1

Introduction

Civilian Autonomy in Civil War

They've got me pissed with so much gosh-darn questioning
About what color my flag is, if I'm Conservative or Liberal.
They've got me fired-up with so much gosh-darn finding-out
About whether I'm an ELN-er, EPL-er, support the AUC or if I'm FARC.
They've got me worn-out with so much gosh-darn interrogating
About whether I've been opening my gate for the army and
giving them water from my well . . .

I'm a hard-working campesino, poor and very honorable,
I live happily but they've got me wound-up like a vine . . .
Well look misters, I'll answer you all,
I want this to be clear:
I ain't on nobody's side, I do what's right, not what's wrong . . .
So that's why I beg you, and ask you: questions – no more
Don't screw with me anymore!

–Colombian folk song, "El Campesino Embejucao"[1]
by Oscar Humberto Gómez

Me tienen arrecho con tanta juepuerca preguntadera
que qué color tiene mi bandera que si soy Godo o soy Liberal
Me tienen verraco con tanta juepuerca averiguadera
que si soy Eleno, Epelo o siquiera apoyo a las AUC o soy de las FARC
Me tienen mamao con tanta juepuerca interrogadera
que si yo a la tropa le abro la cerca y si le doy el agua de mi manantial

[1] Translated to English by the author. A *campesino* is a farmer or peasant. *Embejucao* is derivative of the Spanish word *bejuco,* or vine, and is taken to mean wound-up like a vine, enraged or worked-up. The ELN, EPL, and FARC are guerrilla groups. The AUC are right-wing paramilitaries.

> Yo soy campesino trabajador, pobre y muy honrao
> vivía muy alegre pero me tienen embejucao . . .
> Pues miren señores a todos ustedes yo les contesto
> y quero que quede muy claro esto:
> yo no soy de naide, hago el bien, no el mal . . .
> así que les ruego, suplico y pido: ¡ya no más preguntas,
> no me jodan más!

One day in the early 1970s in the village of La India in central Colombia, residents were warming up for a soccer match on a field that was not much more than a clearing in the forest. As one of the referees that day recalled, a ragtag group of guerrillas in *campesino* garb and boots appeared out of the jungle and asked if they could join.[2] Short on players with few people living in the area, the villagers welcomed them. It was not long before an army patrol arrived. None the wiser that there were guerrillas in the mix, the troops asked if they could also join the game and they all ended up playing a friendly match (of course, the villagers eventually won). At the end of the game, one group of "campesinos" said goodbye rather quickly and left through the jungle. For several years, the villagers continued to play the occasional game against the army, who remained none the wiser.

Historically, communities like La India have been intertwined with various armed actors with close, often benevolent relationships and information flows. This is possible because insurgents sometimes fit the mold of the idealized benevolent guerrilla hailed by classical theorists like Mao Zedong (1961) and Che Guevara (1961): noble, disciplined fighters defending the people and pursuing justice.[3] Governments, as counterinsurgents, are similarly advised to protect the population (Galula 1965). But this is not always the case. At some point in La India, things began to change. Conflict intensified and armed actors became more hostile and violent toward the civilian population.

There has been a similar turn of events in the rest of Colombia and in many other conflicts around the world. Beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, civil wars have been prevalent, claiming the lives of an estimated

[2] ATCC#1, La India, 10/2007. Interviews were conducted anonymously and are designated by community, number of participant, location, and date. In this study, "armed groups" or "armed actors" are terms used interchangeably to refer to any macro-level army in the armed conflict, including "leftist" guerrillas, "rightist" paramilitaries, or the public forces of the government (army, police, etc.). "Towns," "counties," and "municipios" are also used interchangeably to refer to Colombian localities. Interviewee names, some place names, and other potential identifying information have been changed to protect individuals.

[3] According to Guevara (1961, 39), "The peasant must always be helped technically, economically, morally, and culturally. The guerrilla fighter will be a sort of guiding angel who has fallen into the zone, helping the poor always and bothering the rich as little as possible in the first phases of the war." He continues, "The line should be soft and hard at the same time: soft and with a spontaneous cooperation for all those who honestly sympathize with the revolutionary movement; hard upon those who are attacking it outright, fomenting dissentions, or simply communicating important information to the enemy army" (81).

