Particularized Preferences for Civilian Protection? A Survey Experiment

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Even as the protection of civilians becomes a widely held norm, there is substantial variation in public support for humanitarian policy efforts. We use a survey experiment in Sweden to gain insights into this puzzle. Our survey confirms that citizens generally support military, but particularly non-military, means of civilian protection. Yet, we also find that support is partly particularized. Specifying that civilians may have ties to extremist groups (as victims or supporters) reduces support for proposals to provide humanitarian aid, contribute to UN observer missions and accept refugees. We trace this reduced support to lower moral obligation and higher threat perceptions. In contrast to expectations, respondents do not prioritize the protection of co-nationals, or women and children. Manipulation checks suggest the explanation that perceptions of who constitutes a civilian are subjective. Our findings provide insights into the domestic political determinants of atrocity prevention abroad.

Incluso cuando la protección de los civiles se convierte en una norma generalmente aceptada, existe una variación sustancial en el apoyo público a los esfuerzos de política humanitaria. Utilizamos un experimento de encuesta llevado a cabo en Suecia con el fin de comprender mejor este enigma. Nuestra encuesta confirma que los ciudadanos, en general, apoyan los medios militares de protección civil, pero que apoyan en mayor medida aquellos medios de carácter no militar. Sin embargo, también encontramos que este apoyo está parcialmente particularizado. El hecho de especificar que los civiles puedan tener vínculos con grupos extremistas (ya sea como víctimas o como simpatizantes) reduce el apoyo a las propuestas para brindar ayuda humanitaria, para contribuir a las misiones de observación de la ONU y para aceptar refugiados. Atribuimos este menor apoyo a la existencia de una menor obligación moral y de una mayor percepción de amenaza. Contrariamente a lo esperado, los encuestados no dan prioridad a la protección de sus compatriotas, ni de las mujeres y los niños. Los controles de manipulación sugieren como explicación para esto que las percepciones sobre quién es realmente un civil son subjetivas. Nuestros hallazgos proporcionan información sobre los determinantes políticos internos en materia de prevención de atrocidades en el extranjero.

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Même si la protection des civils est une norme de plus en plus respectée, les efforts politiques humanitaires reçoivent un soutien très inégal de la part des populations. Nous utilisons une expérience de sondage en Suède pour mieux comprendre cette énigme. Notre sondage confirme que les citoyens sont généralement favorables aux modes de protection militaires des civils, mais plus souvent aux modes non militaires. Pourtant, nous constatons aussi que le soutien est en partie discriminé. En précisant que les civils peuvent avoir des liens avec des groupes extrémistes (comme victimes ou partisans), on observe une réduction du soutien aux propositions d’aide humanitaire, de missions d’observation de l’ONU et d’accueil de réfugiés. Nous relions cette diminution du soutien à un affaiblissement de l’obligation morale et une accentuation des menaces perçues. Contrairement aux attentes, les personnes interrogées n’accordent pas la priorité aux autres ressortissants, ou aux femmes et enfants. Pour l’expliquer, la perception de la définition d’un civil serait subjective, selon des tests de manipulation. Nos conclusions renseignent les déterminants politiques nationaux de la prévention des atrocités commis à l’étranger.

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**Introduction**

The war in Syria has led to one of the worst humanitarian crises of our time. Yet, international responses to protect civilians have been limited. This is difficult to explain given the development of strong norms such as “the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)” and the “Protection of Civilians (POC)” (e.g., Finnemore 2004; Bellamy 2009; Hunt 2019; Rhoads and Welsh 2019). On the international level, the entrenchment of these norms coincides with an increase in humanitarian interventions—interventions carried out with the aim to protect civilians. On the individual level, decades of survey research shows that even though domestic support may vary with partisanship and ideology (Hildebrandt et al. 2013), individuals are broadly supportive of humanitarian interventions (e.g., Jentleson and Britton 1998; Eichenberg 2005). This support also rests on a sense of moral obligation consistent with civilian protection norms (e.g., Kreps and Maxey 2018; Wallace 2019). Given these general patterns, it is surprising that we have not seen stronger public pressure to take action to protect civilians.

In this paper, we make two contributions to make sense of deviations from the expectations that come from international norms and public support for the POC. First, we examine public support for civilian protection broadly defined, including military and nonmilitary forms of protection. We note that prior opinion research has primarily measured support for state-led military humanitarian intervention, which makes it difficult to separate support for the use of military force from support for protecting civilians through other means. People may be supportive of doing something but perceive some types of action to be less effective toward that end (e.g., Davies and Johns 2016). Second, we empirically assess whether individuals express particularized preferences for civilian protection. We draw on the concept of “particularised protection” in UN peacekeeping (Shesterinina and Job 2016) and its implications for the prioritization of “particularly vulnerable groups” (Carpenter 2005) and group-based biases influencing public support for foreign policy (Boettcher 2004; Grillo and Pupcenoks 2017). We thus contribute to the literature that explores conditions for individual preferences for civilian protection.

For our empirical strategy, we use a population-based survey with a vignette experiment. We conducted our survey in Sweden: a country with a history of supporting human rights and providing protection to civilians in foreign conflicts (Doeser 2014). Respondents read a vignette describing the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria and were then asked their support for several proposed actions Sweden could
take to protect civilians. The proposals span humanitarian aid, military and non-military contributions to UN peacekeeping, and accepting refugees; allowing us to measure support for various forms of civilian protection. By varying the identity characteristics of the civilians in need of protection across treatment groups, we empirically test whether support is particularized along identity lines. If such biases exist, it could be one factor that accounts for the low public support for action in Syria.

