Introduction: Enacting Peace Amid Violence: Nonviolent Civilian Agency in Violent Conflict

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Abstract

Worldwide, civilians experiencing violence make agential choices about how they interact with conflict landscapes. This special issue assembles contributions that specifically deepen our understanding of nonviolent civilian agency amid violence. Our Introduction embeds these contributions in a wider overview of the study of civilian agency in war. First, we unpack the state/military versus civilian binary upon which dominant scholarship's idea of agency in violent conflict is often still based and show how this has contributed to an analytical gap in our understanding of nonviolent civilian action. We then provide an overview of the growing literature that has started to fill this gap and discuss how its recentering of nonviolence and civilian agency enables a more nuanced understanding of conflict management and transformation across diverse contexts. Finally, we provide an overview of the contributions to this special issue and how they take the state of the art of scholarly work forward.

Keywords

violent conflict – war – civilian agency – nonviolence – peace zone – unarmed civilian
peacekeeping – civilian protection

Introduction

From First Nations and Indigenous communities protecting rights to land, to
former soldiers and gang members moving to nonviolent advocacy and con-
flict interruption, and to women protecting themselves and one another from
sexual and gender-based violence amid civil war – people around the world
have long acted to protect themselves and each other and to build peace amid
violent conflict. This action can come in a wide variety of forms, not all of
which are nonviolent. What is striking, however, is how many of these practic-
es are indeed connected by a choice to assert peaceful means of protection and
conflict management, despite a context of ongoing threat and presence of vio-
lence. The articles assembled in this special issue on *Nonviolent Civilian Agency
in Violent Conflict* make important contributions to further expand and nuance
existing knowledge on such nonviolent civilian agency in violent conflict.

With its thematic focus on nonviolent civilian agency and its diverse out-
look in terms of contributors' disciplines, methodologies, geographical foci
and more, this special issue speaks directly to research gaps in the study of
nonviolence, understood not just as resistance but detected in other practices,
policies, and enactments, identified by the *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence*
(Christoyannopoulos 2023). There is now a small but growing scholarly inter-
est in the practices, meanings, effects, and ethics of (nonviolent) civilian agen-
cy in conflict. Although the focus of much attention remains on the roles of
states and state-based institutions as protectors, and in the international con-
text particularly on the role of the United Nations, an emerging body of work
considers what protective agency is and how it is enacted beyond these con-
ventional boundaries and practices of the state. This body of works includes,
for instance, studies on restraint in armed conflict, community self-protection
from armed violence, zones and communities of peace, and unarmed civilian
peacekeeping/protection, and brings together insights from scholars working
in different (sub-)disciplines including peace and conflict studies, internation-
al relations, political science, human geography, social anthropology, develop-
ment studies, law, and area studies.

This growing body of work on civilian agency is a space to consider broader
questions of who has power, and what actions are powerful, in violent conflict.

It shows that when conflict is considered through a military/civilian binary, fulsome and nuanced answers to these questions are obscured by assumptions. When we presume that armed and state actors using force alone shape conflict and peace dynamics, we overlook the ways in which civilians – often through nonviolent actions – exercise power and influence the many ways in which peace, violence, and conflict unfold. Within this analytical gap lies fruitful potential for deepening our understanding of agency in violent conflict settings, as the growing body of work in this area has already started to do.

Against this background, this Introduction is a call to expand the exploration of the micro and macro ways in which nonviolent civilian action shapes violent conflict. We start with a discussion of the persistent binaries that have continued to dominate thinking and theorising on agency in war among mainstream studies and scholars across the different disciplines interested in violent conflict and war. We argue that these binaries work to obscure the many ways in which nonviolent civilian action can be powerful amid contexts of violence. We then review existing literature on civilian agency and nonviolence in violent conflict to provide a brief overview of the state of the art that may also function as a short-cut to the literature for scholars looking to include nonviolent civilian agency in their studies of protection and conflict management in the future.

Finally, we present the individual contributions contained within this special issue. Illuminating new insights into the enactment of peace and protection by civilians themselves across different scales, spaces, and academic disciplines, the pieces mutually reinforce one another to provide a strong foundation for further inquiries into the power and practices of civilians in violent conflict, but also the limitations and nuances such practices entail. What becomes clear when reading the contributions together is that a deeper understanding of (nonviolent) civilian agency in violent conflict requires inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, and that such a deeper understanding will also benefit from a stronger future integration of in-depth qualitative case studies with quantitative and qualitative macro data, much of which is yet to be systematically collected.

