

12-20-2019

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Recommended Citation

Waller, James E. (2019) "“Genocide Is Worth It”: Broadening the Logic of Atrocity Prevention for State Actors," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 13: Iss. 3: 97-110.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.13.3.1675>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol13/iss3/9>

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“Genocide Is Worth It”: Broadening the Logic of Atrocity Prevention for State Actors

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In its evolving delineation from the senior field of Holocaust studies, the interdisciplinary field of genocide studies has seen a remarkable growth in the past 25 years. We have seen the professionalization of the field through the emergence of two organizations, the International Association of Genocide Scholars in 1994 and the International Network of Genocide Scholars in 2005. Each organization gave birth to new scholarly journals for the field and the corresponding growth of scholarship has led to an impressive robustness of interdisciplinary work reflected in the compilation of comprehensive textbooks and handbooks, myriad edited volumes, and a seemingly endless array of workshops, seminars, and conferences. On-line encyclopedias, discussion groups, blog sites, and curricular initiatives in secondary and higher education reveal the extent to which both scholars and educated laypeople continue to wrestle with the concept, and, more importantly, the reality of genocidal violence.

Genocide studies remains, however, a young and, at times, fractious discipline, in search of theoretical and conceptual maturity – often acutely reflected in the self-imposed tension between scholarship and activism. For too long, there remained an “ivory tower” lens in our field that upheld the former and, too often, looked down with suspicion, or even derision, upon the latter. This has been challenged, however, with the emergence of new generations of teacher-scholars in the field – coming from more diverse disciplinary, age, gender, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds – who have pushed us to redefine “engagement.” Increasingly, activism has come to be seen as a necessary complement to scholarship. To divorce the two, cheapens both. There can be a synergy between scholarship and activism in which each is nurtured and informed by the other.

This is just one transition that has pushed us to reframe the field in which we work. It also, however, pushes us to bring a critical lens to other long-held disciplinary assumptions. As Alex Hinton first argued in 2012, “the time is right to engage in critical reflections about the state of the field.”¹ Referring to this exercise as “critical genocide studies,” Hinton called for a “critical thinking about the field of genocide studies itself, exploring our presuppositions, decentering our biases, and throwing light on blind spots in the hope of further enriching this dynamic field.”²

In that spirit, this article expands those critical reflections to the work of genocide and atrocity prevention. Of particular focus in this piece is the communication of the logic of atrocity prevention to State actors. As genocide studies has developed as a field, we also have become more insular; professionalizing how we operate in such a way that it has pulled us away from those very venues in which we should be applying our work. From the sure footing of the outside, we often criticize State actors, particularly policymakers, for their impotent actions in the face of escalating risks or, even, genocidal violence. But we seldom speak with them or push ourselves to find ways to bridge what we know with how they work. Scholars and State actors occupy separate intellectual and institutional universes, to the impoverishment of both communities. Recognizing that reality, this paper will examine how genocide studies scholars might be more productive and influential voices in deliberations on atrocity prevention, particularly in engagement with State actors.

Since its inaugural seminar in 2008, I have had the privilege to be involved with the work of the Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR), an international NGO devoted to atrocity prevention through education, training, and technical assistance to State actors.³ The motivation for that work was not that State actors are the only actors in atrocity prevention; rather, it was that atrocity prevention education, training, and technical assistance was virtually nonexistent for State actors. In the life of the organization, for which I now serve as Director of Academic Programs, we have trained more than 5,000 State actors (government officials, diplomats, parliamentarians, and

¹ Alex Laban Hinton, “Critical Genocide Studies,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 7, no. 1 (2012), 4.

² Ibid.

³ For more information, Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, “Home Page,” accessed November 12, 2019, www.auschwitzinstitute.org.

security sector personnel) from over 85 countries around the world. My unique bank of experiences drawn from this frontline engagement with atrocity prevention training for State actors has shaped much of my thinking in this paper.

In early July 2018, Hikmet Karcic, an author and genocide researcher from Sarajevo, received unsettling news from the European Parliament (EP). His exhibit commemorating the 23rd anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, agreed for over a year to be hosted by the EP, was turned away for displaying “too many skulls and bones.”⁴ Publicly, the EP worried that the exhibit, focusing on the stages leading to genocide, would potentially jeopardize Bosnia-Herzegovina’s path to Euro Atlantic integration. In truth, it was personal political calculations on the part of some EP members – including requests to remove photos of war criminals such as Slobodan Milosevic, Radovan Karadzic, and Ratko Mladic – that led to the cancellation of the exhibit.

The denial of genocide, at Srebrenica and elsewhere during the Yugoslav Wars of 1992-1995, is widespread in Republika Srpska and Serbia. In those regions, war criminals are embraced by their communities as national heroes. For the EP to cancel this exhibit, however, shows the degree to which the broader political establishment and society in Europe is not ready to come to terms with the reality of the worst atrocities committed on its soil since the Holocaust. In the words of Bosnian journalist Mirnes Kovac: “With today’s triumphalism along with the European Parliament members’ mitigation of the genocide when they rejected the exhibit’s content, the world is, in fact, encountering the most brutal lesson from Srebrenica, from Bosnia and it’s short and clear: ‘Genocide is worth it’.”⁵

“Genocide is worth it.” Kovac’s statement is not a test of a scholar’s right to free speech. Neither is it an inexcusable defense of an indefensible position, as Bruce Gilley tried to do in 2017 by arguing for “the case for colonialism” on the spectacularly misguided basis that colonialism was “beneficial” for the colonized and that the recolonization of former colonies by Western powers was worthy of consideration.⁶ Rather, this statement – “genocide is worth it” – is a disquieting, but resonant, reality on two levels.

