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Genocide Myopia: How Reframing Mass Atrocity Could Backfire

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Abstract

The United States has long viewed genocide and mass atrocity as tragic, moral problems divorced from national interests. This may be changing under the Obama administration, with genocide and mass atrocity being reframed as problems to be solved pragmatically. Michael Abramowitz and Lawrence Woocher celebrate this “unprecedented breakthrough” in Foreign Policy, urging President Obama to follow up with specific measures: strategic military planning, interagency coordination, firm leadership, and concrete action on Darfur. Despite the promise of overcoming inaction and focusing on prevention, the new vision of genocide and mass atrocity Abramowitz and Woocher depict remains myopic. It is narrowly focused on military intervention and national security, losing sight of larger political realities.

Keywords

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

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Genocide Myopia: How Reframing Mass Atrocity Could Backfire

by Sonia Cardenas

The United States has long viewed genocide and mass atrocity as tragic, moral problems divorced from national interests. This may be changing under the Obama administration, with genocide and mass atrocity being reframed as problems to be solved pragmatically. Michael Abramowitz and Lawrence Woocher celebrate this “unprecedented breakthrough” in *Foreign Policy*, urging President Obama to follow up with specific measures: strategic military planning, interagency coordination, firm leadership, and concrete action on Darfur. Despite the promise of overcoming inaction and focusing on prevention, the new vision of genocide and mass atrocity Abramowitz and Woocher depict remains myopic. It is narrowly focused on military intervention and national security, losing sight of larger political realities.

The [Genocide Prevention Task Force](#) (GPTF), to which Abramowitz and Woocher refer, laid the foundations for a fresh and much-needed approach. Bypassing legal semantics to focus on both genocide and mass atrocity, the group’s [final report](#) (“Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers”) made at least three essential contributions:

- First, the GPTF recognized the possibility of success. Contrary to popular views, the group rejected the notion that genocide is inevitable, reflecting primordial hatred and irrational leaders. Genocide and mass atrocity, the task force contends, can be prevented or at least kept from escalating. Political will, not the intractability of conflict, has been the main problem.
- Second, the GPTF linked the prevention of genocide and mass atrocity to US national interests, not by means of moral suasion, but with a strategic argument, emphasizing the costs of inaction (e.g., spillover of violence into volatile sub-regions, the costs of post-atrocity relief aid, and erosion of America’s soft power). Genocide and mass atrocity should thus be national priorities, an imperative to act.
- Third, the GPTF broke from past US policy in identifying solutions. It paved the way for a comprehensive framework. Rather than being a mere “add-on,” preventing mass atrocity should dovetail with other US priorities and be embedded organizationally into the national security and foreign policy apparatuses. As part of this comprehensiveness, the United States should strengthen civil society in high-risk states, rather than focusing exclusively on the perpetrators and victims of atrocity.

These are all noteworthy advances in thinking about mass atrocity, but they could also potentially backfire. One risk in devising a blueprint for ridding the world of genocide and mass atrocity is that the United States perpetuates an image of moral arrogance while overlooking Western complicity. The urge to fix “them” without questioning our own role in large-scale violence should be resisted. Humanitarian crusades can damage both the effectiveness of policy and perceptions of the United States abroad.

Another risk is that a national security framework will overwhelm responses to genocide and mass atrocity, displacing more promising [multilateral](#) and non-military measures. The GPTF did what successful human rights activists do; it redefined national interests in terms of international norms. Showing the national security implications of a problem halfway around the world is

crucial for changing political will, but that does not require privileging a national or [military](#) framework. Genocide and mass atrocity are problems of international and [human security](#), entailing a broad range of multilateral tools.

A comprehensive approach will require a much greater role for development and diplomacy, addressing the root causes of violence. Poverty is known to correlate with other egregious abuses, as is armed conflict; and exclusionary ideologies marginalizing or disenfranchising groups of people are fundamental. It is not just about equipping countries to become more like us—embracing greater democracy, civil society, and rule of law. A successful [comprehensive policy](#) must address the concrete disparities and insecurities underlying mass violence. Policymakers should heed the advice of scholars of genocide and human rights violations about early warning and prevention.

Redefining genocide and mass atrocity along national security lines is understandable, but the approach must be fine-tuned to avoid blowback. In overturning a policy of inaction, it is tempting to cater to policymakers who must be convinced of the centrality of US national interests, or to [publics](#) reluctant to mobilize on behalf of geographically and socially distant human beings. The Obama administration, however, must push for a more fully comprehensive and multilateral approach to genocide and mass atrocity, elevating the role of development and diplomacy.

The United States should act to prevent mass atrocity because rampant human insecurity threatens international security (which, in a globalizing world, can harm everyone), and because Western policies are implicated in many of the world's conflicts. Moving past inaction is a noble vision. But if humanitarian action is to protect more than harm, genocide and mass atrocity will have to be reframed broadly, reflecting both US interests *and* the complex sources of atrocity.

Sonia Cardenas is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Human Rights Program at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. She is the author of numerous publications, including [Conflict and Compliance: State Responses to International Human Rights Pressure](#) (2007), [Human Rights in Latin America: A Politics of Terror and Hope](#) (2009), and [Chains of Justice: The Global Rise of National Human Rights Institutions](#) (forthcoming), all from the University of Pennsylvania Press.