(De)constructing binaries in the study of nonviolent civilian agency

There are several ways in which the current mainstream literature on violent conflict in general, and the protection of civilians in conflict more particularly, overlooks the power of nonviolent civilian agency as a practice and factor in the interruption of violence, in the creation of conditions for protection and peace, and in understandings of conflict conditions more generally. These

oversights often hinge on the persistence of influential binaries in the study of violent conditions, and particularly the distinction between military and civilian actors and actions (Daho, Duclos, and Jouhanneau 2019; Guillaume and Huysmans 2019; Hameiri and Jones 2017; Hunt 2017). When the world is understood through a black-and-white, binary lens – civilian/combatant, us/them, formal/informal, international/local – these categories become reified (Gray 2022a), concretising and simplifying what these terms signify, and glossing over the multitudes of shades of grey that exist within and through these binaries. Assumptions build around these categorisations concerning who has power, what actions are powerful, and who is disempowered.

It is in this context that the contemporary conversation around agency in war remains centred on the state and other armed actors, which results in a general oversight of civilians' capacity to influence violence and the course of conflict and may even undermine this capacity. Although a growing body of literature is considering the power of civilians to protect and prevent violence (further discussed below), the contemporary policy conversation around agency in violent settings remains stubbornly narrow. In the context of protecting civilians from violence, for example, states and military peacekeepers are figured as 'active', contrasted with 'passive civilians' (Levine 2013, 1; see also Baines and Paddon 2012; Gray 2022b). These analytic polarities produce – perhaps unintentionally – hierarchies of importance and power when it comes to who and what kinds of action are considered legitimate. Although the study of the state and military actors remains essential to understanding contemporary violence, this focus has resulted in an under-acknowledgement in academic literature and policy of how unarmed and civilian actors also shape conflict dynamics. This has a chilling effect on who and what scholars, policymakers, and practitioners consider as powerful, agential actors and action in the context of violent conflict. For instance, even when local populations in conflict areas are to be engaged as 'partners' in UN peacekeeping, the way such 'community engagement' is imagined is as an inclusion of local communities into a practice that is dominated or pre-determined by state/military actors and not as a shift to locally led forms of UN-community partnerships (e.g., UNDPKO 2018; see also Gray 2022a).

The same binary logics also shape what kinds of action are considered legitimate forms of violence prevention and civilian protection in violent settings. The kinds of action and 'hard' power associated with the state and military actors – particularly the use of force as a deterrent and enforcement mechanism, evident in practices like armed peacekeeping, policing, or military intervention – are understood as active, powerful, and effective (e.g., dos Santos Cruz et al., 2017; see also Michael & Ben-Ari, 2010). Again, understanding how violence

is wielded as a tool and practice, and how it shapes trajectories of conflict, is essential to comprehending violent conflict and its impacts. At the same time, however, the use of violence is only part of a much more comprehensive landscape of action. To overlook nonviolent actions – the deliberate disavowal of violent acts in favour of the 'soft' power of relations, of resistance, of nonviolent protection and disruption (a distinction and definition further discussed below) – is to miss critical practices, and to therefore ignore or misunderstand their power and influence. This results in downplaying or overlooking the ways in which nonviolent actions can and do shape the course of violent conflict – both for better and for worse (see Barter in this special issue). A comprehensive understanding of the practices and actions that shape trajectories of violence and peace has to account for these manifold influences.

These oversights are mutually reinforcing, working to produce an analytical gap whereby nonviolent, civilian-led action is delegitimised and misunderstood. In academia, this leads to a continued neglect of civilian and nonviolent action in mainstream conflict studies, pushing the study of nonviolence to the margins and making it less attractive for early career researchers to engage with in view of necessary career decisions. What results is a vicious circle that keeps the analytical gap from closing and hinders important insights. More importantly perhaps, this gap also has direct implications for policy and practice, including what investments are made (and for whom) by decision-makers and funders of violence prevention and protection initiatives (Gray 2022a, 155). In order to understand violent conflict, and what we can potentially do to prevent it, to protect from it, and to rebuild in its aftermath, nonviolent actors and practices need to be taken seriously.