First, genocide is worth it because, in the minds of its perpetrators, it is sound political and social strategy. We see its ubiquity throughout human history because, in short, it works more often than not. It works to marginalize or remove political opposition, to reshape the social strata of society, to privilege certain identities while disenfranchising others, to transfigure the geography of lived spaces, to separate families as the ultimate expression of state power. Indigenous communities around the world, for instance, have been marginalized by genocidal violence, most often a consequence of settler colonialism, to the point that majority groups see them as “were” rather than “are,” extinct rather than existing. Violence in the former Yugoslavia has transfigured the geography of lived space to such a degree that perpetrators have resolved what they perceived as the problem of identity plurality by being able to draw territorial and social boundaries that exclude the “other.” So, when genocide works, either as political oppression or social engineering, it transforms political and social relationships for generations. Genocide is worth it, again from the “rational actor” perspectives of those who perpetrate it, because it, more often than not, works to achieve their exterminatory or exclusionary aims.

Second, genocide is worth it because not only does it often work, but the chances of punishment for those who orchestrate and carry it out are, if existent, relatively inconsequential. Impunity is the rule rather than the exemption. A recent documentary, for instance, states that more than 800,000 SS soldiers survived the war. While several thousand were prosecuted for war crimes, only 124 were convicted.⁷ The apprehension and conviction rates for international tribunals are as equally

⁴ Mersiha Gadzo, “11 Lessons about Srebrenica genocide ‘unwelcome’ in Brussels,” *Aljazeera World News*, July 12, 2018, accessed July 30, 2018, www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2018/07/11-lessons-srebrenica-genocide-unwelcome-brussels-180711151335396.html.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Originally published as Bruce Gilley, “The Case for Colonialism,” *Third World Quarterly* (2017), the piece has since been withdrawn due to “serious and credible threats of personal violence” to the journal editor.

⁷ Ken Eisner, “The Accountant of Auschwitz Opens the Books on Genocide,” *The Georgia Straight*, July 18, 2018, accessed July 30, 2018, www.straight.com/movies/1104056/accountant-auschwitz-opens-books-genocide.

disconcerting, even as they are empowering for would-be perpetrators. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) indicated 161 individuals, of whom 90 were convicted, at an estimated cost of \$2.3 billion USD. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) indicted 93 individuals, of whom 62 were convicted, at an estimated cost of more than \$2 billion USD. For the beleaguered International Criminal Court (ICC), its 16 years of operation have seen the indictment of only 41 individuals, of whom 8 have been convicted, at an estimated cost of more than \$1 billion USD.⁸ The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, after 12 years in operation and an estimated cost of \$300 million USD, just recently convicted the second and third of only nine Khmer Rouge leaders who have been indicted.⁹ Clearly, genocide overwhelms justice and the lesson learned by would-be perpetrators, as I have found in my interviews with alleged and convicted perpetrators over the years, is that genocide is a benefit worth pursuing because the risk of punishment is inconsequentially small – particularly for the rank-and-file killers who are at the frontlines of the destruction.¹⁰

“Genocide is worth it.” The fact that this truth is unsettling does not make it any less true. Educated folk had truth in esteem. We value truth and aspire to it. That does not mean, however, that every truth we face will make us feel good about our world or ourselves. I argue that this is one of those truths. And yet, still, we find its truth so outlandish, and so unsettling, that it is seldom addressed seriously. In October 2017, for instance, Reuben Rose-Redwood sent a hoax proposal to 13 academic journal editors with the following pitch: “There is a longstanding orthodoxy that only emphasizes the negative dimensions of genocide and ethnic cleansing, ignoring the fact that there may also be benefits — however controversial — associated with these political practices, and that, in some cases, the benefits may even outweigh the costs.”¹¹ His use of an “outrageous” proposal to test the ethical standards in the editorial decision-making process is telling in that, to his mind, he selected a proposition with which any right-thinking person would be immediately appalled and would find no defensible reason to engage with intellectually.

Whatever degree of offensiveness, or perceived cold-hearted calculation, we find in this cost-benefit analysis, however, is irrelevant to its truthfulness and how well it reflects reality. The truth is that perpetrators, in a very practical and utilitarian sense, do weigh the costs and benefits of committing atrocities and that, in not a few cases, they proceed with the commission of atrocities precisely because the benefits outweigh the costs. This recognition pushes us to think more broadly about how we communicate the logic of atrocity prevention. We cannot comfortably restrict the logic of atrocity prevention to the persistent, but misguided, belief that its moral urgency – the preservation of human rights and life – is what must be communicated and that, if communicated effectively, would-be bad actors will refrain from the commission of atrocities. Until we recognize that genocide is perceived as worth it to the people who perpetrate it, however morally repugnant we may find it, our “best practices” of atrocity prevention will continue to fall short.