In line with civilian protection norms, we find that individuals are broadly supportive of a variety of proposals to protect civilians in humanitarian crises. In a close comparison of military and non-military forms of protection, we find that respondents prefer the latter. We also find some support that civilian protection is conditional. In line with our expectations, our results show that when civilians are described as possibly having ties to extremist groups (as victims or supporters) support for protection efforts is lower. Using causal mediation analysis, we trace reduced support to a lower sense of moral obligation and increased threat perceptions. However, we do not observe any effect from informing respondents that there were women and children or Swedish citizens among those in need of protection. Examining the results of manipulation checks, we find some explanation for these null results: respondents inferred that civilians described as Swedish citizens were supporters of the Islamic State (IS), an extremist group. This is a plausible inference, given that IS recruited foreign fighters, among them Swedish citizens. Further, respondents did not seem to perceive women and children as particularly vulnerable—as civilians or victims. This could either be due to the nature of the conflict in Syria or a consequence of gender equality in Sweden making the gendered protection norm less pronounced. Qualitatively, this demonstrates that identity characteristics do matter, but also that perceptions of who constitutes a civilian or a victim are highly subjective.

In sum, we shed light on the complex manner in which civilian protection norms manifest in the public and highlight important variations in public support for civilian protection. Understanding the variation is critical: in democracies especially, public support is fundamental for generating the political will to respond to humanitarian crises and mass atrocities abroad.

**Civilian Protection Norms**

Many scholars have associated the increasing attention to humanitarian interventions globally since the end of the Cold War with a changing normative context: a growing consensus around the imperative to protect civilians suffering from conflict-related violence (cf., Finnemore 1996; Thakur and Weiss 2009; Bellamy and Williams 2011; Hunt 2019). This is most visible in the co-evolution of two specific norms: R2P and POC (Hunt 2019; Rhoads and Welsh 2019). We will refer to “civilian protection norms” more broadly here, understood as the collection of norms and normative principles related to the idea that the international community has an obligation to offer protection to civilians suffering from harm.

Fundamentally, civilian protection norms provide a basis for third-party intervention and protection efforts in the context of armed conflict and mass atrocities. First, they invoke the responsibility of international actors to employ various instruments to protect civilian populations. R2P stipulates the responsibility of third parties to intervene expeditiously, using military force if necessary. However, importantly, the idea of R2P has also broadened the scope of protection efforts beyond military force to include preventative measures, diplomacy, judicial measures, economic measures, peacekeeping operations, and capacity-building (Bellamy 2009, 4). Similarly, POC mandates entail authorizing the use of force to protect civilians from physical violence, but the concept of POC reflects a broader approach to protecting civilians, for example, by enhancing compliance with international hu-
manitarian law, ensuring humanitarian access, and tackling impunity (Hunt 2019, 634–5).

Second, civilian protection norms establish a shared understanding that all civilians warrant protection. The concept of POC within the UN relates specifically to civilians, including specific types of non-combatants such as humanitarians, health workers and journalists (Hunt 2019, 634). Further, the universality of human rights—the idea that all people have the right to freedom from violence and human rights abuses, no matter their race, ethnicity, or other identity attributes—is central to R2P (Bellamy 2009, 19; Murray 2012, 68–9). In particular, R2P extends to internally displaced persons (IDPs), who had previously been outside the reach of the international community when sovereignty was viewed as a barrier to international involvement (Bellamy 2009, 22). As such, civilian protection norms can be seen as indicative of a more general normative trend over time, toward the inclusion of civilians of all backgrounds under the rubric of protection (Finnemore 1996; Grillo and Pupcenoks 2017).

Given civilian protection norms, we should thus expect to see an increased willingness to intervene when civilians are being harmed. Studies confirm that atrocities at least partly increase the likelihood of the UN taking action in the form of peacekeeping or more coercive measures (e.g., Hultman 2013; Binder 2015). However, agreement in the Security Council does not necessarily translate into public support for interventions to protect civilians, and R2P is still controversial (Crossley 2018). Moreover, country-level support for R2P is influenced by domestic norms (Negrón-Gonzales and Contarino 2014). Therefore, we move to the literature on public opinion.

**Public Opinion and Humanitarian Intervention**

Much of what we know about public opinion on intervention in humanitarian crises comes from studies of American public opinion. A common starting point in reviews of previous research is Jentleson’s characterization of the American public as “pretty prudent”: opinion on the use of military force abroad depends on the principal policy objective of the intervention (Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1998; Eichenberg 2005). Studying public opinion of major US military interventions during 1980–2005, Eichenberg (2005) found humanitarian intervention (providing emergency relief in the context of a humanitarian crisis) to be one of the most favored reasons for the use of military force abroad.

Why should the public be supportive of humanitarian intervention? Given that no obvious national interest is at stake, support for humanitarian intervention requires a normative motivation (Finnemore 1996). Normative considerations and moral mechanisms are often viewed in juxtaposition to instrumental motivations—such as perceptions of costs, risks, security threats, and strategic consequences.

To date, the balance of evidence from public opinion surveys primarily points to moral mechanisms. Eichenberg (2005) and Jentleson and Britton (1998) found that the objective of protecting civilians outweighed other considerations such as risk, casualties, multilateral participation and security interests. Through a series of survey experiments with US samples, Kreps and Maxey (2018) find that support for humanitarian intervention rests on the perception that the United States has a “moral obligation” to intervene to protect civilians; perceptions of costs and strategic consequences were not important. Tomz and Weeks (2020) find altered perceptions of morality to be the most important driver of support for military intervention among US survey respondents, followed by threat perceptions. Drawing on surveys of the British public, Davies and Johns (2016) find that individuals perceive humanitarian interventions as ethical. Maxey (2020) provides suggestive evidence: mobilizing public support for security-driven military interventions is enabled by humanitarian narratives.
The conclusion we draw from existing studies is that support for humanitarian intervention is often grounded in a sense of moral obligation. While this does not preclude the importance of other considerations, such as the prospect of success, it does point to the relevance of normative principles.