Understanding nonviolent civilian agency in violent conflicts: a literature review

While nonviolent approaches and civilian agency remain under-represented in research on protection specifically as well as on security and conflict more broadly, growing evidence is showing that nonviolence and civilian agency can effectively change conflict dynamics, create security, and thereby contribute to sustainable peacebuilding (Allouche & Zadi Zadi, 2013; Allouche & Jackson, 2019; Baines and Paddon, 2012; Francis, 2013; Julian, 2020; Kaplan 2017; Krause 2018; Masullo 2021; Wallace, 2017). Far from being passive onlookers or recipients of the negative effects of war, local communities make choices between violence and nonviolence, conflict and peace, depending on their perceptions and calculations of risks and returns (Allouche & Jackson, 2019). Recognising the need to

more deeply understand the role of civilians and nonviolent action in violent conflict, some scholars have begun to explore different elements of this puzzle.

Tracing the origins of this debate is not a straightforward historical task, given the different philosophies and knowledges that are contributing to it. For instance, some relate the relationship between civilians and nonviolent action in violent conflict to the idea of sanctuary or a safe place (Hancock, 2017). The sanctuary idea can be traced back to Greek, Roman and other ancient traditions, and has consequently been recognised in a variety of laws and customs, such as in England from the 4th century onwards. Gandhi's idea of a Shanti Sena, a peace army, is another idea that is often cited as a historical precursor to modern civilian protection efforts (Weber, 1996).

However, academic debates on the role of civilians and nonviolent action in violent conflict only really unfolded since the 1980s, with reflections of practitioners involved in organisations such as Peace Brigades International (PBI) who used nonviolent strategies to protect human rights activists in Central America (Mahony & Eguren, 1997). This type of modern civilian protection practice subsequently spread to other world regions through the work of different national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Witness for Peace, International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR), and Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), to name but a few (Bliesemann de Guevara et al. 2021). Reviewing the work of different peace teams, Lisa Schirch eventually introduced the term 'civilian peacekeeping' to describe the practice (Schirch 1995; cf. Julian & Schweitzer, 2015) – a term that suggests that nonviolent protection is comparable with armed peacekeeping (Julian and Gasser, 2019) but also a term which, because of its closeness to traditional peacekeeping, is highly contested among practitioner and academic communities.

Other, locally led practices and concepts, which are central to the discussion of civilian agency in conflict today, emerged at the same time. For instance, the establishment of zones of peace was pioneered by local activists on the southern coast of El Salvador, 'where a Local Zone of Peace (LZP) was formed by 43 communities in 1995 in response to increasing civil violence following the repatriation of Salvadoran youth who had become gang members while living in the US' (Hancock, 2017: 261). Studies started to take more systematic notice of the wealth of community self-protection practices (Jose and Medie, 2016).

What these historical glimpses illustrate is that nonviolent civilian agency in war was primarily a practical innovation developed by violence-affected communities and peace activists. This is important in the way that the literature evolved, with earlier academic works mainly advocating for the merits of nonviolent approaches to protection (see Furnari, 2016), while later works started to either develop nonviolent civilian agency as a normative concept

or to more systematically (and partly comparatively) explore the conditions and processes through which it works. There are two central academic debates that are linked to the field of (nonviolent) civilian agency in violent conflict and have developed alongside it, hinting at wider trends in humanitarian and peacebuilding practice and scholarship, but which have paid surprisingly scarce attention to nonviolence and civilian agency in war: discussions about and developments in the international protection of civilians, and discussions about local and everyday peace. We will briefly introduce these two discussions, before unpacking the different strands within the expanding literature that does focus on the (nonviolent) agency of civilians in war.

The idea of civilian protection in violent conflict has been focused through policy debates in the humanitarian field. Regarding global efforts on civilian protection, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has historically contributed to the creation of a global protection regime in important and fundamental ways (ICRC, 2012). While its initial agenda focused on wounded soldiers (not least through its contributions to the Hague Conventions), the ICRC has subsequently been the most active organisation in proposing different sets of regulations in addressing civilian protection in international humanitarian law (IHL). Humanitarian unarmed civilian protection (UCP) organisations base their work on these international frameworks.