The restricted logic of atrocity prevention as grounded in moral urgency is particularly misguided, even reckless, when thrown into the bureaucratic structures of State actors. Moral urgency does not fall within the purview of how most State actors self-define “national interests.” As such, appealing to it will be particularly ineffectual, as we have seen time after time. State actors are embedded in bureaucratic structures where rigidity overrides creativity and decision-making occurs with a glacial pace. Bureaucratic structures seldom leave room for moral agency, let alone moral urgency. So, for atrocity prevention to be communicated most effectively to State actors,

⁸ Data for the ICTY, ICTR, and ICC are taken from Carolyn Kenney and John Norris, “International Justice on Trial: Taking Stock of International Justice Over the Past Quarter Century,” *Center for American Progress*, March 28, 2018, accessed November 30, 2018, www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/03/28/448415/international-justice-trial/.

⁹ See Hannah Beech, “Khmer Rouge’s Slaughter in Cambodia is Ruled a Genocide,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 2018.

¹⁰ See James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹¹ Reuben Rose-Redwood, “Genocide Hoax Tests Ethics of Academic Publishing,” *The Conversation*, July 2, 2018, accessed July 30, 2018, www.theconversation.com/genocide-hoax-tests-ethics-of-academic-publishing-98436.

we must move beyond simple moral urgency and find other ways in which their agency can be mobilized.

This paper argues that, in building the capacity and agency of State actors, we must broaden the logic of atrocity prevention to most effectively promote the prevention of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. That broadening of logic is built on three interrelated tasks that represent best practices of engagement with State actors: (a) recognizing the reality of atrocity prevention as a multilayered approach running throughout the pre-, mid-, and post-conflict cycle, (b) understanding atrocity prevention as a cost-benefit exercise, different from, but overlapping with, conflict prevention and (c) identifying the specific features of bureaucratic information processing that too often lead political will away from atrocity prevention.

Atrocity prevention is a multilayered approach running throughout the pre-, mid-, and post-conflict cycle.

When atrocity prevention is narrowly understood as crisis management or humanitarian intervention, it is reduced to self-interested actions that often accelerate the rate of mass violence as well as reinforce global hierarchies built on colonial and post-colonial structures.¹² Effective atrocity prevention requires a re-imagining of that logic to recognize a continuum of strategies that include preventing atrocities from ever taking place (upstream prevention), preventing further atrocities once they have begun (midstream prevention), and preventing future atrocities once a society embarks on rebuilding after mass violence (downstream prevention). Central is the notion that prevention does not end when the violence begins. As Gareth Evans argues: “Prevention’ language can reasonably be applied at *all* stages of the conflict cycle.”¹³

Let’s contextualize this continuum of prevention strategies in an analogy. Imagine you are standing beside a river and see someone caught in the current and struggling for their life. You jump in and manage to pull the victim ashore. Just as you catch your breath, however, another person in distress comes downstream...followed by another and another and another. Rather than remaining downstream and exhausting yourself on the rescue of individuals already in distress, you travel upstream to find the source of the problem. You may discover a hole in a bridge or perhaps of a lack of a protective fence on a cliff. You have changed, though, the calculus of what prevention means – rather than expending your resources and energy on rescuing people in crisis, you can now try to stop the crisis at its source. Saving victims in crisis and fixing the source of the crisis are both forms of prevention – as is helping victims the moment they fall into the river rather than waiting until they have been swept downstream – each simply occur at different stages of the process of prevention. Clearly, focusing prevention efforts at the source of the crisis, before it happens, is more efficient and less costly than managing the consequences of the crisis once it has occurred. You may not stop all of the people from falling into the river, at least not right away, but – by addressing the root cause – you have decreased risk and there will be far fewer people to rescue downstream.

Following a population-based health model where the aim is the prevention of the disease of genocide and other mass atrocities, we can think of three stages in a continuum of prevention strategies – primary, secondary, and tertiary.¹⁴ Primary prevention is *upstream prevention*; fixing the hole in the bridge or constructing a protective barrier to prevent people from falling into the river. Upstream prevention is the “before” analysis of the longer-term governance, historical, economic, and societal factors that leave a country at *risk* for genocide and other mass atrocities and the inoculation avenues open to mitigating those risk factors. Like genocide itself, upstream prevention is a process, not an event. It is a long-term strategy of building underlying structures of societal and state durability related to governance, the interpretation of conflict history, economic conditions, and social cohesion. Upstream genocide prevention is built on sustained efforts to increase the

¹² See Daniel Feierstein’s related paper in this special issue.

¹³ Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 281.

¹⁴ See James Waller, *Confronting Evil: Engaging Our Responsibility to Prevent Genocide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

capacity and resilience of societies to inoculate themselves against the risk of mass atrocity. These are long-sighted measures – often underappreciated or even unrecognized because they have led to a non-event – intended to minimize the necessity for midstream crisis management or reactive measures.

