

New Tools to Prevent Atrocities: Beyond Syria Stewart M. Patrick Council on Foreign Relations
24 April 2012

No U.S. President, with the possible exception of Bill Clinton, has devoted as much attention as Barack Obama to preventing mass atrocities and ensuring that their perpetrators are held accountable. Yesterday, in a reflective speech at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the president announced several initiatives that will help the U.S. government put its “never again” rhetoric into practice more often. The most important of these were the creation of a high-profile Atrocities Prevention Board, the authorization of a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on the global risk of mass atrocities, and the imposition of targeted sanctions on those who exploit information technology to facilitate grave human rights abuses.

If implemented and preserved through subsequent administrations, these welcome innovations will give President Obama and his successors an institutional system and policy tools to work with other nations to anticipate, deter, and respond to crimes against humanity. (...)

(...) In 1999, the Clinton administration made some progress when it orchestrated a messy, but ultimately successful NATO air offensive to reverse a Serbian campaign of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. At the time, Kofi Annan, then UN secretary-general, called for the articulation of new norms of humanitarian intervention. The ultimate result, thanks to the work of the Canadian sponsored International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, was the unanimous embrace by the UN General Assembly in 2005 of a new global norm, the

Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

In March 2011, President Obama presided over the first unambiguous military enforcement of **R2P**

, deploying critical American military assets in a NATO-led coalition operation to prevent impending mass atrocities by Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi. The administration’s leadership secured passage of two critical UN Security Council resolutions, 1970 and 1973—the first referred Qaddafi and his henchmen to the International Criminal Court; the latter endorsed the use of “all necessary means” to end the threat to civilians.

Lest one imagine that the United States regarded the Libya operation as an isolated incident, on August 4, 2011, the Obama administration released Presidential Study Directive Ten. That document designated the prevention of mass atrocities and genocide as a “core national interest and core moral responsibility” of the United States and directed an agency-wide review of gaps in fulfilling this mission.

President Obama’s speech on Monday represented the culmination of that review. Of the many

recommendations it generated, three endorsed by the president stand out:

Elevating Genocide Prevention to the Highest Level: In creating an Atrocities Prevention Board (APB), the Obama White House is making it clear to senior leaders of executive branch agencies that stopping genocide is a U.S. national security priority—and one for which they will be held accountable. The APB will include representatives at the assistant secretary level or above, drawn from the departments of state, defense, justice, treasury, homeland security, as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Joint Staff, and the Office of the Vice President. (...)

Ramping Up Intelligence Efforts: A key to heading off mass atrocities is timely knowledge regarding the intentions of genocidal regimes and the vulnerability of target populations. In directing the first NIE on mass atrocities, President Obama is sending a clear signal to the intelligence community to prioritize the collection and analysis of all-source intelligence on genocide and gross human rights abuses. (...) While early warning is no substitute for (and can hardly guarantee) a robust policy response, accurate intelligence is a precondition for effective preventive action.

Targeting New Sanctions at Technology Abusers: Obama's most innovative step was to sign an executive order authorizing sanctions and visa bans against officials, entities, and individuals who commit or facilitate "grave human rights abuses via information technology." (...) According to the White House, this novel sanctions tool allows the United States to sanction not just the oppressive governments, but the companies that enable them with technology they use for oppression and the 'digital guns for hire' who create or operate systems used to monitor, track, and target citizens for killing, torture, or other grave abuses.

These new sanctions will initially be limited to Syria and Iran, but they will surely gain wider use as a new arrow in the U.S. foreign policy quiver; a spokesman stated that administrations will possess the authority to impose them on individuals or groups. (...)

In the end, these tools will only impact situations on the ground gradually—and their use is unlikely to slow the brutal oppression in Syria soon. But they hold promise for future atrocities prevention and response, by elevating the battle against genocide to the highest level of government—and putting the onus on U.S. officials to react in a timely manner when the threat emerges.

Read the complete [article](#)

.