However, previous research tends to equate humanitarian intervention with the use of military force. Many definitions are restricted to state-led interventions using military means (e.g., Boettcher 2004, 332; Kreps and Maxey 2018, 1814). Even studies that conceptualize humanitarian intervention as including non-military means empirically measure support for the use of military force, with the goal of protecting civilians (e.g., Jentleson and Britton 1998; Eichenberg 2005, 399–400). The problem in our view is that individuals may be supportive of interventions for the purpose of protecting civilians, but still disagree with the use of military force abroad. Indeed, Davies and Johns (2016) find that although individuals think humanitarian interventions are morally justifiable, they question their efficacy. People are likely to have quite varying beliefs about efficacy, as a result of limited public knowledge about the impact of foreign policy instruments. By differentiating between different measures, we acknowledge that people may support the idea of intervention due to moral obligation and at the same time have doubts about the efficacy of some forms of intervention. Public support for military intervention specifically may also depend on the foreign policy tradition of the state. For example, while unilateral military intervention is a realistic alternative for the United States, it is not for a smaller country like Sweden. Instead, people may support multilateral action and non-military options. These varying preferences, however, have largely gone unmeasured in previous research.¹

### Particularized Preferences for Protection

Another possible explanation for variations in public support for civilian protection is that while people may agree with civilian protection norms in principle, they hold particularized preferences in terms of who they perceive as more or less deserving of protection.

Prior research points out that humanitarian actions tend to be biased toward certain populations and subgroups (Finnemore 1996; Murray 2012; Shesterinina and Job 2016). During the 19th century, humanitarian interventions were aimed at protecting either interveners’ own nationals or other in-groups such as fellow Christians (Finnemore 1996). Some have argued that US interventions have been racially biased; the United States was willing to intervene on behalf of white Kosovar Albanians but not on behalf of black Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda (Boettcher 2004).

Within the context of peacekeeping, Shesterinina and Job (2016) conceptualize a related phenomenon: “particularised protection.” Analyzing several UN peacekeeping missions, the authors find that mandates are adjusted over time to provide direct protection to specific population subgroups: nationals of intervening states, UN personnel, state officials, humanitarian aid workers, and journalists. The consequence, they argue, is that the majority of civilian populations effectively receive little protection.

Other research suggests the existence of a gendered protection norm. Studying the rhetoric used by transnational humanitarian networks in advocating for the protection of war-affected civilians, Carpenter (2005) suggests that women and children are viewed as “particularly vulnerable groups” and are prioritized for protection. The UN Security Council is more likely to take action in response to sexual

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¹One of the few studies that explores support for peacekeeping shows that American public support for peacekeeping for humanitarian purposes is high (Bark 1999) but does not compare that to other measures. Lyon and Malone (2010) compare support for peacekeeping in the United States and ten European countries to support for military action for other policy goals. However, they do not evaluate support for different responses for the purpose of protecting civilians.
violence, which is often assumed to target women (Hultman and Johansson 2017; Benson and Gizelis 2020). Carpenter (2005) argues that this contradicts the principle that *civilians* (non-combatants) are the population who warrant protection. Given the nature of many conflicts today, the prioritization of women and children can end up including some combatants (adult female combatants) while excluding some non-combatants (adult civilian men) from protection (see also Bond and Sherret 2012).

In the literature on public opinion and humanitarian intervention, there is relatively little prior research on whether individuals exhibit particularized preferences for protection. Some evidence of racial, religious and gender bias has been found in studies with US samples. Grillo and Pupcenoks (2017) find that Americans are more willing to support a military humanitarian intervention in the Syrian civil war when the affected civilians are described as Christian, compared to Muslims. The authors also find that priming respondents to consider the suffering of women and children increases support for military humanitarian intervention, but only among female survey respondents. Similarly, Agerberg and Kreft (2022) find that Americans are more supportive of intervention when women, compared to civilians in general, are victims of torture. In a survey experiment with a US student sample, Boettcher (2004, 346) finds indicative evidence that the “race/ethnicity/religion” of an endangered population affects support for military intervention in humanitarian crises.

Outside the literature on humanitarian intervention, identity-based biases have been found in studies of public tolerance of human rights violations (e.g., Mondak and Hurwitz 2012; Piazza 2015; Conrad et al. 2018; Carriere et al. 2019; Hatz 2021). A general insight is that individuals are more tolerant of human rights abuses directed toward members of out-groups; specifically, groups that are perceived as threatening, disruptive, or violent are those who are considered legitimate targets of civil and human rights abuses. For example, several studies conducted with US samples have found that individuals are more permissive of human rights abuses directed at members of extremist groups, insurgent groups, Arabs, and Muslims (Piazza 2015; Conrad et al. 2018; Wallace 2013). Similar results have also been found with samples of Israeli Jews (Shamir and Sagiv-Schifter 2006; Lupu and Wallace 2019), Indians and Argentinians (Lupu and Wallace 2019), Germans (Asbrock and Fritsche 2013), and Swedes (Lindén et al. 2018).

Naturally, there is a tension between the argument that civilian protection norms motivate support for civilian protection and the argument that people may prioritize the protection of certain population subgroups. The universality of human rights and the principle of civilian immunity are central to both R2P and POC, so particularized protection and the prioritization of particularly vulnerable groups seem to contradict the core value that all civilians warrant protection. Yet, the very definition of “civilian” is complex and perhaps subjective considering the nature of many conflicts and humanitarian crises today, in which insurgent or extremist groups are closely intertwined with civilian populations. Ultimately, particularized preferences may be defined as a bias toward protecting subgroups perceived as civilians—as innocent, victimized, and vulnerable—while excluding subgroups perceived as culpable or threatening.

Drawing on our notion of particularized preferences for protection, we expect that support for civilian protection varies according to the identity characteristics of the civilians in need of protection. Based on the discussion above, we identify three such relevant characteristics.

First, we expect that individuals are more supportive of protection proposals aiming to protect citizens of their own country. This could be due to in-group favoritism or due to an assumption that co-nationals in a humanitarian crisis abroad are civilians.
H1: Individuals are more supportive of civilian protection including the protection of citizens of their own country.

Second, we expect individuals to be more supportive of protection proposals aiming to protect women and children, since these are likely to be perceived as “particularly vulnerable groups.”

H2: Individuals are more supportive of civilian protection including the protection of women and children.

