



Atrocity Prevention: Tools and Strategies

A New Voices in National Security Workshop Report

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Overview

On September 29, 2023, Bridging the Gap and the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide convened academic and policy professionals at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to participate in a workshop on the prevention of mass atrocities. Thirty-eight individuals participated drawn from universities, think tanks, various USG offices, NGOs, philanthropy, and civil society.

Workshop participants tackled two critical questions, each structured as a panel with three presenters whose policy memos were circulated in advance:

- What are optimal tools and strategies for preventing mass atrocities in different types of scenarios, and how can international actors increase their effectiveness?
- In a period of heightened great power conflict, how can the US government work most effectively with other governments and international organizations to help prevent mass atrocities?

This report incorporates key conversation points and questions both for their own direct value and as bases for policy development and further research, reported consistent with the Chatham House rule of non-attribution.

Panel One: Optimal Tools and Strategies for Preventing Mass Atrocities

One presenter focused on forced displacement and addressed key factors that can increase the effectiveness of policy tools in helping prevent this particular type of mass atrocity. These included international collaboration through bilateral and multilateral alliances, cooperation with a vulnerable population's perceived "homeland," and international institutions. Research shows that domestic alliances, where certain government elites have a vested interest in keeping the vulnerable population within the country, can deter political leaders from actually enacting the expulsion. Similarly, governments with strong ties to the vulnerable population's homeland are less likely to expel that population. More broadly, international organizations condemning small-scale expulsions demonstrate that such acts will not go unpunished, potentially helping deter larger-scale expulsions. The presenter suggested that policymakers should constantly reevaluate both internal and external alliances to track changes and identify any potential future partners to help prevent mass atrocities. Emphasis also was placed on taking these measures early on when warning signs appear so as to have a chance at prevention.

Another presenter focused on tracking elite power struggles to more effectively warn about the potential onset of mass atrocities. These struggles can emerge around disputes over control of civilian or military state apparatuses. If policymakers are able to map changes in the command-and-control structures of countries, they may be more likely to predict how these power struggles can lead to mass atrocities. However, this strategy requires high-quality intelligence about the political motivations and relationships of senior and mid-level leaders. The presenter suggested that intelligence agencies may face trade-offs in building relationships with local intelligence providers: although these informants can provide detailed information because of their information networks, they are also susceptible to the politics of rumors. Consequently, policymakers may not have a full or accurate scope of the actors orchestrating mass atrocities, which complicates prevention efforts.

The third presenter on this first panel focused on "cyber humanitarian intervention" as a potential prevention strategy. Present-day perpetrators are often online, meaning cyber counter-campaigns can potentially disrupt their motivations and work. Cyber tools are particularly optimal for early detection because they can identify local trends in hate speech and rhetoric that may incite groups to violence. For example, some research suggests that individuals' Google searches may disclose hateful beliefs in ways that are not obvious in opinion surveys. Other cyber humanitarian prevention efforts, such as deprioritizing toxic content and diverting potential perpetrators, are also less costly than other prevention tools. Additionally, their potential adverse consequences are less permanent than efforts to target civilian infrastructure. This lack of

physical damage may alleviate the US government's hesitation about contributing resources where it knows that US service members may be at risk of harm.

Building on these presentations, a main point of discussion among participants around the table revolved around US frequent underestimation of its potential international leverage for atrocity prevention. Some of this comes from coordination challenges given both the numerous existing intra-governmental entities with roles in atrocity prevention and the tendency to create additional ones tailored to particular cases. In addition, American civil society can more easily engage with policymakers on these matters than in many other countries. To the extent that such coordination problems can be managed, they also can provide enhanced and flexible capacity. If the US government recommends a particular course of preventive action, it generally also has the institutional features needed to accomplish that action – this was the point of those stressing underestimation. At the same time some participants flagged concerns about this becoming the kind of American hubris about influence in the world that can cause friction with partners. In this regard, it is sometimes most effective for the United States to exercise restraint and self-consciousness about the comparative advantages others bring to the effort.