The late 1990s were a major turning point in the international protection of civilians agenda, with the United Nations' recognition that it had been unable to protect civilians in Srebrenica and Rwanda (Ferris, 2011). Civilian protection thus became an issue of global policy concern (Carpenter, 2005). These debates in particular led to so-called humanitarian interventions and eventually to the emergence of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine (Bellamy, 2009). This was accompanied by changes in UN peacekeeping operations, which increasingly included protection of civilians (PoC) mandates, with now almost all UN peacekeepers mandated to protect civilians (UNDPO 2020).

The growth in UN PoC mandates has been accompanied by a growth of studies into UN PoC; however, scholars concerned with the armed, state-led protection of civilians have consistently ignored unarmed civilian protection efforts, even in countries where both are present (e.g., in South Sudan). More generally, when exploring the possibilities and limits of humanitarianism, there is a tendency by both academics and practitioners to focus on macro-level structures to understand how the international community can provide civilians' protection in wartime (the exception being Baines and Paddon, 2012). Therefore, there still exists a considerable gap 'between contemporary normative debates about what the international community should do to save people, on the one hand, and the reality of what we know about how people have

historically been saved, on the other' (Mégret, 2009: 581). Despite the recent 'local turn', Mégret (2009) suggests, humanitarian practice tends to continue to reduce intervention to the receipt of aid and protection by the supposedly helpless who do not have any agency or voice.

This is where critical and emancipatory approaches to peacebuilding studies have made a major difference. Constituting another influential school of thought among which one could situate the literature on nonviolent civilian agency, but which has so far remained largely detached from it, peacebuilding literature and in particular liberal peacebuilding critiques have made some advances towards including local agency in its studies. Especially so-called emancipatory approaches to peacebuilding have put emphasis on context, partners, and agency and linked them to specific examples of peacebuilding on the ground (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013). Such approaches further build on a tradition that shows how conflict-affected local communities use indigenous practices to manage post-conflict situations (Hohe, 2004; Nordstrom, 1997). This includes contested peace narratives, techniques of peace-making, the role of local peace committees and practices of coexistence, and how civil society contributions to peace can be dependent on the phase of the conflict (Paffenholz, 2010; Odendaal, 2013).

The approach taken is to analyse empirical examples of peace and show how they relate to both peace as a process and practice within the everyday acts of different individuals and communities, but also peace as a geographical and temporal space among which these dynamics take place (Allouche & Zadi, 2022). However, this type of research has mainly focused on either war prevention or post-conflict reconciliation, while the logic of nonviolence during conflict is only scarcely covered in this literature. Questions such as how nonviolent civilian agency during violent conflict impacts on the quality of local post-war peacebuilding could provide fruitful ways in which these literatures could speak to each other (e.g., Furnari et al. 2021).

While scholars in international relations have focused on the macro-level structures of protection but overlooked nonviolent forms that exist alongside state-led, top-down interventions, and peace and conflict scholars have drawn attention to the local and the everyday in post-war peacebuilding but not linked this much to civilians' local and everyday agency in war, anthropologists have long usefully accounted for civilian agency in areas of ongoing war-related violence, detailing civilian coping strategies regarding, for example, livelihoods and migration (Finnström, 2008; Hoffman, 2007; Lubkemann, 2008; Nordstrom, 1997; Steele, 2009; Theidon, 2006). Ethnographic studies have also put emphasis on civilian agency and countered the idea of the passive victim, showing in particular how civilians devise specific tactics to secure access to humanitarian

aid and resources (Utas, 2005; Malkki, 1996). This earlier anthropological work, however, did not engage specifically with communities' and individuals' nonviolent civilian agency to protect themselves from physical attack.

An article by Baines and Paddon (2012: 232) therefore was a major innovation in that it focused on a 'new conception of protection based on the strategies civilians adopt in settings of ongoing violence, where their efforts are often the first line of defence against armed groups'. The authors distinguish three civilian self-protection strategies, namely (a) appearing neutral, (b) avoidance, and (c) accommodation of armed actors, and argue that each of these is shaped by access to local knowledge and networks (Baines and Paddon 2012: 236). The research emphasised the importance of local knowledge, showing the evolving strategies of civilians in relation to changing behaviours and tactics by armed groups. A future task is to continue to further our understanding of how the different types of civilian strategies, including nonviolent and violent ones, work together and/or undermine each other in practice and which factors determine which strategies are being used (see Barter in this special issue).

