence by 42 percent.

In these brief illustrations from case studies in Nigeria, Columbia, and Iraq we see a number of good practices. In the case of actors from Nigeria we can observe the need to address previous grievances and historical pain, not rushing to confront a different religious community before dealing with internal issues, involving not just leaders but the entire community, and working together to tackle local problems. The Columbian case highlights how governance and thoughtful processes can solve known problems before they arise. In the case of Iraq, communities learned to jointly value the heroic aspect of peace and move beyond their defensive impulses.

Anticipated practical outcome of documenting good practices to prevent religious discrimination

We have introduced religious discrimination as a neglected category in the prevention of mass atrocities, we have garnered insights from peace building and conflict transformation, we justified the mapping and describing good practices

using the cynefin framework, and illustrated the concept through a brief selection of case studies from pilot research. These selected examples, even in brief form, depict creative ways to reduce religious discrimination and offer concrete solutions to the gaps described in previous sections.

Based on this presentation, we argue that ongoing exploration of good practices around the world can have a positive impact on preventing violence and mass atrocities. The productive possibilities stemming from documenting good practices become even more clear when analyzed in light of categories like the ten stages of genocide – the ultimate mass atrocity.

Following earlier statements about the challenge of predicting the future as well as the importance of human security for a robust life, we have argued that further efforts are required to articulate good practices for preventing conflict and reducing religious discrimination. This is confirmed by studies from groups like genocide watch. In their ten stages of genocide, at each successive stage, there exists an opportunity for disruption or de-escalation. Opportunities for disruption have increasingly likely chances in earlier stages rather than later.

Genocide Watch claims that these processes are not linear, but occur in stages, each with narratives and movements on its own. The initial four stages of classification, symbolization, discrimination, and dehumanization all include opportunities for intervention that a systematic study of good practices might generate. Monitoring systems can help identify areas of concern or vulnerability, but having a set of good practices to drawn upon to actually intervene offers a different type of resource to prevent mass atrocities. This might involve stalling one of the 10 stages of genocide, or developing social cohesion to the point that communities are not as vulnerable to manipulation to dehumanize another group.

There are tremendous resources put into various early warning projects, which we affirm are quite important. The US Holocaust Museum produces an important statistical assessment of risk factors. The Atrocity Forecast project, People's Under Threat, ACLED, Conflict Forecast, the State Resilience Index, Fragile States Index, and others all seek to monitor and understand areas where mass atrocities might take place. These various studies offer a tremendous service which must continue to inform many of the actors in this field. And yet, another space dedicated to promoting good practices can complement these efforts for mass atrocity resistance. When the stakes are this high, prevention can indeed be better than cure.

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