Third, we expect individuals to become less supportive of protecting civilians who have ties to armed extremist groups; these are likely to be perceived as threatening or culpable.

H3: Individuals are less supportive of civilian protection including the protection of civilians affiliated with extremist groups.

With regard to each of our hypotheses, our underlying expectation is that identity characteristics serve as cues that allow individuals to update their perceptions of the extent to which the civilians in question are innocent, victimized, vulnerable, and deserving of protection. Yet, identity characteristics may be imperfect cues. For example, we have noted that the assumption that women and children are victims of conflict is not universal; meaning that this cue may not always increase perceptions of vulnerability. In a similar vein, the affiliation with an extremist group could signal guilt and threat—in the case of civilians being voluntary and active supporters—or innocence and vulnerability—in the case of coerced recruitment of civilians. In our empirical analysis, we will probe our implicit assumptions regarding how identity cues map onto perceptions.

Research Design

To test our hypotheses, we use a population-based survey experiment: an experiment within a survey of a representative population sample (Mutz 2011). This method offers the advantage of maximizing the potential for both internal and external validity. As in a traditional experiment, random assignment in a survey experiment allows for the estimation of treatment effects in isolation from pre-existing differences across survey respondents. Additionally, by employing a representative population sample, the results of the experiment can be generalized to the larger population.

We conducted the survey in Sweden, a country where civilian protection norms are internalized in foreign policy. Sweden has a strong identity of internationalism and commitment to global justice (Bergman Rosamond 2016). Yet, even in Sweden, there is variation in public support for civilian protection, providing a plausible setting for our investigation of “particularised preferences.” A few recent studies provide interesting comparisons of public attitudes in Sweden to other Western states. Swedes have more positive attitudes toward refugees compared to people in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands (Coninck 2020). Support for humanitarian aid is slightly higher in Sweden as compared to the United States but lower than in the United Kingdom (Dumitrescu and Bucy 2021). Support for military intervention in response to widespread violence is similar in Sweden as compared to the United Kingdom, and slightly higher than in the United States (Agerberg and Kreft 2023). All in all, this suggests that Sweden is similar to many Western countries, but with a slightly higher expectation to see norms of protection expressed in public attitudes, making it a hard test for our hypotheses. Regarding the gendered protection norm, Sweden has a tradition of promoting gender equality and was the first country to formally introduce the concept of feminist foreign policy. At the same time, other
surveys show that Swedes are less prone to favor humanitarian responses when children or sexual violence is highlighted (Dumitrescu and Bucy 2021; Agerberg and Kreft 2023). For the hypothesis about extremist groups: due to the general support for protection and equal treatment, Sweden could provide a hard test. However, it is perhaps more likely that Sweden is similar to other countries in Western Europe, given the attention to the risk of terrorism and the role of foreign fighters in politics and media all over Western Europe when the war in Syria escalated.

The survey was fielded by the Laboratory of Opinion Research (LORE) at Gothenburg University, during December 3, 2020–January 5, 2021. A total of 2,149 Swedish citizens, a subset of LORE’s web-based Citizen Panel, participated in our study.2 Prior to collecting the data, we obtained ethical approval from the Swedish national ethical board (dnr. 2020–04,408). We registered our survey design, hypotheses, and pre-analysis plan (PAP) on OpenScience Forum (OSF).3 Details on sampling, randomization procedure and other aspects of the survey and experiment design can be found in our PAP. At the start of our survey, respondents were presented with information about the purpose of the study, their role as voluntary participants, and the procedure in place for ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and protection of personal data.4

In the vignette experiment, respondents were randomly assigned to receive one of six possible vignettes describing the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria.5 All vignettes contained the following background information, formulated based on information available to the public on the websites of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and Sweden’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs:6

The conflict in Syria is in its tenth year and has led to the world’s largest refugee crisis. Over 6 million civilians are internally displaced within Syria and 5.6 million have fled to neighboring countries. The situation for civilians in Syrian refugee camps is critical: they suffer from extreme poverty, starvation, disease, violence and serious human rights abuses. The Syrian government has not provided basic public services such as medical care, water, electricity, sanitation, and protection from harm.

With this background held constant, the vignettes differ only in the identity characteristics of the Syrian civilians. Specifically, we varied additional information which places emphasis on the civilians as Swedish citizens, women and children, or affiliated with IS. We combined these three identity factors to construct five different treatment conditions.7 The control condition received no additional information about the civilians’ identity. Table 1 shows the text corresponding to the treatment condition in each of the six vignettes.

We then measured our outcome variable: support for civilian protection. We used a multi-item question in which respondents were presented with several proposals for how Sweden could respond to the crisis. Respondents were asked to rate each of these proposals on a numerical 5-point scale with labeled end-points, ranging from “(1) very bad proposal” to “(5) very good proposal.” The question items, shown