Another way in which scholars have attempted to centre the agency of civilians in violent conflict is through the ideas of islands of peace or zones of peace (see also Macaspac in this special issue). The study of 'islands of peace', that is, spaces that have been able to broker local peace processes, is a strangely neglected subject (Allouche & Zadi Zadi, 2013). The idea of islands of peace does not follow a linear approach to conflict, but rather recognizes the different intensity of violence and whether and how it affects peacebuilding dynamics and processes. The concept of islands of peace attempts to encapsulate both peace as a process and practice constituted by the everyday acts of diverse individuals and communities, but also as a geographical and temporal space among which these dynamics take place. 'Islands of peace' can be defined as pockets within larger areas of conflict where civilian safety is maintained and where attempts are made to construct the foundations of a more positive peace. In this context, Hancock talks about 'zones of peace' to denote 'physical zones whose inhabitants are generally held to be inviolate against attack' (Hancock, 2017: 261; cf. Hancock and Mitchell, 2007). These physical zones are varied and can range from temporary zones created to deliver medical supplies during conflict, to safe zones in the midst of armed conflict created to shield civilians from attack, and to cantonment zones set up as a result of peace agreements.

The literature suggests a number of potential critical factors that contribute to this but tends to coalesce around three main dominant factors that influence local outcomes: the nature of inclusion and opportunity; the leadership and agency of people connected to those communities; and the availability of alternative and viable institutions. All of these are broad categories that link inclu-

sion, incentives, agency, leadership, and choice. The absence of systematic data in the interaction between these factors at the local level means that it is impossible to collate all the modalities of interaction, but we can hypothesise that these three groups of factors all influence the nature of the local alliances on the ground that can determine a peaceful outcome (Allouche & Jackson, 2019).

A central question that the existence of islands of peace and zones of peace raises is what keeps armed actors from violating the peace in those spaces, if it is not defended through violent means. This question is linked to wider attempts to understand the protection of civilians in war through concepts of restraint, which is another strand within (nonviolent) civilian agency in violent conflict scholarship. By the early 2010s, the shortcomings of earlier macro-studies on violent conflict led researchers to disaggregate data in more detail to study sub-national and microdynamics of violent conflict (Kalyvas 2008), and debates shifted to questions of variation in patterns of violence against civilians (Balcells and Stanton, 2021; Kalyvas and Straus, 2020). The core question is why some communities in areas of violent conflict suffer from violent attacks and massacres, while other, seemingly similar, communities do not (e.g., Kalyvas, 2006; Krause, 2018). Early works on this question covered civilian agency and nonviolence, but again followed a binary logic where one was just considered as the opposite of the other, leaving little room for agency.

A newer literature on the dynamics of restraint, by contrast, is showing that studying violence alone is insufficient to understand armed group behaviour without also studying restraint. This opens the potential of analysing the dynamics that lead to peace rather than conflict and what Straus (2012) calls the 'dynamics of restraint' (see also Allouche & Zadi Zadi, 2013). Strauss (2012: 344) defines factors of restraint as 'ideas, interactions, and institutions that provide incentives for leaders and/or citizens to abstain from or moderate the use of extensive violence against civilians'. McQuinn et al. (2021: 802) furthermore differentiate between '"effective restraint" – a deliberate decision to limit violence' and '"mechanical restraint", or confounders that are associated with reduced violence but do not reflect a desire to limit violence'.

A related literature is that on rebel governance emerging in situations of 'no peace, no war' where the overall conflict has reached a deadlock (Richards, 2005), or what McGovern (2011) has termed 'unsuccessful wars'. Rebel governance is articulated around the idea that coercion and violence are counterproductive to maintaining order over a longer time, thereby leading rebels to take into consideration local populations' demands (Arjona, 2014; Mampilly, 2017; Wood, 2003). This allows space for interactions between civilians and violent groups which can range from collusion to outright resistance on the side of the civilians (Allouche & Jackson, 2019: 86). This has led to further reflections

on the idea of peace in war zones and how these islands or zones of everyday peace emerge, persist, and/or grow in rebel governance spaces. As shown by Förster (2017: 109), 'the spatial articulation of the differences between peace and violence challenges conventional political theories', especially putting into question 'rational-choice models that would expect superior actors to conquer such pockets of peace' (see also Macaspac in this issue).