Another key point was recognition by a number of workshop participants that there is no non-position for international actors; that is to say, there is no course of action that does not have an impact on the situation at hand. All courses of action, including doing nothing, are taken into account by key actors and thus have an impact on the risk of mass atrocities. Similarly, there are situations where an active US role can make it harder for other entities, whether they be local actors, other countries, or international organizations, to act.

Topics for Further Exploration

Three main topics for further policy development and scholarly research emerged from this conversation. The first topic concerned the level of risk that atrocity prevention presents to civil society leaders in countries at high risk of mass atrocities. Prevention efforts are more effective when local populations are involved. They can contribute more accurate, up-to-date intelligence. They can also influence levels of public support. However, direct involvement comes with security risks to the individual, their family, and their broader community. Workshop participants generally acknowledged such risks are almost always present while also wrestling with how much risk civilian actors should be expected to endure.

A second question involved the effectiveness of targeting mid-level actors within governments and rebel groups responsible for mass atrocities. While measures against high-level actors can get directly at those making key decisions, they also run the risk of boxing the perpetrator in, launching a fight for survival, and ultimately backfiring. While mid-level actors can be easily replaced, potentially muffling the impact deterrence measures could have, they also often have more on-the-ground impact because they are the ones tasked with carrying out high-level

directives. Workshop participants also considered the option of targeting intermediaries or “enablers,” such as arms providers and financiers. Intermediaries may be less invested in the “mission” to commit atrocities, and therefore more likely to give in to cost-imposing external pressure.

The third guiding question explores best practices to influence the potential perpetrators who have the power to commit atrocities. Workshop participants underscored the importance of understanding the combination of rational decision-making, ideological commitment, and related tolerance for pain that influence these decision-makers. Perpetrators may rationally respond to threats against their safety or political authority. However, they are also frequently highly ideologically dedicated. These ideological commitments can create biases that lead them to be more resistant to threats. As a result, decision-makers who are highly committed to a guiding ideology are less deterrable by measures such as sanctions or loss of assets.

Panel Two: Methods to Increase the Effectiveness of US-Led International Collaboration

Heightened great power tensions, having gone in some aspects beyond competition to conflict, make multilateral collaboration that much more difficult on many issues, atrocity prevention included. One of the most obvious great power battlegrounds is the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which was the focus of one of the presenters. Prospects for reinvigorating or replacing the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), already weakened from its original 2001 formulation by a number of factors most especially by the 2011 US-NATO Libya military intervention, are even less possible amidst UNSC contentiousness. While not translating into broad Global South support for the US and NATO-led coalition supporting Ukraine, sovereign non-intervention has been reaffirmed more generally in ways that further weaken claims of legitimacy for R2P’s interventionary pillar three. Indeed, the US has been faced with countering the accusation of selective norm invocation in focusing so much on Ukraine yet much less on other cases. Particularly in this context, and consistent with a growing body of scholarship, emphasis was put on regional and locally driven conflict prevention and resolution. One participant emphasized the importance of these processes happening before the situation escalates into civil war, noting that even when conflicts are ultimately resolved it is only after substantial death tolls and other consequences.

A second presenter continued the focus on regional and local actors providing mediation and playing other roles that have prevented and/or ameliorated mass atrocities. Often regional and local actors have greater interests at stake, relationships to build on, and more information to work with. The key role for the US in this regard is to fund and support capacity building for pre-deployment training, deployment capacities, and funding for extended deployments. The Central African Republic and Mali were among the cases discussed in themselves and for drawing out lessons.

The International Criminal Court (ICC), which had come up in earlier presentations, was the focus of the third presenter on this panel. While an important part of atrocity prevention, its role is limited by US non-membership and frequent criticism of the ICC. The argument was made that US fears of ICC jurisdiction and potential for politically motivated investigations including into the actions of US servicemembers abroad are overblown, and the case made for the US to work more with the ICC and indeed to join it. The ICC issuing an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin on charges including the unlawful deportation of children was cited as further basis for American reevaluation of such staunch opposition. The urgency of the moment has mobilized some previously antagonistic US politicians to speak in favor of the ICC, signifying fertile ground for the United States to increase its ICC involvement without directly joining. Some participants argued that even given these developments the domestic politics still are highly problematic for ICC membership. Even without membership, the point was made that the Biden administration should share as much information as possible with the ICC, to combat the Court's struggle to convict due to lack of evidence.

