

How New Atrocity-Prevention Steps Can Work Andrew C. Miller and Paul B. Stares Council on Foreign Relations

15 August 2011

The following is an analysis of the steps to prevent mass atrocities taken by US President Barack Obama including a Presidential Study Directive to take inventory of existing tools to prevent and halt crimes and the establishment of a new Atrocities Prevention Board.

As the Presidential Study Directive (PSD-10) authorizing the new initiatives more or less acknowledges, the U.S. response to the threat of mass atrocities and genocide often has been too little, too late, and too improvised. (...)

Predicting the outbreak of atrocities with a high degree of confidence is no doubt a difficult task, but scholars have in recent years improved our understanding of telltale risk factors, such as leadership instability and ethnic polarization, which can help with early warning. Helping analysts within the intelligence community or diplomats in the field to raise "red flags" when they detect dangerous signals is another important component.

But without a high-level body of policymakers to receive such early warning information, it is effectively worthless. The new Atrocities Prevention Board, augmented by the recently created National Security Staff directorate for atrocities and war crimes, could serve as that body--one potentially empowered to push for proactive responses. (...)

But greater awareness of atrocity-prevention steps does not guarantee a process that will have lasting effect. Tough questions remain:

First, will the new atrocity-prevention structures and processes become "mainstreamed" within the national security apparatus? Recent history demonstrates that the established bureaucracy can marginalize or eliminate good faith efforts to change the status quo. (...)

Second, will the elevated priority given to atrocity prevention continue with subsequent administrations? (...)

Third, and most importantly, will the American people support what some will doubtless see as altruistic efforts with little bearing on U.S. interests? (...)

See full
[brief](#)