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2Information about LORE, its Citizen Panel, and its sampling methodology can be found at https://lore.gu.se.
3See https://osf.io/pr52. This paper focuses on three of the four hypotheses listed in the pre-analysis plan.
4Our survey was inserted into a longer survey: LORE’s December 2020 wave of the Citizen Panel. We only describe the questions in our survey here.
5Respondents were also randomly assigned to a priming experiment. We do not describe the design of this experiment or its additional survey questions here, but we control for treatment assignment to the priming experiment in our analyses.
7To clarify our language here: we use “factor” to refer to the three different identity characteristics we vary: Swedish citizens, women and children, and IS affiliation. We use “treatment condition” to refer to the factor or the combination of factors in a single vignette. For example, the treatment condition in vignette 5 is “Swedish citizens” and the treatment condition in vignette 6 is “Swedish citizens + women and children” (see table 1).
Table 1. Survey experiment treatment conditions and text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>Treatment condition</th>
<th>Vignette text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>[no additional information]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>IS affiliation</td>
<td>Among the civilians in need, some have ties to the Islamic State. It is difficult to determine who has been a victim of the Islamic State and who supports the Islamic state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Women and children</td>
<td>Among the civilians in need, many are women and young children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Women and children + IS affiliation</td>
<td>Among the civilians in need, many are women and young children. Some have ties to the Islamic State. It is difficult to determine who has been a victim of the Islamic State and who supports the Islamic state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Swedish citizens</td>
<td>Among the civilians in need, there are Swedish citizens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Swedish citizens + women and children</td>
<td>Among the civilians in need, there are Swedish citizens. Many are women and young children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Outcome variables and text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome variable</th>
<th>Question item text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian aid</td>
<td>Increase humanitarian aid to Syrian refugee camps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN observers</td>
<td>Contribute unarmed observers to a UN peacekeeping operation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN police</td>
<td>Contribute police to a UN peacekeeping operation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN military troops</td>
<td>Contribute military troops to a UN peacekeeping operation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept refugees</td>
<td>Accept more Syrian refugees into Sweden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repatriation</td>
<td>Return Swedish citizens in Syrian refugee camps to Sweden.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 2, correspond to a range of different forms of civilian protection efforts, including humanitarian aid, UN peacekeeping, and aiding refugees. We further distinguished between different kinds of personnel contributions to a UN operation: unarmed observers, police, and military troops (Kathman 2013). This allows for a close comparison of military and non-military forms of civilian protection.\(^8\) For respondents assigned to vignettes 5 and 6 (which include the Swedish citizen identity factor), we additionally asked about a proposal corresponding to repatriation. Because support for repatriation is only measured for a subset of respondents, we refer to the first five items listed in Table 2 as our primary outcome variables.

We chose to use a real-world crisis in our vignettes, rather than an abstract scenario. This choice presents a trade-off between experimental control and generalizability (Brutger et al. 2023). On the one hand, the use of a real-world crisis allows us to control the background attributes of the crisis by either fixing or randomizing information. A risk with abstract scenarios is that respondents infer specific information (such as the location or type of conflict)—these inferences are both correlated with respondent characteristics and unmeasured. On the other hand, a real-world crisis may come with lower generalizability, since the crisis in Syria differs from past and ongoing crises. Recent methodological work, however, has shown that increasing the level of abstraction in a survey vignette, e.g., by describing a situation as hypothetical, using artificial actors or unnamed countries, offers no ad-

\(^8\)We specifically construct these items as proposals that involve Sweden "contributing" to UN efforts for two reasons. First, this allows us to hold constant whether there is multilateral cooperation, since prior research shows that public support for humanitarian intervention depends on whether the intervention is multilateral (Wallace 2019). Second, this form of response is much more realistic for Sweden compared to hypothetical unilateral intervention.
vantage over the use of real-world scenarios (Brutger et al. 2023). We reflect further on generalizability as we draw conclusions about the findings.

Our primary concern with our use of a real-world crisis is that Swedish respondents may hold pre-existing beliefs about the case, and these pre-existing beliefs are not randomly assigned. In particular, respondents may have pre-existing beliefs about civilians in Syrian refugee camps—e.g., the extent to which they are victims of atrocities, targets of coercive recruitment into IS, or voluntary IS supporters; these labels feature prominently in media stories and political debates. Although we deal with this problem by randomly assigning civilians’ identity factors, we do anticipate that pre-existing beliefs could still cause problems.

First, pre-existing beliefs could make respondents less sensitive to information treatments. Second, pre-existing beliefs could cause respondents to make subjective interpretations about vulnerability and culpability; making the identity treatments imperfect cues. Third, respondents could draw on pre-existing beliefs in order to make inferences about other background factors, which are correlated with the information treatments and the outcome (Dafoc et al. 2018). We employ a manipulation and placebo check question to assess the extent to which pre-existing beliefs cloud or confound our treatments. Directly after the outcome variable, we asked a question that measures the treatment respondents received, that is: respondents’ perceptions of the identity of the civilians in the crisis description. This question allows us to validate whether the experiment manipulated perceptions of identity as intended, and to assess if the treatments caused respondents to make inferences about other identity characteristics which we did not manipulate.

We then measured two possible mediating variables identified in prior research: moral obligation and threat perceptions. To encourage respondents to answer in reference to the specific vignette they read, we repeated the vignette on the same page as each of the mediating variable questions. We also collected data on respondents’ demographic characteristics: gender, age, country of birth, education, left-right political ideology, and political party preference. We use these as pre-treatment covariates for balance tests and adjustments in regression models. A sample survey including the full text of the vignettes and all survey questions is given in Online Appendix C.

**Results**

In line with our expectations about Sweden as a case, our survey of the Swedish public confirms that individuals are generally supportive of the protection of civilians in the context of humanitarian crises, and also support a variety of different forms of civilian protection. **Figure 1** shows the average levels of support for each of the six protection proposals we asked about.

There are a few interesting patterns. First, respondents generally preferred non-military forms of civilian protection. Humanitarian aid was the most favored (mean = 4.03, sd = 0.87), followed closely by contributing unarmed observers to a UN peacekeeping operation (mean = 3.98, sd = 0.85). Consistent with prior opinion studies on military humanitarian intervention, respondents also supported the proposal to contribute military troops to a UN peacekeeping operation (mean = 3.62, sd = 1.10). However, support for contributing military troops was significantly lower compared to support for contributing unarmed UN observers; the 95 percent confidence intervals do not overlap. This suggests to us that the question of military force is important to separate out. Also of interest is that accepting

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9Gender, age, and country of birth were drawn from LORE’s prior surveys of the Citizen panel. Education, political party preference, and political ideology were measured in our survey, after a block of questions in LORE’s longer Citizen panel survey. Although our covariate measures are post-treatment, we argue they are unlikely to be affected by the treatment and can be treated as pre-treatment covariates.
Figure 1. Support for civilian protection across six proposals. Support is measured on a five-point scale, where higher numbers correspond to greater support. Means and 95 percent confidence intervals are plotted over the distribution of responses.

refugees stands out as being relatively unpopular, with more respondents rating this as a bad proposal (mean = 2.63, sd = 1.43).