While the literature on restraint in war and rebel governance has focussed mainly on the side of the violent actors and their agency to not use violence in certain situations, another strand in the literature is more concerned with the question of strategies that civilians employ to influence violent actors through different nonviolent means. In this regard, the small body of works on unarmed civilian protection (UCP), often also termed protective accompaniment, is important but so far largely overlooked by other scholarship. UCP refers to the work of trained civilians – both international and national – who use proactive nonviolent strategies to protect other civilians and themselves from violence and create safer space for local efforts to build peace (Bliesemann de Guevara et al. 2021; Furnari, 2016). UCP includes a variety of activities that civilians undertake, including, but not limited to, protective accompaniment and presence, interpositioning, early warning early response, ceasefire monitoring, rumour control, and capacity development. UCP practitioners always describe the practice as context-specific, that is, it is adapted and developed by practitioners on the ground and by the accompanied communities themselves (Julian & Schweitzer, 2015).

The UCP community of practice has been growing over the last three decades, from its humble beginnings in Central America to a global community of organisations and groups that use strategic nonviolence to protect civilians. What is missing to better understand the potentials and limits of this practice, as Kauffmann and Janzen (in this special issue) argue, is a more systematic data collection on UCP that will allow for systematic and generalisable study of the effectiveness and effects of UCP and for more robust comparisons between armed and unarmed forms of peacekeeping and the protection of civilians. They suggest not least to make closer links between the literatures on UCP and nonviolence resistance (e.g., Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011), which like the literature on civilian-led peace movements promoting norms of peace, nonviolence, and 'cultures of peace' has some overlaps but cannot be conflated with UCP (García Durán, 2006; Hancock and Mitchell, 2007; Kaplan, 2013). Nonetheless, the overlaps between some of their strategies suggest that these related literatures should be able to speak to each other more closely and, through this conversation, push our understanding of nonviolent civilian agency in violent conflict forward.

Nonviolent civilian agency enacted

This special issue comprises five articles which aim to make different contributions to push and challenge the state-of-the-art understanding of civilian agency, how it is enacted in contexts of armed violence and conflict, with what effects, and what its nuances and limits are. The authors base their empirical insights on fieldwork in and examples from the Philippines, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the United States (US), different conflicts across Southeast Asia, and the experience and lessons learnt from an attempt at creating a global database on unarmed civilian peacekeeping (UCP). The contributions are not anchored in an overarching theoretical framework for the special issue, with each contribution setting out its own theoretical assumptions, propositions, and conceptual framework. They also do not share the same methodological parameters, with methodologies including both qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods ranging from ethnographic observation to key informant interviews and to systematic database creation. Rather, the articles assembled here have in common that they share a cross-cutting commitment to recognising, understanding, and nuancing – including in their limitations and challenges – both the agency of civilians and the power of nonviolence in violent conflict.

The first article, "Indigenous geopolitics: Creating indigenous spaces of protection and peace amid violent conflict", by Nerve Macaspac, contributes to debates about peace zones, islands of peace, and other spatial nonviolent strategies in armed conflict. Specifically, the author unpacks the agentive nonviolence of Indigenous actors through insights from a case study of the Kankana-ey indigenous peoples community of the municipality of Sagada in the Philippines, who have established a peace zone that rejects violence from both the Philippine state and non-state insurgents. Pushing the limits of the current state of the art, Macaspac develops a framework of 'Indigenous geopolitics' to capture how architectures of protection and peace amidst ongoing conflict, such as the Sagada peace zone and many similar projects by Indigenous and other marginalised communities in conflict zones around the world, undermine the logics of both states' and insurgents' claims to nation-wide control through the idea of a local-level sovereignty that rejects any overarching or competing projects of rule. Civilian agency here is understood as both social *and spatial or geopolitical* agency, which underpin the assertion of Indigenous sovereignty over the local peace zone. Upholding the peace zone amidst insurgency and counter-insurgency dynamics, Macaspac argues, is a process that requires the community's continuous geopolitical work in the form of a sustained collective refusal of both state and non-state violence, and the con-

stant assertion of the claim to Indigenous sovereignty in the space of the peace zone. Self-protecting Indigenous or marginalised communities like the Sagada peace zone are neither passive victims nor merely reacting to violence, but proactive in their attempt to shape the geopolitics of war and peace. By doing so, however, they do not only create safer space for their community; they also fundamentally put into question the logics that underpin the globalised image of modern statehood and state-based imaginaries of who can provide protection in conflict and build peace, and how. Seen in this light, the peace zone is not just a local protection mechanism; it is a lived bottom-up alternative of social and spatial organisation that challenges the dominant order. Beyond its immediate aims of unpacking the geopolitics and everyday work of peace zones, Macaspac's article also speaks to wider debates, such as the recognition and study of Indigenous and First Nations leadership in establishing their own protection mechanisms, and explorations of the historical roots of nonviolent self-protection practices that build on traditional cosmovision and praxis.[1]