16.2 million people (Fearon and Laitin 2003). Indeed, most of the world's killings and human rights violations occur in conflict settings and most victims are noncombatants (Sivard 1993), with civilians comprising four out of every five of Colombia's war victims (GMH 2013). Rebels can be abusive (Weinstein 2006), states use mass violence (Valentino 2004), and, with changing conflict conditions, civilians come to face the predicament of the *campesino embejucao* of the song: caught in the crossfire, "*entre la espada y la pared*," or "between a sword and a wall." They can be stigmatized in the "fog of war" and accused of collaborating with the enemy (Kalyvas 2006). In Colombia, they must additionally deal with the problems of coca, youth recruitment, and displacement from their lands, among other maladies. And, like the *campesino embejucao*, most civilians facing less-than-benevolent armed groups just want to be left alone.[4] What are people in this predicament to do and what chances do they have? Are they helpless, inactive, and consigned to a fate of abuse, as many accounts describe?

I argue to the contrary that civilians are not necessarily passive or powerless. They are actors with agency whose ability to respond to the dangers of conflict derives from social cooperation. Villages with different social relations deal with increasing pressures and violence differently. This is illustrated by returning to the village of La India as the conflict worsened and contrasting its experience with that of the nearby village of San Tropel, just to the west over some low hills. In 1998, paramilitary forces that had by then arisen in the region brutally executed twelve woodcutters in San Tropel and dumped their bodies in the Carare River (El Tiempo 2009).[5] Just a short time later, in 2001, this same group was preparing to kill eleven residents of La India, but did not because a community organization that had been formed there to deal with the problems created by the conflict, the Peasant Workers Association (ATCC in Spanish), came to the civilians' defense and advocated on their behalf.[6] The eleven people lived. Though this is but a single episode, it is emblematic of many similar events in this community (I explore these communities in detail in Chapter 7).

This raises a puzzle: given similar pressures, why were residents of La India able to act but not those of San Tropel? And why were the people killed in San Tropel, but not in La India? More broadly, how common are these kinds of actions? How do they affect armed groups and how can we tell if they affect levels of violence? It is not obvious that unarmed civilians in civil wars can protect themselves against heavily armed combatants, and yet some civilians do. The attention of both journalists and scholars has concentrated on the many victims of civil conflicts – "If it bleeds, it leads." Yet in line with a

[4] Popkin (1979), Kriger (1992), and Kalyvas (2006) suggest that macro-actor goals are not civilians' primary concern. According to Nordstrom (1992) on Sri Lanka and Mozambique, civilians are often not even familiar with macro-actors' goals, "Civilians often had difficulty distinguishing sides, especially according to ideological considerations of just and unjust. Indeed, many of the victims of war – torn from comfort and community, family, and home, too often wounded or bereaved – do not know what the conflict is about or who the contenders are" (265).

[5] Heard of by ATCC#2, La India, 10/2007. [6] ATCC#3,4, La India, 10/2008.

corollary that "If it's nonviolent, it's silent," few accounts examine how the people who are not victims survive. Millions of people have been displaced from the countryside in Colombia, but many have been able to remain as well.

The topic of this book is how civilians can retain their autonomy, or self-rule, in the face of armed groups and protect themselves.[7] Civilians may flee violence or seek protection from an armed group, but these options can be dangerous, unavailable, or unappealing, since many would prefer to stay in their communities. Facing this dilemma, their alternative in autonomy is to actively avoid participating in the conflict between the contending armies to avoid its damaging effects and gain even a small degree of certainty in their daily lives.[8] However, in changing, complex environments and with but one life to live, following this course is difficult for most individual civilians. Even when many civilians might share such preferences and together be more effective in gaining protection, fear creates collective action problems in confronting combatants. Some residents may receive benefits from relationships with armed groups, or armed groups may seek to penetrate and control communities – to divide and rule. Social cooperation and organization is therefore the key to help civilians overcome fear, manage their own communities, and deal with armed group pressure in an enduring manner. The narrower question of autonomy and protection from armed groups therefore links to the broader question of what capacity civilians have for social cohesion and cooperation in war settings – the question of social capital (Putnam 1993; Buonanno et al. 2009 related to crime). While civilian strategies for autonomy can and do arise specifically as a response to deal with armed conflict, preexisting bases of social cooperation are a helpful catalyst.