Although there was variation in levels of support across the measures, an exploratory factor analysis suggests the questions measure the same underlying concept. We therefore constructed a composite index (which we call the POC index) using the five main outcome measures, which account for the relative importance of each measure. The POC index is the factor score of the variables, rescaled to a five-point scale (mean = 3.6, sd = 0.35).

Protection for Whom?

Given respondents’ generally positive predisposition toward civilian protection, did they also express particularized preferences—preferences that vary with the identity characteristics of those in need of protection?

To answer this question, we turn to the vignette experiment. The independent variables in the experiment are dummy variables indicating a comparison of two groups of respondents assigned to vignettes that differ along one identity factor. Each dummy independent variable is coded 1 for the identity factor of interest and 0 otherwise. For example, to test Hypothesis 1, we use a dummy variable coded 1 if the respondent was assigned to vignette 5 or 6 (which both include the Swedish citizen’s identity factor) and coded 0 if the respondent was assigned to vignette 1, 2, 3, or 4 (which do not include this identity factor). Figure 2 shows the results of the experiment used to evaluate our three hypotheses.

Looking at the top two rows of figure 2, there is little support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. Mentioning that there are Swedish citizens among those in need of protection appears to increase support for the proposal that Sweden contribute unarmed observers to a UN peacekeeping mission in Syria, but this effect is not statistically sig-
Figure 2. Effect of identity factors on support for civilian protection. Support is measured on a five-point scale, where higher numbers correspond to greater support. Estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals are calculated using robust linear regression. Average treatment effects (Difference in mean support) are estimated including mean-centered pre-treatment covariates. P-values (except for the POC index) are adjusted using the Holm’s correction.

Significant after applying a Holm’s adjustment to correct for multiple comparisons.11 There are also no significant effects from informing respondents that many civilians were women and children, to respondents assigned to other vignettes not including this information.

Looking at the bottom row of plots, we do find support for Hypothesis 3. Providing the information that the civilians in need have ties to the IS significantly reduced support for the proposals the Sweden increase humanitarian aid to Syria, contribute with unarmed observers, and accept more Syrian refugees. The effect of IS-affiliation is also negative and significant for the POC index. It is interesting to note that IS affiliation affects only support for non-armed forms of civilian protection; it is possible that respondents’ preferences regarding the deployment of the Swedish military or police are more rigid.12

We were surprised to find no effect from informing respondents that Swedish citizens or women and children were among those in need of protection. In Online Appendix B, we explore whether the null results could be due to the pooling of treatment conditions and reference categories in our comparisons. We compare each treatment to the control group only and conduct additional difference of means comparisons across pairs of treatment conditions. This allows us to assess interaction effects—whether the effect of one identity factor depends on the presence of another. The results remain the same for citizens and women and children, when compared individually to the control. While we do not identify any significant interaction effects, the findings underscore the importance of IS affiliation:

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11 We apply the Holm’s correction to the group of tests run for each hypothesis. The correction is applied to the vector P-values from N tests where N is number of independent variables tested (1) times the number of outcome variables (5). We do not include the P-value of the POC index in the adjustment, as the index produces a single test of the five outcome variables.

12 Full results of regression models are reported in Online Appendix B. As we measure our outcome variables using numerical 5-point scales, we use linear regression. The results are consistent when we instead estimate logistic regressions with dichotomous versions of the outcome variables and ordinal logistic regressions with ordered categorical outcome variables. All models include mean-centered pre-treatment covariates, but we also show that the results hold when using unadjusted models. Section 5 of Online Appendix B shows the results of sub-group analysis for heterogenous treatment effects. We generally do not find any meaningful patterns, although we note that the effect of women and children treatment remains insignificant among female respondents, in contrast to the findings in Grillo and Pupenoks (2017).
The dependent variables are dummy variables coded 1 if the respondent received the treatment factor assigned and 0 otherwise. Estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals are calculated using robust linear regression.

even when respondents are informed that many of the civilians in need are women and children, mentioning that some have ties to IS significantly reduces support for protection efforts.

Our primary concern with using a real-world humanitarian crisis in the vignette experiment was that respondents’ pre-existing beliefs about the identity characteristics of Syrian civilians in refugee camps could cloud or confound the effects of the identity treatments. To assess the extent to which this is problematic, we incorporated a question that measured the treatment respondents received, that is: respondents’ perceptions of the identity of the civilians in the crisis description.

We first used this question to conduct factual manipulation checks: to assess if respondents correctly perceived civilian identity according to the identity treatment factor assigned (Gerber and Green 2012; Kane and Barabas 2019). In figure 3, the top row of plots indicates the presence of two-sided non-compliance in each of the comparison groups. For example, among the respondents assigned to the women and children identity factor, some correctly answered that there were women and children among the civilians (they received the treatment) while other respondents did not. However, the extent of non-compliance is negligible for each identity factor, and in the bottom row of figure 3, we consistently observe a significant difference in the probability of correctly receiving the treatment, given the identity factor assigned. We can therefore rule out non-compliance as a cause of the null results, and we gain confidence that the difference in support for civilian protection comparing IS affiliation to otherwise is due to respondents’ perception of civilians as affiliated with IS.

We gain a bit more insight into the null findings on Hypothesis 1 by assessing if the information treatments caused respondents to perceive the Syrian civilians as civilians, combatants, victims of IS, or supporters of IS. These can be thought of
as subjective manipulation checks (Kane and Barbas 2019), since the treatment received is not necessarily factually “correct” with respect to treatment assignment. The results of these tests are shown in figure 4.

Importantly, the Swedish citizen’s treatment significantly reduced the perception that the persons in need of protection were civilians. It is likely that respondents assumed that Swedish citizens were in Syrian refugee camps because they voluntarily joined IS, although other possible assumptions would be that they were civilians kidnapped or coerced to join IS. Indeed, the Swedish citizen’s treatment also significantly increased the tendency to describe the Syrian refugees as supporters of IS and significantly decreased the tendency to describe them as IS victims, even while the vignette text specified both possibilities. These perceptions could have reduced support for civilian protection in the same manner as IS affiliation, possibly canceling out any tendency to favor fellow citizens.

