

PART 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The importance of R2P and POC

Over the second half of the Twentieth Century, civilians increasingly have become the predominant victims of armed conflicts and mass violence. Civilians have not merely been caught in the crossfire, but in the crosshairs of combatants. The slaughter of civilian populations in civil wars across the globe has emerged as a settled aim of armed actors – whether as a strategic mechanism to obtain further war objectives, or as a war objective in itself.

Against this rising targeting of non-combatants are the twin international protection principles of the *Responsibility to Protect* (R2P) and the *Protection of Civilians* (POC) in *Armed Conflict*. Both R2P and POC are concerned with protecting vulnerable persons from mass violence, but they have different foci and are the products of different processes in the international system. The principles are also sometimes confused by policy makers and practitioners. POC in armed conflict consists in the first instance of the constraints on the methods and means of war, in particular as enshrined in the 1949 Geneva Conventions (and its Additional Protocols of 1977) which clearly distinguish the rights and responsibilities of combatants and non-combatants and mitigate against harm to the civilian population. In contrast, R2P takes as its focus atrocity crimes – the large-scale and systematic use of violence against populations, whether performed in times of war or peace, whether performed by regular or irregular armed actors, and whether those actors are State, non-state or state-supported. As POC was formed in response to the horrors of World War II, the need for R2P emerged in the crucible of Rwanda, Srebrenica, Kosovo, and East Timor. While their immediate areas of concern are thus distinct, there is wide scope for overlap. R2P’s atrocity crimes can both *emerge out of* POC’s

armed conflicts, and can *precipitate* such conflicts. The two principles have shared legal frameworks, overlapping institutional structures and face similar operational challenges.

POC pre-dates R2P, but since the affirmation of R2P in the WSOD of 2005, the question of the relationship between the two principles has arisen. If protection is to be enhanced, then clarity is required on the normative, institutional and operational dimensions of the twin principles. Policy makers and practitioners need to know their distinct responsibilities under R2P and POC, when those responsibilities converge and diverge, and how they interact with the R2P and POC agendas of other protection actors. The history of peacekeeping operations over the last decade is one context where ambiguity in the understanding of civilian protection mandates has cost lives. On the other side of the coin, the agendas of R2P and POC are controversial in several applications. Again, clarity is necessary in order for international stakeholders to predict whether specific situations will be approached by protection actors in an R2P or POC register, and how the situation can shift from one to the other, or envelope both, as occurred recently in Libya in 2011.⁴

1.2 The purpose of the Policy Guide

This Policy Guide seeks to enhance the ability of policy makers and practitioners – in governments, regional and international organizations, and civil society – in strengthening their efforts to protect vulnerable populations from conflict-related grave harm and mass atrocity crimes. The Guide clarifies and compares the twin principles of R2P and POC in their normative, institutional and operational dimensions, distinguishes the principles’ different actors and methods, and specifies the situations when the two principles converge for specific actors and organizations.

4 See text box below *R2P and POC Convergence and Controversy: Libya in 2011* in §2.1.c.