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## April Roundtable: Genocide and US National Interests Introduction

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## April Roundtable: Genocide and US National Interests Introduction

### Abstract

An annotation of:

“How Genocide Became a National Security Threat” by Michael Abramowitz & Lawrence Woocher. Foreign Policy. February 26, 2010.

### Keywords

Human rights, United States national security, United States foreign policy, Genocide, Conflict prevention

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## Genocide and US National Interests

Article under review: [“How Genocide Became a National Security Threat” by Michael Abramowitz & Lawrence Woocher. \*Foreign Policy\*. February 26, 2010.](#)

At the last Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony in April 2009, President Obama spoke of his commitment as president to do “everything we can to prevent and end atrocities like those that took place in Rwanda, those taking place in Darfur.” A year after Obama’s statement, Lawrence Woocher, a senior program officer at the US Institute of Peace, and Mike Abramowitz, the director of the Committee on Conscience at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, published an article in *Foreign Policy Magazine* examining the impact of genocide on the national security of the United States and the measures taken by Obama’s administration to enhance the capacity of the US government to prevent and respond to mass atrocities.

Woocher and Abramowitz’s article begins by explaining why preventing genocide needs to be a priority for US national security: “Mass violence destabilizes countries and entire regions, threatening to spread trafficking in drugs, arms, and persons, as well as infectious disease pandemics and youth radicalization. When prevention fails, the United States invariably foots much of the bill for post-atrocity relief and peacekeeping operations—to the tune of billions of dollars. And even as Washington is paying, America’s soft power is depleted when the world’s only superpower stands idle while innocents are systematically slaughtered.”

The authors indicate that there are “several signs that Barack Obama’s administration is rethinking Washington’s response to genocide.” The most recent “[Quadrennial Defense Review](#)” ([QDR](#)), a touchstone planning document for the military, states that the Defense Department should be prepared to present the president with options for preventing human suffering due to mass atrocities or large-scale natural disasters abroad. The White House has also moved in the last several weeks to create a high-level interagency committee within the National Security Council aimed at anticipating and preventing mass atrocities. This new development, according to the authors, “should take control of a process now fragmented between agencies, helping combat the bureaucratic lethargy and ad hoc decision-making that has characterized past U.S. responses to genocide.”

Woocher and Abramowitz indicate that more can be done, including a presidential statement that preventing genocide is a national security priority for the United States, and a strategy for conflict prevention in Sudan—the region most likely to experience mass atrocities in the near future. What is clearly a positive step, however, is the White House’s implementation of some of the recommendations of the [Genocide Prevention Task Force Report](#), which signals an unprecedented commitment by Obama’s administration to include the issue of genocide as part of his foreign policy agenda.

This month’s panelists welcome the re-conceptualization of genocide prevention as part of the US national interest. However, they believe that this new approach needs to treat responding to mass atrocities not only as part of the national interest, but also as a moral obligation of the international community, an issue that is crucial when endeavoring to effectively match words with deeds on this subject. If preventing genocide is not obviously in the national interest of the

major powers—due to the high financial costs of acting or because of the high-risk situation for their soldiers—then there may be no response. Finally, the contributors emphasize that long-term and sustainable solutions to prevent mass atrocities and genocide require a strategy based on prioritizing diplomacy, multilateral institutions, and a focus on economic and social development as an integral part of conflict prevention mechanisms.

**These issues and others are considered in this month's Roundtable.**