We also gain a bit of insight into the lack of a women-and-children effect (Hypothesis 2). In contrast to our expectations, the assignment to the women and children identity factor did not coincide significantly with the perception of persons in the crisis description as civilians or victims. This suggests that women and children may not have been judged as particularly innocent or vulnerable. Lastly, assignment to the IS-affiliation identity factor significantly increased perceptions that the individuals were combatants, which helps to explain the overall negative effect of the treatment condition (in line with Hypothesis 3).

We conducted placebo tests in order to assess another problem related to respondents’ pre-existing beliefs. That is, the treatments could cause respondents to change their beliefs about other background factors, creating a risk that these perceptions (which are not randomly assigned) drive differences in outcome (Dafoe et al. 2018; Eggers et al. 2023). This can be thought of as hidden confounding (Samii 2011) or a violation of the information equivalence assumption in survey experiments (Dafoe et al. 2018).

Figure 4. Subjective manipulation checks. The dependent variables are dummy variables coded 1 if the respondent perceived the identity characteristic of interest and 0 otherwise. Estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals are calculated using robust linear regression.
Using the same question measuring perceived identity, we assessed whether the information treatments caused respondents to interpret the civilians as “Christians” or “Muslims.” We chose religion as a placebo attribute because religion is likely correlated with the identity characteristics we varied, and prior research suggests that the religious traits of civilian populations affect support for humanitarian intervention (Boettcher 2004; Grillo and Pupcenoks 2017). The results, shown in figure 5, show that there is no significant difference in the probability respondents perceived the civilians as Christians or Muslims, across any of the comparison groups in our hypothesis tests. This gives us confidence that the negative effect of IS affiliation on support for civilian protection is not due to any confounding effect of Religion.  

Causal Mechanisms

Our manipulation checks help us to understand the null results on hypotheses 1 and 2: identity cues can be imperfect and perceptions of who constitutes a “civilian” may be subjective. We also gained some insight into the reason for a dampening effect of IS affiliation; IS-affiliated civilians were likely to be perceived as combatants.

To further understand how identity characteristics of civilians in need influence support for protection, we sought to measure the importance of threat perceptions and moral obligation as causal mechanisms. These are two considerations found to be important in prior research (Larson 1996; Tomz and Weeks 2020). Drawing on the wording in Tomz and Weeks (2020) survey experiment, we asked respondents whether Sweden had a strong or weak moral obligation to intervene in the crisis we described in the vignette. In order to capture whether the civilians described in the vignette were perceived as threatening, we asked about the likelihood they might pose a security risk in countries where they settle. Both questions are coded on numerical five-point scales with labeled end-points.

We assessed the causal pathways connecting the independent variables in our hypothesis tests, the mediating variables, and the outcome variables through mediation analysis (Imai et al. 2010; Tingley et al. 2014). As a first step, we examined the effect of civilian identity factors on each of the mediating variables. Next, we estimated the effect of the mediating variables on each of the outcome variables.

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13 Additional tests of design, including balance tests, for question ordering effects and systematically missing data are reported in Online Appendix A.
controlling for each of the independent variables in turn. Finally, we estimated average causal mediation effects: the indirect effect of the independent variables on the outcome through the mediating variable (Imai et al. 2010). In all three steps, we controlled for pre-treatment covariates.

Figure 6 summarizes the main results of the mediation analysis. From the first step of the analysis (estimates are denoted with squared-shaped points), we find that associating the civilians with IS significantly lowered respondents’ views that Sweden has a moral obligation to intervene, while it significantly increased respondents’ perception that the civilians pose a security risk. In the second step (denoted with round points), we find that both of these considerations, in turn, shape respondents’ attitudes toward civilian protection. Looking down the left column, higher levels of moral obligation significantly increase support for all five proposals for civilian protection, and this is also reflected in the POC index. In the right-hand column, we also see that higher levels of threat perceptions reduce support for each proposal for civilian protection, with the exception of proposals involving UN police and UN military troops. In the final step of the mediation analysis, we link the two causal chains to assess the extent to which the effect of the independent variable travels through the mediating variables. This is primarily relevant for IS affiliation, the independent variable that produced a statistically effect direct effect. The average causal mediation effect is statistically significant here for all outcome measures, meaning that respondents’ lowered sense of moral obligation contributed to lower support for civilian protection among respondents who were informed that some civilians had ties to IS. Threat perceptions also moderate the impact of IS affiliation, but to a lesser extent: playing no significant role in support for civilian protection via UN police and UN military troops.

In the analyses above, we are unable to tease out the importance of the expected efficacy of various measures. In our Online Appendix B, we therefore explore a number of additional considerations suggested in prior research: expectations of success, risk, cost, and benefit (e.g., Jentleson and Britton 1998; Eichenberg 2005; Eckles and Schaffner 2011; Davies and Johns 2016; Kreps and Maxey 2018; Tomz and Weeks 2020). Because of the question formulation, we can only assess these mechanisms with regard to the UN military troops outcome variable. Results of that extended mediation analysis indicate that expectations about success and benefits are relevant for support for UN troops, but these effects are not conditioned by the identity characteristics of the victims.

Discussion

Our survey sheds light on the complex manner in which civilian protection norms manifest in the public. In line with internationally and nationally established norms, Swedish survey respondents are broadly supportive of proposals to protect civilians in humanitarian crises. There is, however, some variation across different forms of civilian protection: support for contributing military troops is significantly lower compared to similar non-military proposals.

We find some support for the idea of particularized preferences. In the context of our vignette experiment, respondents become significantly less supportive of civilian protection when the civilians in need are specified as affiliated with the extremist group IS. From our mediation analysis, we find that specifying civilians’ IS affiliation lowered respondents’ sense of moral obligation to intervene and increased perceptions that the civilians in need pose a security threat. These considerations, in turn, contributed to lower support for civilian protection.