In Colombia and other countries there are many notable examples of local organizations for autonomy and organizational actions for protection in wartime. A review of these cases reveals they are more common than one might believe. To give an initial sense of their breadth in Colombia, according to one survey, more than 500 local officials (mayors and governors) held dialogues

[7] The concept of autonomy has been previously introduced in UNDP 2003, Sandoval 2004, and Tarrow 2007. According to the UN report, "Autonomy of citizen movements vis-à-vis the armed organizations and indeed the State itself ... but not neutrality has allowed them to keep themselves apart from the armed confrontation. They have avoided taking sides in favor of one or the other band, but always show themselves to be on the side of the population. Since armed groups attempt to involve them in the conflict, they have claimed their right to survive. That way any initiative from a group is replicated in another, and any position is communicated equally to all. They have also earned themselves a degree of autonomy with respect to central government. As one activist put it, 'What's on the line are our lives, not the government's life.' Therefore they look for alternative ways of handling the conflict, beyond the desires and recipes of the national government. They know that they cannot sit around waiting to act until the government has organized its grandiose 'negotiations' with armed groups."

[8] I make no normative judgment about the righteousness of either participating in "liberation" struggles or defending the establishment, "la patria."

with armed groups during the peak years of conflict (El Tiempo 2001a).[9] To more precisely illustrate the prevalence of civilian autonomy organizations and actions, I classified community cases based on the criteria of being local and grassroots-based (i.e., at the community level), "apolitical," based on social cohesion and organization (not individual), and nonviolently seeking protection from violence (from one or more groups).[10] Across Colombia, more than fifty locations formally organized for self-protection from armed groups since the early 1990s.[11] Figure 1.1 shows a map of these civilian organizations by their *municipio*, or town. These cases are found in many regions of the country and vary according to types of strategies implemented and the number of people, villages, and areas involved.[12]

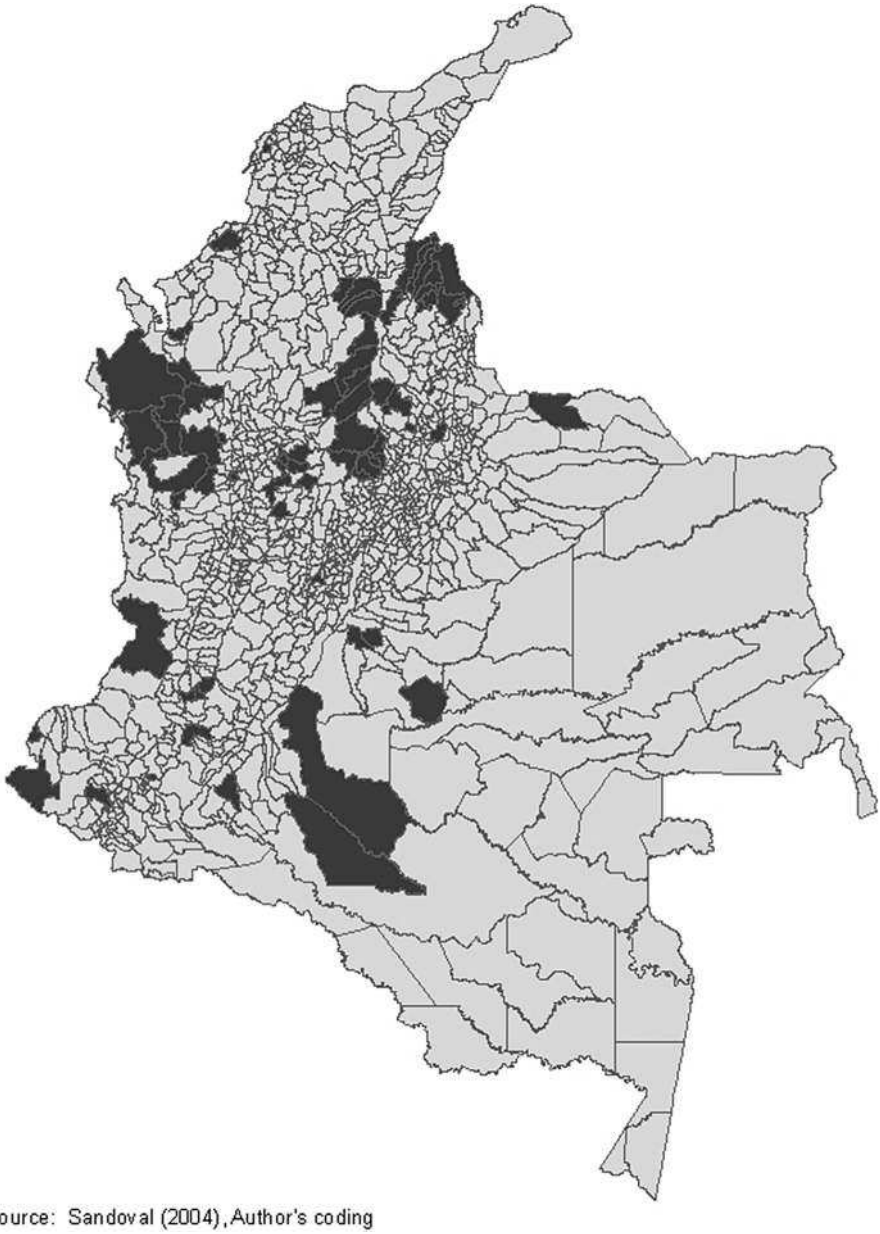
Civilian autonomy in conflict settings is also found more broadly around the world than might be expected. Figure 1.2 shows a map of cross-national protective actions by civilian organizations in conflict conditions that were classified

