

Transatlantic Cooperation to Prevent and Stop Mass Atrocities

In February 2015 Chatham House convened a group of senior representatives from the UK government, the NGO sector and the think-tank and academic communities to discuss current thinking on mass atrocity prevention and intervention, and to identify common perspectives and best practices across the Atlantic. This document summarizes some of the key themes and findings from the discussions. It includes initial recommendations for improving the early warning, prevention and intervention regimes in the UK, the US and beyond.

UK perspectives on mass atrocities

- **With approximately 85 per cent of mass atrocities occurring in armed conflict settings, there is naturally a great deal of overlap between the UK's conflict prevention and mass atrocity prevention strategies.** However, there is a strong need to remain sensitive to the differences between conflict settings and mass atrocities, and to the respective challenges each situation poses. For one thing, mass atrocities constitute crimes and therefore necessitate particular responses that conflicts do not. For another, a sizeable percentage of mass atrocities are still committed outside armed conflict situations. The indicators of mass atrocity events may also differ significantly from those of conflicts.
- **The potential of the new Conflict, Security and Stability Fund to engender the adoption of a 'mass atrocity lens' – i.e. the mainstreaming of mass atrocity prevention across the spectrum of relevant policies – remains uncertain.** However, what is clear is that future funding commitments must be matched by reform of decision-making processes. On the one hand, this means finding ways to resensitize the bureaucracy to threats of mass atrocities relative to other counter-terrorism and security concerns. On the other, it means establishing greater clarity around the question of who has the mandate to trigger action when necessary.
- The UK is focused principally on atrocity prevention. But this is potentially a very interventionist strategy. Given the need for action by security forces before an event occurs, such a strategy can be politically difficult to implement.
- British thinking on mass atrocity prevention has emphasized support for multilateral agencies, particularly the UN special offices. However, given that the recommendations made by these offices can be sidelined by the UN secretary-general, the UK should be conservative in its expectations of what can be achieved through these bodies alone. Instead, **the government should focus on the deployment of its own assets and resources – for example, by**

incorporating mass atrocity prevention into its development assistance programming.

Assessing the impact of early warning and prevention efforts

- **A good prediction may not be proven right, but is backed up by solid evidence.** Without this understanding, early warning systems risk being discredited by individual failures to forecast accurately – living or dying, as one participant put it, by their last prediction. Policy-makers therefore need better understanding of the limitations, as well as the capabilities, of early warning systems.
- At the national level, the use of analysts with deep in-country expertise and information would improve the UK's ability to make accurate short-term forecasts of mass atrocities. Internationally, better intelligence sharing between states would allow resources to be used more efficiently.
- Turning early warning into effective prevention will require policy-makers to think carefully and strategically about their engagement with target states and other local actors. The weakness of governance in many fragile states means that early action to prevent mass atrocities will often be crucial. Yet the interventionist nature of early action, not least the hostility of target states to the identification of mass atrocity risks, presents many obstacles. Preventing mass atrocities therefore requires a sensitive balancing of timing and players, with early action requiring the engagement of a variety of state and non-state actors; this might not necessarily take place under the explicit auspices of 'atrocity prevention'.
- **In the delivery of early warning signals to decision-makers, the messenger is often critical.** The ideal messenger is someone with knowledge of the area and a corresponding level of authority and influence. Strong personal relationships with decision-makers, as well as well-developed networks with local actors in target states, are crucial for ensuring that early warning signs result in concerted action.

Rethinking intervention and protection capabilities

- **Changes to the geopolitical landscape have eroded the legitimacy of intervention and increased its costs.** Discord between major powers continues to impede consensus on intervention among members of the UN Security Council. Regional organizations are becoming increasingly influential, but they rarely have the capabilities to act. Local conflicts are increasingly overlaid with global ones in ways that deter external intervention. With diminishing political capital behind effective international action, the space for perpetrators of mass atrocities to act with impunity is likely to grow.
- **An asymmetry of interests around intervention is also emerging between global and regional organizations.** Though the former are in many ways better equipped to intervene in stopping mass atrocities, the latter are often more willing to act. Regional organizations such as the African Union or the Economic Community of West African States also often act earlier and with greater local legitimacy. Despite its concerns about the motives, and capacity, of such actors, the West will need to adapt

to this new reality. Governments and policy-makers will need to demonstrate goodwill – devolving responsibility for intervention, and sharing best practice and early warning assessments, where appropriate. At the same time, local actors have a lower threshold for action and thus need their capabilities to be better developed.

- **More effective intervention and protection will require a rethink of UN peacekeeping missions.** There is growing recognition that such deployments focus excessively on the short-term security aspects of their mandates, at the expense of longer-term resilience-building goals. Fulfilling the latter will require an adjustment of military doctrine and a correction to the over-representation of combat soldiers in peacekeeping forces. In many mass atrocity situations, sustainable de-escalation will require policy-makers to rely on police-like deployments and to emphasize local capacity-building measures – particularly those offering greater representation to marginalized groups such as women.
- **Policy-makers need to better understand the variable impact of justice-seeking in mass atrocity situations.** While justice and the rule of law have a significant positive contribution to make in terms of structural prevention – as illustrated by the recent success of justice reforms in averting pre-election violence in Kenya – decision-makers should be cautious about using legal instruments as tools of intervention. Examples in Libya, Uganda and Sudan highlight the risk that indictments of conflict actors in ongoing mass atrocity situations may lead nowhere, or even to a worsening of outcomes. In such instances, the goal of averting mass atrocities may be better served by a deferral of international justice.

This meeting was one in a series convened as part of a project of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Stanley Foundation on 'Advancing Transatlantic Linkages on Responsibility to Protect and Mass Atrocity Prevention'. A larger report on this topic is forthcoming in 2015 from Tod Lindberg, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and Lee Feinstein, a former US ambassador to Poland.