\footnote{In figure 6, the coefficient for the effect of an identity factor on a mediator (denoted with a square-shaped point) is the same across the outcome variables, we include it in each plot for reference.}
Figure 6. Mediation analysis: moral obligation and threat perceptions. Outcome variables and mediating variables are coded on five-point scales. Estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals for the effect of identity factors, and the effect of mediators are calculated using robust linear regression. Estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals for average causal mediation effects are estimated via the Quasi-Bayesian Monte Carlo method (1000 simulations) using robust standard errors. All models include mean-centered pre-treatment covariates. Estimates with significant P-values (P < 0.05) are colored red. For ACMEs (except for the POC index) P-values have been adjusted with the Holm’s correction.
In contrast to our expectations, we did not observe any effect from informing respondents that there were particularly vulnerable groups—women and children—or co-nationals—Swedish citizens—among those in need of protection. The results of subjective manipulation checks shed some light on possible reasons for these null results. Respondents assigned to the Swedish citizen identity factor were less likely to describe the Syrian refugees in the crisis vignette as civilians or IS victims, and more likely to describe them as supporters of IS. Hence, the non-finding is less about Swedes adhering to the R2P norm and more about threat perceptions that in this particular case are linked to the many Swedish citizens found among foreign fighters in Syria. The subjective manipulation checks also showed that respondents assigned the women and children identity factor did not necessarily perceive the Syrian refugees in the crisis vignette as particularly vulnerable—as civilians or victims, as we would expect based on the gendered protection norm. It is possible that the gendered protection norm is less pronounced in Sweden due to its relatively high gender equality, something suggested also by Agerberg and Kreft (2022).

Outside the hypothesis tests, there are several other interesting results. First, while the forms of civilian protection we measured were diverse—spanning humanitarian aid, UN peacekeeping and accepting refugees—exploratory reliability analysis suggests they belong to the same underlying concept. Preferences for civilian protection can be measured as a whole, and we chose to do this by creating a POC index. At the same time, some forms of civilian protection are more sensitive to variations in civilian identity than others: IS affiliation only affected support for non-military/armed means of protection: humanitarian aid, contributing unarmed observers, and accepting refugees. We infer that attitudes toward the use of military or police forms are less sensitive to changes in context.

Second, it appears that the different considerations we measured as mediating variables shape preferences toward different forms of civilian protection in different ways. Moral obligation appears to be the most important consideration; it influences preferences for all forms of civilian protection. Threat perceptions are also influential, but not when it comes to preferences on the contribution of police or military troops to UN missions. The clear role of moral obligation in influencing preferences is consistent with our underlying expectation that individuals are guided by normative principles as articulated in civilian protection norms.

**Conclusions**

Intervention for the purpose of protecting civilians is at once one of the most acceptable forms of third-party intervention and one of the most debated topics in international politics (Fixdal and Smith 1998). We hope that the findings of our survey with Swedish citizens will illuminate how individuals in the public form preferences about different forms of civilian protection, and in this way contribute to our understanding of domestic political debates. We make three key contributions to prior research.

First, our study measures public opinion on a variety of different forms of civilian protection, including humanitarian aid, peacekeeping operations, accepting refugees, and the repatriation of citizens. While much prior research focuses on the use of military force, our survey separates the question of intervention from the question of military force, as people may be in favor of a humanitarian response but also think that military intervention is unlikely to enhance civilian protection or is too costly. Contrasting non-military and military forms of civilian protection,

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15 This can be compared to the findings by Getmansky et al. (2018) who even found a negative effect of informing people that Turkey’s refugee policy has saved innocent women and children on their support for refugees. Their interpretation is that people’s views toward women and children were influenced by the perceived negative impact they had on Turkish society through, for example, increased begging on the streets and increased divorce rates as Turkish men married Syrian women.
we found overall weaker support for the latter. Future research should explore these issues further; in particular, how people view efficacy versus moral obligation when comparing different types of responses.

Second, we studied whether biases in civilian protection exist among individuals in the public. We found that, to a certain extent, individual-level preferences for protection are particularized. When civilians are perceived as having ties with extremist groups, support for protection drops. We have also highlighted how perceptions of who is a civilian are highly subjective, shedding light on apparent tensions with core principles of civilian protection norms such as the universality of human rights.

Third, the study brings evidence from a new empirical context. Prior research on public opinion and humanitarian intervention predominantly uses US samples, lending little insight into whether existing findings are generalizable to different cultures and national contexts. We believe that Swedish public opinion is particularly relevant, as Sweden has and continues to play an important role in UN- and EU-led missions.

In addition to these contributions to research, we aim to generate knowledge that is relevant for international advocacy groups and policymakers. For example, our survey reveals that just mentioning that civilians may have ties to IS—even while specifying that they could be victims or supporters—reduces support for many forms of civilian protection. This should be an important insight for humanitarian groups and foreign policymakers, as it suggests that public is sensitive to framing and messaging concerning humanitarian crises. This is relevant also for the media or any influential actor issuing statements on crises and potential interventions.

While we tested our hypotheses about particularized preferences in the specific context of Swedish opinion on the refugee crisis in Syria, we believe the patterns we observe generalize to other populations and similar crises. Outside of Sweden, many countries are reluctant to aid civilians in Syrian refugee camps. The crux of the debate often revolves around civilians’ ties to IS: for example, obligation versus the potential risks of repatriating citizens. The question of what to do becomes more complex considering women and children, whose combat roles remain unclear. Beyond Syria, recent analyses of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine (2022) suggest that the perception of Ukrainian refugees as ‘civilized’ and “European” has been a salient factor influencing the positive response across European countries. We encourage future research to probe the extent to which particularized preferences guide international responses to humanitarian crises.

**Supplementary data**

Supplementary information is available at the *Foreign Policy Analysis* data archive.

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References


Protecting Political and International Responses Routledge.


Particularized Preferences for Civilian Protection?