[9] However, few public officials wish to publicly admit to such dealings. Interactions varied from mere intimidation and conversations under pressure to communication, small-scale humanitarian accords, peace communities, constituent assemblies, and voting. As Gilberto Toro of the Federation of Municipios observed, "While the state is impotent in guaranteeing local governability [stopping abuses of the civilian population] we are going to have desperate mayors turning to new ideas."

[10] These cases may include idiosyncratic actions and social processes as well as formal organizations created to promote local peace. A case is considered "apolitical" if, in its beginnings, it does not have apparent, formal, sustained relationships with macro-political actors, such as the public forces or armed groups. However, some communities are eventually co-opted by or integrated with the state. Some but not all of these cases confront conflict environments with multiple macro-actors. The communities that are identified are not believed to have formal relationships with any macro-political actors, but from afar it is difficult to tell by which group(s) they may feel threatened. Inferences about the number of armed groups these communities face are found in Table 1.1.

[11] I classified cases from secondary sources through a broad and admittedly nonsystematic search since there is not usually standard language to describe these experiences (i.e., many more "silent" cases might exist). These codings are therefore not comprehensive and possibly omit many actions. In some cases the limited information and context available in the reporting also present challenges in assessing the nature of events and social cooperation, possibly producing classifications that are inaccurate. The resulting collection of cases are examples of collective actions but are *not* precise analyses of the effects of civilian strategies, which would require much more labor-intensive measurements – such as those found elsewhere in this text.

[12] While the autonomy movements do not encompass every village within each municipio where they are located, the number represents roughly 10 percent of municipios with the presence of at least one armed group at the peak of the conflict or about 20 percent of the smaller set of municipios that were affected by conflict for extended periods during the 1990s and 2000s. A number of these organizations are profiled in the United Nations Development Program's Good Practices website database, a catalog of over 250 community experiences intended to disseminate examples of and lessons from how different civil society actions and organizations have "overcome" the armed conflict. Some of these are user-submitted. Though the database is still surely missing many experiences and movements, 51 of these profiles explicitly mention the aim of "autonomy." Greater detail on the diversity of actions taken by communities is contained in the history and case study chapters ahead.



Source: Sandoval (2004), Author's coding

FIGURE 1.1 Map of formal civilian autonomy organizations in Colombia

similarly to the Colombian cases (Table 1.1 at the end of this chapter contains further details on these examples).[13] These fourteen countries with civilian

[13] Many but not all of the countries where these cases are found fit the accepted national level definition of civil war of at least 100 annual battle deaths for each party to a conflict and at least

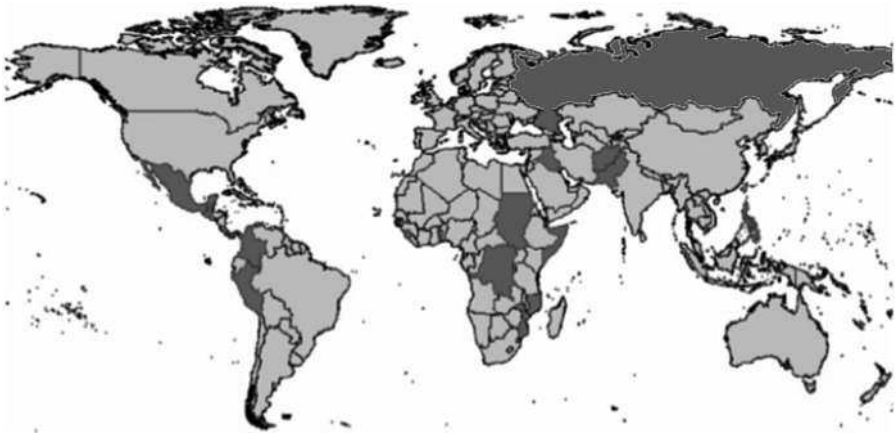


FIGURE 1.2 Map of civilian autonomy in civil war around the world.
Source: Author's coding.