Upstream prevention strategies are universal; that is, they can – and should – be applied broadly for a population regardless of their current state of risk. While many developed states think of atrocity prevention as a foreign policy issue, it also should be recognized as a domestic concern as no state is immune to the risk of genocide. Upstream strategies for atrocity prevention also can be selectively applied to populations who have been identified in some ways as being at heightened risk for genocide. For their most durable and sustainable effectiveness, however, it is important that upstream strategies for atrocity prevention come from within a society rather than being imposed from without. Localized community-based initiatives that are highly responsive to the unique internal dynamics of the society are crucial in building a state’s resilience, reducing its susceptibility to genocide and, ultimately, reinforcing a state’s sovereignty. In addition, increased “emphasis should be placed on building the capacity of non-state actors, including traditional and religious institutions, to identify and monitor risk factors preceding mass atrocity crimes.”¹⁵

The work of my colleagues at AIPR, for instance, has intersected with the birth of national mechanisms for the prevention of genocide and other atrocity crimes in Mexico, the US, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Argentina, and Paraguay.¹⁶ As just one example from this list, Tanzania’s National Committee for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, War Crimes, Crimes Against Humanity and All Forms of Discrimination (TNC), established in February 2012, was the first of its kind in the Great Lakes Region, site of some of Africa’s most intractable and violent conflicts. Housed within Tanzania’s Ministry of Constitutional and Legal Affairs, this committee includes a broad-based national membership drawn from government, civil society, and faith-based organizations. In addition to several AIPR-led training seminars to build the capacity of the committee, the group has developed collaborative ties with a range of other international partners, including the UN’s Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Since its inception, the TNC has had a remarkable impact throughout Tanzania, leading Peace Forum workshops, bringing diverse religious leaders together to brainstorm strategies for the promotion of social cohesion, establishing Joint Peace Committees in regions throughout the country, and conducting periodic risk assessments of conflict-prone areas in Tanzania and its neighboring countries.

Secondary prevention is *midstream prevention*; the rescue of victims just as they hit the water but before they are swept further downstream. Midstream prevention “during” the crisis captures the immediate, real-time *response* efforts – political, economic, legal, and military – that are direct crisis management tactics to slow, limit, or halt the mass violence. The mistaken belief that, short of full-scale coercive military intervention, little or nothing can be done to respond to an ongoing genocide is a failure of preventive creativity.¹⁷ We have a diverse and wide-ranging set of preventive response tools that can be applied in myriad creative ways to a broad spectrum of actors and interests. To believe otherwise is willful neglect.

Even when we are aware of the tools in the preventive toolbox, however, we still need to articulate better principles for how they are used. “Future work should emphasize the interactions between the various tools that slow or stop the killing, so as to better understand how best to

¹⁵ Kwesi Aning and Frank Okyere, “Responsibility to Prevent in Africa: Leveraging Institutional Capacity to Mitigate Atrocity Risk,” *Policy Analysis Brief* (Muscatine: The Stanley Foundation, January 2015), 1.

¹⁶ For the most recent description of these national mechanisms, see access Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, *National Mechanisms for the Prevention of Genocide and other Atrocity Crimes* (New York: AIPR and Cardozo Law, 2018), accessed November 9, 2019, www.auschwitzinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2018-National-Mechanisms-Booklet-web.pdf.

¹⁷ Madeline K. Albright and William S. Cohen, *Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers* (Washington, DC: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the American Academy of Diplomacy, and the Endowment of the United States Institute of Peace, 2008), 56.

deploy ‘all the means at our disposal.’”¹⁸ As Alan Kuperman warns, a poorly-conceived and poorly-implemented response to genocide can create a “moral hazard” that increases the very human suffering that it intends to alleviate.¹⁹ Certainly, used in isolation, any one of the preventive response tools is unlikely to slow, limit, or stop genocide violence. Employed, though, in conjunction with other tools, and as part of larger overall framework conditioned on the principle of “do no harm,” the strategic application of several of these preventive response tools can go a long way toward mitigating genocidal conflict and protecting civilians.

Finally, tertiary prevention is *downstream prevention*; the hopeful resuscitation of victims who were swept away because upstream or midstream prevention failed. Downstream prevention refers to the “after” efforts to foster *resilience* by dealing with the acute long-term consequences of mass violence through pursuits of justice, truth, and memory to help stabilize, heal, and rehabilitate a post-genocide society. Verbitsky, a prominent Argentine journalist best known for reporting the confessions of Francisco Scilingo, a retired naval officer who admitted to throwing live prisoners out of airplanes and into the sea on the so-called “flights of death,” said: “People always ask, ‘Why reopen wounds that have closed?’ Because they were badly closed. First you have to cure the infection, or they will reopen themselves.”²⁰ Societal wounds that reopen after genocide leave a society at considerable risk. This is why, from a downstream prevention standpoint, it is vital to focus on social repair – “closing the wounds” – after genocide.

Complementary pursuits of justice, truth, and memory can be important mechanisms of social repair in a post-atrocity society. They are paths that cleave a trail to societal reconstruction. While States carry the primary responsibility for such repair, the international community (including international and regional organizations, neighbors, states, private companies and businesses, and civil society) has a responsibility to assist States in building the capacity to carry out that repair. It also is important to note that no one transitional justice mechanism can address the myriad problems facing a post-genocide society. “The large number of victims, inadequate legal systems, and traumatized societies require countries to adopt multiple transitional justice mechanisms.”²¹ No single mechanism of transitional justice – be it rooted in justice, truth, or memory – is as impactful on its own as when combined with the others.