In the second article featured in this special issue, "Breaking the culture of silence and women protection groups in North and South Kivu (Democratic Republic of Congo)", Jeremy Allouche, Sohela Nazneen, Mushi Mugumo, Eustache Kuliumbwa Lulego, and Irene Hamuli shed new light on the agency of women as conflict, peace, and protection actors. They do so through an in-depth case study of women's knowledge and practices of self-protection from gender-based violence in the context of protracted conflict in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The authors employ a nuanced understanding of women's agency, which differentiates between (short-term) tactical and (longer-term) strategic agency and accounts for both practices of resistance as well as practices favouring stability and continuity, in order to capture the subtle and everyday ways in which women's agency, especially in conservative contexts marked by entrenched gender norms, can unfold. They thereby push the boundaries of the current state of the art on civilian agency in violent conflict by unpacking this agency in a highly nuanced way around gender and intersectionality but without falling back into binary (in this case gendered) categories. The authors organise their empirical exploration of women's agency vis-a-vis gender-based violence in the eastern DRC around the notion of 'silence', which manifests in a conservative 'culture of silence' that limits individual women's agency, individualises their possibilities for self-protection responses, and makes silence also a strategic choice that can protect women from

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1 See, for instance, the research project "Ritualising Protection", which studies cultural and spiritual protection practices of the Nasa people in Colombia (https://www.ritualisingprotection.org).

the potential repercussions of denouncing violence in the family or community. The article also shows, however, that women's organisation in groups that advocate for women's rights, supported by local and/or international NGOs, can help break through cultures of silence by enhancing women's collective agency and visibility in their communities. Through nonviolent strategies such as knowledge-sharing about rights, alliance-building with men, informal networking with key official figures, or stakeholder support acquisition, this has enhanced women's agency to self-protect from gender-based violence. Yet, this collective approach has also experienced backlashes and has so far shown a limited ability to fundamentally change entrenched gender norms that enable and normalise gender-based violence in the first place. Through their nuanced conceptualisation of women's agency, which also conceptualises strategies such as avoidance as forms of active choice rather than victimisation, and the combination of these insights with the question of self-protection, the authors contribute a differentiated, non-normative tool to unpack women's room for different forms of nonviolent action in situations of protracted conflict and entrenched gender norms, and the diverse effects such action may have on the physical and structural violences they endure.

In the third article, "Credible messengers, formers, and anti-war veterans: Former fighters as resources for violence/war disruption", Molly Wallace pushes common understandings of civilian agency in war reflected in the current state of the art by showing how nonviolent civilian agency is also at times asserted from unexpected – namely (formerly) violent – places or actors. She thereby makes an important contribution to undoing the binary of armed actor/civilian, which may be much more blurred in practice than what this binary suggests (cf. Arias López et al., 2023). Wallace suggests that (former) armed individuals can disrupt violence in two fundamental ways. First, by refusing or ceasing to fight, including through desertion and defection, they diminish the fighting capacity of their armed group. Second, by then taking on active roles as activists against violence and war, these former armed actors may convince other armed individuals to stop acting violently and supporters among the wider public to withdraw their support for violence. Wallace analyses a range of examples from the US context, including the interventions of 'credible messengers' (former gang members) in the context of gangs' or cliques' street violence, of 'formers' in the context of extremist violence, and of anti-war veterans in the context of US war efforts. She finds that the mechanisms of violence disruption in each case are similar, including not least the central role of 'credible sources', that is, of former fighters in the reinterpretation of past violent activity and the remodelling of life around new communities, identities, and purposes. Yet, the analysis also shows that these types of

violence or war disruptors differ with regard to their societal acceptance: while disengagement from criminal gangs and extremist groups is celebrated, veterans' anti-war efforts are not. Wallace explains this with the deep militarism of US society, which hinders wider critical engagement with the US military and leads not least to very different policies regarding disengagement from gang or extremist violence, on the one hand, and state-organised violence, on the other. Wallace's contribution invites us to broaden our understanding of civilian agency to disrupt violence and war, by including former violent actors who are often dismissed as sources of nonviolent action, but whose specific status as former 'insiders' makes them particularly credible in questioning logics of violent masculinities, extremism, and militarism.