autonomy actions comprise around one-quarter of countries that experienced civil wars since 1980 (including only some communities from these countries). Instances of protective actions and organizations are found in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. In some countries, there are only a few press reports on one or two isolated communities, such as the profile of a single village leader in Dagestan, Russia, who negotiated a path for his community between Russian counterinsurgents and Islamist militants (Greene 2010). In other countries, there are cases that are more deeply profiled in the budding anthropological literature on this topic and involve many communities. Studies of the Peace Zones in the Philippines identify at least ninety-one communities that organized with the help of the Catholic Church to opt out of the conflicts between the Philippine military and communist and Muslim rebel groups (Santos 2005, Hancock and Mitchell 2007). There are cases as diverse as the religiously motivated and superstition-based Naprama movement and Jehovah's Witness communities in Mozambique (Wilson 1992) as well as strategies of avoidance as found in Guatemala's Communities of Populations in Resistance (CPRs, Falla 1994).

Examples of armed resistance for autonomy are also included in Table 1.1, although they are not the emphasis of this study.[14] Cases of local armed

1,000 total annual battle deaths among all sides (Fearon and Laitin 2003). Cases in countries falling short of this standard were included because their locales still suffered what would reasonably be considered civil war conditions and contestation.

[14] There are additional cases of apparent armed resistance in Colombia and other countries but these are excluded because their origins are not entirely bottom-up. Rather, they are political and "pro-government militias" allied with the state. Examples from Colombia in this category include the Convivir self-defense forces, the village-based peasant soldiers program (*soldados campesinos*), and paramilitary groups.

resistance range from the Rondas Campesinas studied by Starn (1999) and Fumerton (2001) in different regions of Peru to Iraq's Anbar awakening of Sunni tribes (at least in their beginnings) to Muana's (1997) description of the origins of the Civilian Defense Forces (CDF) in Sierra Leone. In Chapter 9, I more closely review instances of civilian autonomy from the conflicts in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Syria.

Many of these cases are highly organized and have been publicized, but there may also be more subtle, underreported kinds of civilian social cooperation and strategies. Given this variety, it can be hard to tell whether and which social organizations and collective strategies explain differences in resilience to violence across communities. This task is further complicated by possible reverse causality and selection biases since, if conflict harms social cooperation, then social relations and civilian strategies may be solely derivative of the powerful armed groups, with no independent success at suppressing violence. Any observed existence of civilian collective action or impact would then be epiphenomenal, or merely due to existing in peaceful places. Alternatively, many civilian self-protection processes largely exist in stateless, conflict-ridden areas, which could also make them more predisposed to suffer violence. Given these research challenges, I address three interrelated research questions:

(1) Where and why do local social organizations arise?
(2) What strategies do such organizations permit communities to use to deal with civil war violence?
(3) Why and under what conditions do armed groups change their behavior toward (organized) civilians?

To study the question of civilian autonomy in civil war, I use multiple social science methods, from statistical tests to interviews and case studies from the Colombian conflict. This process involves the careful construction of counterfactual scenarios of what would have happened, what the armed groups would have done, had civilians not used a given strategy or taken a given action. I find that some kinds of civilian social arrangements, organizations, and strategies can reduce civil war violence, suggesting that civilian autonomy occurs more broadly than originally believed. At the same time, and with reason, there are also limitations on where civilian organizational processes succeed – they are not a panacea. By exploring these conditions, I find that, along with successes, communities experience challenges and failures. While some organizational processes appear to affect certain kinds of violence and conflict dynamics, organizations are also more likely to buckle under extreme levels of combat and overall have few discernable effects on the intensity of the fighting between belligerents themselves.

In the rest of the chapter, I first present my main argument about the importance of civilians' social capital, organizations, and strategies for limiting civil war violence and delimit its scope. I also briefly summarize the research findings in support of this argument. I then situate this study in existing

literatures and indicate how they have so far only obliquely addressed the questions surrounding civilian autonomy. I then preview the research design and methods. Lastly, I preview the chapters to come.