We should not create an artificial distinction between these stages of prevention strategies, boundary them in mutually exclusive boxes, nor suggest an overly simplistic sequential approach to the protection of populations. Mass atrocities are often more cyclical than linear.²² So upstream, midstream, and downstream prevention efforts work in an interconnected and synergistic, rather than isolated, fashion. I also do not mean to imply a strict temporal process; most conflicts are an intricate tangle of pre, mid- and post-conflict at any one time. As a result, the defining element of an upstream preventive approach, for example, is not “when” it takes place but rather that it seeks to address the underlying causes of conflict. “In theory, interventions to prevent conflict upstream can be undertaken at any point during the conflict cycle, even at the same time as measures to address the symptoms of conflict are also being carried out.”²³ In short, these stages of prevention, and the measures involved in each, are complexly linked and state responsibility, buttressed by international assistance for capacity building, is threaded throughout all three stages of the continuum.

¹⁸ Matthew Krain, “The Effects of Diplomatic Sanctions and Engagement in the Severity of Ongoing Genocides or Politicides,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no.1 (2014), 47.

¹⁹ See Alan J. Kuperman, “The Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Balkans,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (2008), 49-80.

²⁰ Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 145.

²¹ Tricia D. Olsen, et al, “The Justice Balance: When Transitional Justice Improves Human Rights and Democracy,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2010), 990.

²² USAID, “Field Guide: Helping Prevent Mass Atrocities,” (April 2015), 26.

²³ Saferworld, “Upstream Conflict Prevention: Addressing the Root Causes of Conflict,” *Saferworld Briefing* (September 2012), 2.

By broadening the logic of atrocity prevention to a continuum of prevention strategies, rather than artificially isolating prevention as simply a reaction to crisis, we also broaden the range of actors who play roles in prevention. These actors include domestic non-state actors (civil society, traditional and religious institutions, education, localized community-based initiatives, etc.), state actors, multilateral regional organizations that oblige member states to surrender a measure of state sovereignty for the sake of collective goals, and international actors working through internationally-recognized organizations.

Atrocity prevention as a cost-benefit exercise, different from, but overlapping with, conflict prevention.

In atrocity prevention, the measures used and those targeted by a particular strategy, as well as the objectives and type of engagement, may be narrower than the measures deemed suitable for more general conflict prevention. Where a conflict prevention strategy might consider the use of amnesty for perpetrators, for instance, such a strategy for mass atrocity prevention would compromise criminal accountability in an unacceptable way.²⁴ In yet other ways, atrocity prevention strategies may be broader, including, for example, physical protection for vulnerable groups, a tool rarely associated with conflict prevention.²⁵ In some cases, the exact same prevention tools might have decidedly different targets or objectives when tailored to the context of atrocity or conflict prevention. In atrocity prevention, for example, sanctions may be used coercively to target specific actors we are seeking to dissuade from committing atrocities. In the case of conflict prevention, the same tool could be directed cooperatively at several actors we are seeking to bring together in a consensual peace agreement.²⁶

In many ways, though, the preventive implications for conflict and atrocity are markedly interconnected; many of the actions taken to prevent the former will necessarily reduce the occurrence of the latter. Just as the number of drowning incidents is likely to increase as more people head to the water on a hot day, the number of atrocities will increase as more conflicts emerge globally. So, understanding the general sources of conflict, and how they may be mitigated, will go a long way towards helping us at least indirectly prevent, or reduce the number of, atrocities. As Alex Bellamy argues, “there can be no meaningful and effective agenda for the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities that does not incorporate the prevention of armed conflict and the measures commonly associated with it.”²⁷ In short, the prevention of conflict should be a core element of any atrocity prevention strategy.

Atrocity prevention reduces four types of costs—human, instability, economic, and diplomatic.²⁸ Atrocity prevention is primarily focused on reducing *human costs* through the protection and preservation of human life and security. Even the most restrictive of definitions estimates that at least 60 million men, women, and children were victims of genocide and mass killing in the past century alone.²⁹ On the upper end, political scientist Rudolph Rummel argues that close to 170 million civilians were done to death in the twentieth century.³⁰ Unfortunately, the first two decades of the twenty-first century have brought little light to the darkness as a variety of international watch lists suggest that close to 20 countries are currently “at risk” for genocide. Even for those who survive, genocide is a collective trauma, a redefining destruction that shatters their assumptive world and transforms societies for generations.

²⁴ Claudia Diaz, personal communication, February 9, 2015.

²⁵ USAID, *Field Guide*, 8.

²⁶ See Alex Bellamy, “Mass Atrocities and Armed Conflict: Links, Distinctions, and Implications for the Responsibility to Prevent” (Muscatine: The Stanley Foundation, February 2011), 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁸ These four types of costs are taken from United Nations, *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention*, October 2014, 2.

²⁹ See Roger W. Smith, “Human Destructiveness and Politics: The Twentieth Century as an Age of Genocide,” in *Genocide and the Modern Age: Etiology and Case Studies of Mass Death*, eds. Isidor Wallimann and Michael N. Dobkowski (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 21.

³⁰ R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1994).