In the fourth contribution to this special issue, "The partisans: Civilian support and indirect violence", Shane Barter draws attention to some of the central limitations and complications of civilian agency amidst violent conflict by unpacking forms and effects of civilian partisanship that enhance the coercive power of armed groups (state or nonstate) and thereby indirectly contribute to higher levels of violence. Barter categorises different forms of partisan civilian action in war along a continuum from nonviolent action (e.g., refusing to share information) and neutral action (e.g., providing food, medicine, or shelter) to indirectly violent and finally violent action (e.g., the formation of village guards). Civilian support for violent groups that contributes indirectly to violence levels includes actions such as the provision of resources and intelligence as well as support in the recruitment of fighters or the procurement of weapons. Barter argues that the acknowledgement of civilians' potential roles in fuelling violence indirectly through their active partisan actions questions their dominant portrayal as merely 'victims' of, or 'neutral' actors in, violent conflict. At the same time, however, he cautions that civilians' partisanship does not undermine their fundamental status as civilians – a status often questioned by armed actors, leading to civilians' victimisation. By focussing and further unpacking different types of civilian partisan support for armed actors and resulting indirect violences, Barter's analysis pushes the state of the art by troubling accounts of civilian agency or nonviolence that fail to recognise complexity and complicity, and cautions scholars against a romanticisation of the role of civilians in war.

In the final contribution, "Expanding data on unarmed civilian peacekeeping", Mayeul Kauffmann and Randy Janzen zoom in on a particular form of nonviolent civilian agency in violent conflict: unarmed civilian peacekeeping (UCP). Noting the prevalence of qualitative, single-case research on UCP, and driven by the observation that compared to the systematic quantitative study of armed peacekeeping interventions there is a significant lack of similar ef-

forts to study nonviolent forms of protection, their article explores steps towards creating a rich database to document and study the state, development, effectiveness, and effects of UCP. First, Kauffmann and Janzen explore conventional (armed) peacekeeping data to highlight what types of data should be collected to make UCP comparable to the armed protection of civilians, and to inform future data collection methodologies on UCP. The authors then take stock of a previous attempt at systematically collecting data on UCP and its insightful but limited findings. They note that among the challenges that have contributed to existing data gaps is not least the lack of archiving among parts of the UCP community of practice, which differentiates UCP organisations from highly bureaucratised armed UN interventions. In the main part of the article, drawing on data on nonviolent campaigns and data collection good practice in other fields such as health and aviation, the authors then develop steps towards a rich, accessible, and useful future UCP database. Specifically, they recommend: to widen the inclusion criteria of what constitutes UCP; to address the problem of different categorisations of UCP methods by disaggregating UCP data semantically, temporally, and spatially, establishing a multi-lingual UCP terminology glossary, and collecting more data overall; and to ensure the security of sensitive UCP data (such as personnel or beneficiary data) through methods of pseudonymisation, data aggregation/degradation, and anonymous reporting. Taken together, Kauffmann and Janzen suggest that the proposed UCP database could help fill current gaps of systematic information on UCP and its efficacy, make nonviolent forms of peacekeeping and protection comparable to conventional armed forms of peacekeeping as well as to other forms of nonviolent action (such as civil resistance), and inform improvements and reforms in the UCP community of practice. More fundamentally, it would establish nonviolent forms of protection as a valuable object of study for peace, conflict, and security research, by establishing that it is indeed a widespread practice and by shedding statistical light on the contexts in and extents to which it is effective in achieving people's protection.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue open up new avenues for research, theorising, and data generation and collection, which we hope will inspire future studies of civilian agency and nonviolent action in situations of violent conflict. Currently, the binaries discussed in the first section of this introduction, and the silos of different (often disciplinary) debates that were revealed in the discussion of the state-of-the-art literatures, not only limit mainstream research in peace, conflict, and security studies, but also set limits for what studies interested in understanding civilian and nonviolent agency in violent conflict can achieve. The aim of future research in this area should

be to join the authors in this special issue in their endeavour to undo binaries and siloes, and to contribute new conceptual frameworks, empirical insights, and methodological innovation to the study of nonviolent civilian agency in violent conflict.

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