THE ARGUMENT

My main argument is that there are conditions where civilians can use social processes to reduce violence perpetrated against them. The field of conflict resolution usually pays most attention to state actors, nonstate armed groups, and national-level peace negotiations. By contrast, this argument is grounded in civil society (sometimes referred to as "Track II") in considering why civilian bystanders succeed or fail in organizing opposition to state oppression or to a potentially harmful insurgent movement. Since armed actor coercion of (and violence against) civilians has been theorized to stem from divisions within civilian communities (Kalyvas 2006), I argue that social cohesion affords civilians greater chances to overcome fear, break the "law of silence" and revive communication, and implement collective strategies for protection.

In situations where communities face multiple armed actors or even a single abusive group, compliance and alliance do not guarantee protection. It is here that cohesion and collective strategies can help communities achieve autonomy, or maintain democratic decision-making power over outcomes *for* the community *within* the community, without influence from outside armed groups.[15] Violence can be reduced through *institutional* solutions to avoid participation in the conflict, manage the internal order of communities, limit the inroads of armed groups, and demand accountability from these groups.

With three outcomes to explain in this book, I develop a three-part "civilian autonomy theory" that links civilian organizations to strategies and then to security. First, variation in the social and demographic landscape and technical assistance from external actors (be they the government, churches, or NGOs) propels some communities to organize more easily than others. Second, cohesive, organized communities can make collective decisions about how to best deal with the various dangers of civil war conflict. Although civilians may commonly align with dominant armed groups or displace, in addition to these standard strategies, I pay special attention to strategies to retain autonomy in the midst of multiple armed groups. These can include what can be termed "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985) for conflict settings to deal with conflicts and divisions within civilian communities as well as "weapons of the *not-so-weak*," such as overt protest and actions by nonviolent community guards. The selection of strategies is shaped by an interaction between civilian

[15] These arguments were first published as my doctoral dissertation (Kaplan 2010). My main interest and assumption is that civilian responses to violence are usually instrumental, intentional, and with strategic forethought. However, they can certainly also be emotional, cathartic processes or be born out of frustration.

preferences, social cohesion, and the past and prospective threat environment, and some strategies are more assertive and thus potentially more effective than others. Third, the strength of civilian organization, selected strategies, and armed group incentives jointly determine substantive outcomes such as levels of violence. In sum, it is the unity of civilian centrists that helps impede and isolate violent "extremists." This theory is stated in general terms to pertain both to the case of Colombia and be adapted to explain patterns in other conflicts.

A main task of this theorizing about autonomy is to specify civilian mechanisms that generate protection. I show how different civilian actions reduce violence by affecting armed actors' behavior, capabilities, or ways of thinking. I take a moment here to foreshadow the strategies and mechanisms that I identified through reading and fieldwork and elaborate on them in greater depth in Chapter 2.[16] The multiple kinds of violent threats civilians face call for multiple solutions. Subject to the constraints of available ideas and imperfect information about levels of danger, civilians may thus select different kinds of autonomy strategies in different places as they organize and adapt responses to different types of violence.

These autonomy mechanisms can be grouped according to their level of formalization and depth of cooperation. First, there are cohesion and solidarity mechanisms, which more resemble ad hoc coordination in that some are less premeditated or enduring. These can include preexisting social harmony, which means fewer conflicts among neighbors to exploit, or the common knowledge among residents that allows them to collectively and spontaneously protest aggression and resist armed groups' attempts at domination.

Second, there are formal organizations and mechanisms that are based on deep and sustained cooperation and intentionally oriented for protection. Civilians can actively promote ideational norms among residents against aiding armed actors (a so-called culture of peace), develop local conflict resolution processes (so civilians do not seek policing by outside actors), develop early warning systems to avoid combat, dialogue with armed groups and investigate suspected enemy collaborators for them, and link with external nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international governmental organizations (IGOs) to "go public" to protest aggression and shame armed actors. As one man told me in reference to these kinds of strategies, "Creating peace is an everyday process."[17] Some strategies are more contentious toward armed actors than others, and some formally organized communities that use these

[16] The terms "strategy" and "mechanism" are interchangeably used to convey processes that affect violence. However, a mechanism is a causal process whereas a strategy is a plan that is chosen by an agent. Some mechanisms that affect violence, such as preexisting cooperation, are not strategies that civilian agents can actively choose, but are still mechanisms that affect armed group violence.

[17] ATCC#3, La India, 10/2007.