Unifying Themes and Questions for Further Discussion

Four underlying themes emerged from this conversation. The first is an acknowledgment that although American involvement is necessary, American support for regional and local prevention efforts should sometimes be less visible. Too often American global involvement has preceded and promoted regime change, which the international community grew to resent. Today, to better facilitate multilateral, regional and local diplomacy, the United States would do well to engage in supportive measures without being intrusive. These include strategic guidance, financial support, various training, evidence sharing, greater resources in support of the Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General for the Prevention of Genocide, and heightened "friend of the court" relationship with the ICC even if not becoming a member.

Second and related was the potential agency and efficacy of local actors, and not just the usual elites. Caught between atrocity preventers and perpetrators, these populations must live with the consequences of atrocities, therefore they must have a hand in deciding how to deal with atrocities. Working with and through local actors places a significant share of decision-making into the hands of the population that must live with the consequences. Atrocity prevention operates at its best when it focuses on the human lives at stake. Further study of the interplay between local populations, perpetrators, and potential collaborators with the international community will push atrocity prevention scholarship and policymaking forward.

Third was the need to be more willing to acknowledge the lack of teeth in many prevention and punishment measures. For example, the ICC often struggles to convict individuals accused of war crimes, because of a lack of evidence. In the case of Syria, the UN General Assembly's International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) collects evidence and signals to victims that there are ongoing international efforts to hear victims' cases. However, there is less work done to prosecute perpetrators. Perpetrators of mass atrocities will not be concerned about the consequences of their actions if they do not think they will be effectively prosecuted to begin

with. Participants underscored that when perpetrators understand atrocities have legal consequences, they will be deterred from continuing their operations. Workshop participants recognized the need for more punitive measures to actually be enacted upon perpetrators, to legitimize future deterrence efforts.

Fourth was not losing sight of the ways in which even when politics present obstacles and constraints impact may still be head at the policy and technical levels. By design, debate and broad political support-building affects decision-making bodies both within democratic countries and among coalition partners. Progress towards atrocity prevention still can be made at the technical level even when politics are not amenable. Discretion and existing policies can be invoked in support of intervention, meaning that political gridlock should not extinguish optimism for prevention efforts.

Conclusion

Exchange on Best Practices for Scholars and Policy Practitioners

The workshop concluded with scholars and policymakers sharing best practices for communication with each other. Policy practitioners underlined their appreciation for the application of a policy memo format to academic research, including memos' clarity, brevity, and specificity. Academic publications often go unread by policymakers, due to a shortage of their time and a lack of digestibility. Memos are significantly more likely to be read and absorbed.

Beyond the memo, another method for academia to communicate with policymakers is through brokers, such as policy think tanks and civil society coalitions. Policy institutions frequently value these entities and their resources more highly, prioritizing them over universities. Scholars can participate in workshops and working groups led by these policy organizations, to package their research findings into more accessible content.

Additionally, policymakers underscored the need to both have a broad framework and lessons learned from various cases and factor in specific conditions of each potential or ongoing mass atrocity episode. The unique context preceding each mass atrocity episode is relevant to policy, because it informs the factors that will make a strategy more or less effective. Scholarship must account for these contextual factors prior to making recommendations. Policymakers also commented on the significance of connecting personal narratives to data, then presenting these two pieces in tandem.

Scholars communicated that the path to stable employment in academia, such as tenure, makes it difficult to justify policy-focused scholarship. One workshop participant shared that academic advisors sometimes recommend against writing policy reports or op-eds because these types of products do not contribute to academic credentials. Shifting this culture and incentive structure in a more intellectually pluralist direction is a core part of what Bridging the Gap is all about, and indeed in BtG's close to 20 years, some impact has been evident.