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Preventing Atrocities Now — And in the Future

By Jared Genser

Three years ago, President Obama created the Atrocities Prevention Board to help fulfill his important recognition that the prevention of mass atrocities is a “core national security interest and core moral responsibility.” With ethnic conflict boiling in Burma, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, among other places, such a mechanism has never been more important. Although the board’s operations have been classified, there have been some visible successes. But much remains to be done.

The board is run out of the National Security Council and is composed of senior policymakers from across the government who meet to discuss conflicts with the potential to generate mass atrocities. It is a major step forward that senior officials are regularly discussing atrocity prevention and that these discussions are now informed by a national intelligence estimate on the risk that atrocities could occur. This new approach has enabled better coordination and more rapid responses across government agencies.

In one vivid illustration, the Obama administration reacted swiftly in late 2013 to help stem sectarian and political violence in a fast-deteriorating situation in the Central African Republic, providing millions of dollars for aid and peacekeeping operations as well as a national radio broadcast from Obama urging peace. This critical intervention helped turn the country back from the precipice of disaster. In addition, the board has been credited with producing a rapid U.S. response last summer after the Islamic State drove tens of thousands of Iraqi Yazidis from their homes. And it has spurred the creation of a major prevention program in Burundi in the run-up to its presidential election in June.

In a recent speech at the Council on Foreign Relations, Undersecretary of State Sarah Sewall explained the complexity of atrocity prevention and how it requires using a broad array of “diplomatic, political, financial, intelligence and law enforcement capabilities to prevent these crimes before they evolve into large-scale civilian atrocities.”

Although there has been strong criticism of the administration’s failures in Syria, including by me, the board is focused on lower-profile prevention and not such highly visible problems where the U.S. government is already heavily engaged. In the case of the Central African Republic, for example, senior officials credited the rapid mobilization of resources and support on their familiarity with the country after months of being briefed on the potential threat of escalation.

Still, while important progress has been made, further action must be taken.

First, Obama should issue an executive order to govern the board’s operations, explain how it goes about its work and assign specific responsibilities to various agencies. This is not a partisan issue, and future presidents should have every reason to retain the board. This order was expected years ago, and the delay in making this structure permanent undermines the president’s goals and creates uncertainty about the board’s future.

Second, Obama and Congress should work together to create an Atrocities Prevention Fund, with an appropriation of at least \$50 million in the first year. Prevention can be a hard sell, as success is often measured in things that don’t happen. But the government’s ability to respond rapidly to evolving situations is highly limited by resource constraints. The creation of such a fund, with appropriate congressional oversight of how the money is spent, would help institutionalize atrocity prevention activities in the government and focus attention on designing the right responses. While the United States is only one country and it relies on support from many partners in this work, ongoing U.S. leadership is indispensable, and these funds can be used to leverage support from other donors.

Finally, the board must provide greater transparency in its operations and elevate the visibility of its work. While certain aspects of its operations need to remain classified, there is no reason a declassified version of the board’s annual report to the president could not be released. Greater engagement with Congress, civil society and the public at large will also help the board build a stronger and broader base of support to sustain its critical work in the years to come.

Today, the international community has both the experience to predict and the capacity to prevent mass atrocities before they spin out of control. Obama has recognized the centrality of atrocity prevention to our values and our national security. Now, in his remaining time as president, he should take action to ensure that the Atrocities Prevention Board becomes one of his most enduring legacies.

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