In addition, atrocity prevention reduces *instability costs* by contributing to national peace and stability in fragile countries, as well as promoting regional and international peace and stability. As the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) report argued, “these days, good international citizenship is a matter of national self-interest. With the world as close and interdependent as it now is, and with crises in ‘faraway countries of which we know little’ as capable as they now are of generating major problems elsewhere (with refugee outflows, health pandemics, terrorism, narcotics trafficking, organized crime and the like), it is strongly arguable that it is in every country’s interest to contribute cooperatively to the resolution of such problems, quite apart from the humanitarian imperative to do so.”³¹

Atrocity prevention also reduces *economic costs* as prevention is much less costly than intervening to stop genocide or rebuilding in the aftermath of a mass destruction that has destroyed the development trajectory of a state or region. That is, the strategies available to us for upstream prevention are much less costly, in an economic sense, than the available strategies for midstream prevention once atrocity has broken out or, even more so, for downstream prevention for rebuilding after the atrocities are over. In a world where the global economic impact of violence was \$14.76 trillion in 2017 alone, the economic costs potentially addressed by effective atrocity prevention are no small issue.³²

Finally, atrocity prevention reduces *diplomatic costs* as it reinforces state sovereignty by limiting the more intrusive and invasive forms of response, from other States or international actors, that may be required to halt atrocity crimes. The violation of state sovereignty by the use of military force for nonconsensual coercive intervention carries with it significant costs. To the civilians it is meant to protect, military intervention can inflame hostilities and put them at greater risk by further destabilizing the state in which they reside. To a perpetrator regime it is meant to defeat, military intervention can rouse sympathy among bystander nations and lead perpetrators to blame the victims for the costs they are now suffering. To an international order predicated on state sovereignty, military intervention can undermine that “last defense against the rules of an unequal world” and raise the abusive threat of powerful states meddling in the affairs of those less powerful.³³

Atrocity prevention is impeded by bureaucratic information processing that too often leads political will in a non-preventive direction.

As mentioned earlier, State actors are embedded in bureaucratic structures where rigidity overrides creativity and decision-making occurs with a glacial pace. While there are certainly cultural variations in how bureaucracies function, a common thread is that many become self-sustaining institutions in which substantive gaps between information received and action taken become a natural consequence of risk-adverse hierarchical structures often build on cautious prudence. These realities become particularly problematic when State actors, often with too little support and too few resources, are being asked to use their agency to respond to escalating situations of violent conflict.

In 1997, Alexander George and Jane Holl first identified the “warning-response” gap in a Carnegie Commission report on preventing deadly conflict. “If events such as in Bosnia, Kuwait, and Rwanda,” they asked, “are known (and increasingly knowable, given the rapidly contracting nature of global interactions), why are they not prevented?”³⁴ Rather than a lack of timely or accurate early warning, George and Holl posited a systematic warning-response gap as the key

³¹ International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), *The Responsibility to Protect* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001), 36.

³² Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Peace Index 2018*, accessed September 14, 2018, www.visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/06/Global-Peace-Index-2018-2.pdf.

³³ Quote is from Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, cited in Barbara Crossette, “U.N. Chief Wants Faster Action to Halt Civil Wars and Killings,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 1999, A12.

³⁴ Alexander L. George and Jane E. Holl, “The Warning-Response Problem and Missed Opportunities in Preventive Diplomacy,” *A Report to the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict*, accessed April 4, 2015, www.carnegie.org/fileadmin/Media/Publications/PDF/The%20Warning-Response%20Problem%20and%20Missed%20Opportunities%20in%20Preventive%20Diplomacy.pdf, 4.

factor in understanding policy delay or paralysis in the face of deadly conflict. They cited six reasons, related to decision makers' information processing, for this warning-response gap:

- the relatively low stakes perceived to be at risk for a given state's vital national interests;
- the uncertainty and interpretive ambiguity of knowing which trouble spots are likely to explode and when;
- the lack of theories and models to assess and predict the significance of early warning indicators;
- the dread of "false triggers," or a "cry wolf" phenomenon, that may register preventive actions as premature or unnecessary;
- the impracticality of responding with preventive actions given the large number of low-level crises and the ever-growing limitation of resources; and
- the fear of a "slippery slope" engagement in a potentially intractable problem.³⁵

Similarly, the Albright and Cohen report admits: "Warnings always entail a degree of uncertainty, and human beings naturally resist paying certain costs today, even if small, to protect against uncertain future costs; this is true of bureaucracies all the more so. Add to this the incentives for political leaders to focus on short-term costs and benefits, and the tendency for bureaucracies to resist risky action, and it should not surprise us that it is difficult to generate support for preventive action."³⁶ Indeed, with such a list of compelling barriers to preventive action, the surprise is not that we have a warning-response gap; rather, the surprise is that the gap between warning and response is *ever* bridged.

Since George and Holl's 1997 piece, the field of genocide studies has made great strides in developing theories and models of early warning as well as unpacking the accelerators and triggers that cause trouble spots to explode. Still, however, four of their other reasons (low stakes, "false triggers," impracticality, and "slippery slope") for the warning-response gap remain relevant. For many, this warning-response gap can best be bridged by making sure that "early warning is not simply the sharing of information about an impending crisis, let alone the wail of a siren announcing the imminence of such a crisis. Early warning goes beyond the collection and sharing of information to include both analysis of that information *and* the formulation of appropriate strategic choices given the analysis."³⁷ That is, the impact of early warning can be heightened by also offering appropriate response strategies to the at-risk situation, rather than simply warning that an at-risk situation is getting worse. As Annika Bjorkdahl suggests, political will and capability can be strengthened by presenting "decision makers with a clear policy alternative which identifies the tools and strategies relevant to the main objective of the preventive effort."³⁸ So, in essence, bridging the warning-response gap, rather than being thought of as "where there is a will, there is a way," might be best framed as "where there is a way, there is a will."³⁹

As Christoph Meyer et al. emphasize, however, just adding policy or action recommendations to early warning does not close the warning-response gap, even when early warning is regionalized or localized "by directly involving those who will have to carry the brunt of the consequences should a conflict escalate."⁴⁰ It can be more helpful, they argue, to approach early warning as a nuanced and graduated persuasive process – rather than an informational, educational, or alerting activity with a simple binary outcome of action or no action. Drawing on an extensive body of social scientific literature, they distinguish between five distinct stages of persuasion – reception,

³⁵ Ibid., 9-10.

³⁶ Albright and Cohen, *Preventing Genocide*, 22.

³⁷ Howard Adelman, "Difficulties in Early Warning: Networking and Conflict Management," in *Early Warning and Conflict Prevention: Limitations and Possibilities*, ed. Klaas van Walraven (Netherlands: Nijhoff Law Specials, 1998), 57.

³⁸ Annika Bjorkdahl, "Developing a Toolbox for Conflict Prevention," in *Preventing Violent Conflict: The Search for Political Will, Strategies and Effective Tools*, ed. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, (Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2000), 17.

³⁹ John N. Clarke, "Early Warning Analysis for Humanitarian Preparedness and Conflict Prevention," *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (2004), 10, accessed April 4, 2015, <http://sites.tufts.edu/jha/files/2011/04/a146.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Christoph O. Meyer, et al., "Recasting the Warning-Response Problem: Persuasion and Preventive Policy," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2010), 560.

attention, acceptance, prioritization, and the decision to mobilize. When applied to early warning, warning can fail to elicit response – for various reasons – at each stage. For instance, even if a decision maker has received an early warning, attended to it, and accepted its veracity, they still may be unconvinced that the pending crisis is a greater priority than other current or future crises pressing for their attention. So, in this case, low prioritization of the early warning becomes a barrier to preventive response. Recasting the warning-response problem as a special case of persuasive discourse can go a long way toward understanding how early warning is best communicated at each stage of the communication process. In so doing, we increase our gap-bridging chances “to raise a given recipient’s awareness about a potential threat to a valued good or interest to enhance her ability to take preventive or mitigating action.”⁴¹

Thinking of early warning as a persuasive process also opens us up to the different vectors of preventive persuasion that can impact reception, attention, acceptance, prioritization, and the decision to mobilize. For instance, much attention has been drawn to the use of Facebook as a tool of perpetration in Burma. For the past several years, Myanmar military personnel used Facebook to wage a systematic campaign targeting the country’s Muslim-majority Rohingya minority group. Human rights groups blamed this propaganda for inciting violence against the Rohingya, acts which a recent UN fact-finding mission labeled as “genocide.”⁴² Far less attention, however, has been given to the use of social media as a tool of atrocity prevention. While, in theory, most agree there is a preventive power in social media to inform and shape decision-making processes, relatively little empirical work has been devoted to analyzing exactly how such tools can be used in a preventive capacity.⁴³

Crucial to this persuasive process, by whatever medium through which it is communicated, is the collective mobilization of political will. The oft-stated notion that “nations don’t have friends, nations have interests” reminds us of the importance of prioritizing how responding to genocide is in our best interests. Unfortunately, baser political and strategic interests too often override humanitarian concerns. As Meyer et al. argue, the calculus underlying political will “is not ‘do we care about x,’ but ‘how much do we care about x in comparison to y and z.’”⁴⁴ Often, what State actors care most about is the well-being of their own citizens rather than the protection of civilians from atrocity in other countries. Juan Mendez states: “I have no doubt that the greatest contributing factor to humankind’s inability to protect vulnerable populations from slaughter is the absence of political will to act on the part of leaders that do have the solution at their disposal.”⁴⁵ In reality, though, the issue is not an absence of political will; rather, the issue is political will displaced elsewhere and the subsequent need for a reshaping of how we interpret “national interests” and international obligations.

Finally, particularly in the context of working with State actors, we must acknowledge the seismic changes in contemporary political landscapes that exacerbate the challenges we face in broadening the logic of atrocity prevention. The notion that countries should privilege democracy over all else is no longer unquestioned and support for autocratic alternatives continues to rise. In the words of Michael Abramowitz, president of Freedom House: “Democracy is in crisis. The values it embodies—particularly the right to choose leaders in free and fair elections, freedom of the press, and the rule of law—are under assault and in retreat globally.”⁴⁶ These comments regarding a global democratic recession coincide with a 2018 report indicating that democracy was

⁴¹ Ibid., 567.

⁴² See United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar,” accessed September 27, 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/myanmarffm/pages/index.aspx>.

⁴³ For a recent review of the state of the field, see the special issue Colette Mazzucelli and Anna Visvizi “Information and Communications Technologies in Mass Atrocities Research and Response,” special issue, *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 11, no. 1 (2017).

⁴⁴ Meyer, et al, *Recasting the Warning-Response Problem*, 561.

⁴⁵ Project for a UN Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS), *Standing for Change in Peacekeeping Operations* (New York: Global Action to Prevent War, 2009), 44.

⁴⁶ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2018*, accessed May 27, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>.

on the retreat and authoritarianism on the rise in more than 96 of the UN's 193 member states.⁴⁷ A diverse set of research suggests that states with a lower degree of democratization are at greater risk for the onset of conflict or mass atrocity.

Concomitant with the above is a rise in violation of basic freedoms worldwide. For instance, the *CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report* found that, in 2017, the space for civil society – including the core civic freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression – had become closed, repressed, or obstructed in 109 countries.⁴⁸ Similarly, *Freedom in the World 2018*, the latest in a series of annual reports by Freedom House, found that – for the twelfth year in a row – freedom around the world is declining. Over the period since the 12-year global slide began in 2006, 113 countries have seen a net decline, and only 62 have experienced a net improvement.⁴⁹

We also are seeing an increasingly divided world in terms of peace and security. The well-respected *Global Peace Index*, issued annually by London's Institute for Economics and Peace, found that global peacefulness has deteriorated by 2.14 percent in the decade since 2008, with 52 percent of countries recording a deterioration, while 48 per cent improved.⁵⁰ The thirteenth annual *Fragile States Index* (FSI), published by The Fund for Peace, is an assessment of 178 countries based on twelve social, economic, and political indicators that quantifies pressures experienced by countries, and thus their susceptibility to instability. FSI 2017 found that factionalization and group grievance were fueling a rise in instability across the globe, including in a number of developed countries.⁵¹ In the words of executive director J.J. Messner: "When you see the most fragile countries continuing to worsen and the most stable countries continuing to improve over time, it suggests fragility begets fragility and stability begets stability."⁵²

To these warning signs can be added a number of potent international and local drivers of conflict that raise additional concern for our future. These intersecting drivers of conflict include economic fragility, mismanagement of natural resources and tensions over equality of access to them, population growth, transnational organized crime, climate change, and the proliferation of violent non-state actors.⁵³ These intersecting drivers of conflict do not respect state borders.

Taken collectively, all of these factors suggest a tenuously uncertain future, foreshadowed in the echoes of an increasingly violent present. Indeed, it seems that our words of "never again" most often translate into actions leading to "again and again," "ever again," and "here we go again." On our worst of days, our commitment to atrocity can be compromised by a diminishing will, a problem fatigue, or a selfish isolationism. On our best of days, however, we realize that, as Gareth Evans said in a 2012 lecture at Central European University, "genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity were not no one else's business, but everyone's business."⁵⁴

In the field of atrocity prevention, State actors are but one actor with one set of tools. There are many actors with many tools and part of the challenge in working with State actors is to help them understand how to most effectively work with other diverse non-state actors – including academics, civil society, traditional and religious leaders, educational leaders, and localized community-based initiatives. While they do not always share common interests or utilize the tools for common purposes, the many actors can be mobilized to create the political will necessary to prevent genocide and mass atrocity. As Evans writes:

⁴⁷ Civicus, *State of Civil Society Report 2018*, accessed May 27, 2018, https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2018/socs-2018-overview_top-ten-trends.pdf.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2018*.

⁵⁰ Vision of Humanity, *Global Peace Index 2017*, accessed May 27, 2018, <http://visionofhumanity.org/indexes/global-peace-index/>.

⁵¹ The Fund for Peace, *Fragile States Index 2017*, accessed May 27, 2018, www.fundforpeace.org/fsi/2017/05/14/fsi-2017-factionalization-and-group-grievance-fuel-rise-in-instability/.

⁵² The Fund for Peace, Press Release, accessed June 30, 2015, www.library.fundforpeace.org/fsi15-pressrelease.

⁵³ Clare Castillejo, "Fragile States: An Urgent Challenge for EU Foreign Policy," *Working Paper No. 126* (Madrid: FRIDE, February 2015), 2-7.

⁵⁴ Central European University, "Gareth Evans speaks about R2P at CEU's School of Public Policy – snapshots," (remarks, Budapest, November 9, 2012), accessed July 1, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ym6BDzUGZ8Q.

Political will is capable of creation and subject to change: its presence or absence is not a given... It has to be painfully and laboriously constructed, case by case, context by context. And all of us have a role in this respect... It is also a matter of bottom-up mobilization: making the voices of ordinary concerned citizens heard in the corridors of power, using all the resources and physical and moral energy of civil society organizations all round the world to force the attention of policymakers on what needs to be done, by whom, and when.⁵⁵

Juan Mendez concurs with the importance of bottom-up mobilization in which political will “is constructed over time by the force of public opinion that can shame leaders out of their complacency and into effective action.”⁵⁶

In sum, atrocity prevention is an achievable goal, but it requires each of us to take seriously our global civic responsibilities in whatever role and in whatever place we find ourselves. While perpetrators will still, too often, make a utilitarian calculation that “genocide is worth it,” the world that we have made is not the one for which we must settle. The field of atrocity prevention must remain steadfastly committed to building bridges with State actors and broadening the logic of prevention in such a way as to recognize the multilayered approaches to prevention, understand prevention as a cost-benefit exercise, and identify the bureaucratic features of information processing that too often result in leading political will away from atrocity prevention.

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⁵⁵ Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect*, 224.

⁵⁶ Project for a UN Emergency Peace Service (UNEPS), *Standing for Change in Peacekeeping Operations*, 44.

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