the auschwitz institute
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Policy Brief in Prevention

Building Resilience to Genocide

Ten Practical Measures

Introduction

Reducing the threat posed by genocide in our world is more achievable than ever before. New research on genocide prevention offers fresh insights and practical steps to reduce risk. The development of mass atrocity risk lists, for example, provides specific information as to the countries in which genocide prevention efforts might be effectively targeted. Accompanying these advances, there has also been a greater allocation of resources dedicated to prevention in recent years. This includes the establishment of the United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, the Atrocities Prevention Board within the United States government, and a proliferation of non-governmental organizations focused on prevention.

This upsurge in research and resources could have a profound impact. Yet to do so, efforts must be focused on the most effective approaches to reducing the risk and incidence of genocide. This brief provides recommendations on practical, evidence-based measures that can build resilience to genocide in at-risk states. Recommendations are targeted toward policymakers and practitioners within national governments, intergovernmental organizations, and non-governmental organizations working to prevent genocide and mass atrocities.

Genocide Prevention as a Process

Armenian Genocide Memorial, Montebello, California. It is estimated that more than 250 million civilians were victimized by genocide and mass atrocities during the twentieth century.

Essential to this endeavor is understanding that prevention, like genocide itself, is a long-term process and not a single event. At any given point, the likelihood of genocide occurring in a country can be understood as a "risk profile," comprising risk factors and resilience factors. Risk factors, such as the persecution of a vulnerable minority, increase the likelihood of genocide over time. Resilience factors, such as an impartial and independent legal system, reduce the likelihood of genocide over time.

Resilience factors are particularly important, as the elimination of risk factors is not always feasible through the implementation of government policies. Factors such as discrimination against a minority population or economic challenges can be deeply entrenched in at-risk states. Some of the risks associated with these long-term factors, however, can be offset by resilience factors. Putting in place robust measures to respond to discrimination, for example, or to provide opportunities for

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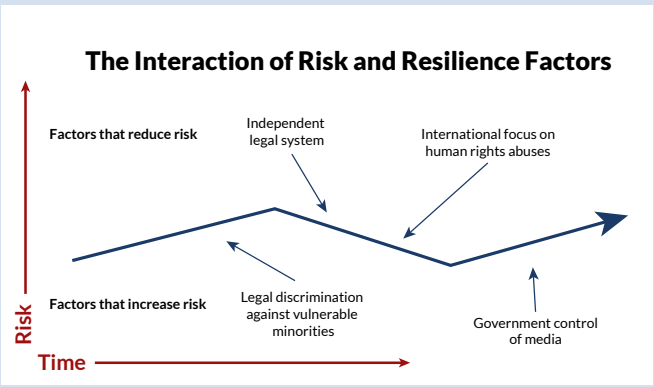


A state's risk profile for genocide reflects the relative dominance and interaction of risk and resilience factors and can change over time. Measures to build resilience in at-risk states can lead to sustained reductions in risk of genocide.

young people at risk of joining a militia, can have a protective effect. Over time, using such measures can reduce a state's risk profile for genocide.

An Evidence-Based Approach

Understanding genocide prevention as a process of reducing risk over time enables a focus on practical measures that can have a real impact. This policy brief presents ten such measures, developed through careful analysis of historical case studies in which a potential genocide was averted.

Previously, most research in this field has focused on case studies of genocide. In these cases, however, risk factors dominated and resilience factors were inoperable or ineffective. This has limited analysis of the role of resilience factors.

By contrast, the research that informs this brief has focused on historical cases in which a genuine risk of genocide was averted. Using this dataset of cases, in which resilience factors were effective, has led to new research findings. The following measures are therefore the result of close analysis of factors that have contributed to reducing the potential for genocide in at-risk states in the past. Each has been identified as reducing risk of genocide in multiple case studies, indicating their potential effectiveness in contemporary situations. These practical measures, when used appropriately, have real potential to increase stability and decrease risk of genocide in at-risk states.

Measures to Reduce Risk

A Localized Focus Can Have a National Impact

Utilize Local Agency

Local agency, with appropriate support, can make a crucial difference in building resilience to genocide. Vulnerable minorities are inherently those most heavily invested in their own protection. Despite the relative weakness of their position and the risks that may be associated with taking action, vulnerable minorities are often able to identify a pathway with the potential to improve their position.

In the past, when such minorities have received appropriate external support, the actions they have undertaken have proven effective in reducing or even eliminating their risk of genocide. For example, vulnerable minorities have been able to bring their plight to the attention of international media and the United Nations, leading to a stronger international response to their persecution. It is important to qualify this measure by highlighting that in no way should vulnerable minorities at risk of genocide be expected to somehow "save themselves," no matter how dire the circumstances. Nevertheless, it suggests the need for greater prioritization of local perspectives in genocide prevention. Working with vulnerable groups to identify potential protective measures could lead to the development of important initiatives. These measures are likely to be context-specific rather than cross-situational, and therefore different from those identified through external analyses. Moreover, past examples suggest that such proposals are likely to be feasible with even limited support.

Intensively Manage Local Areas of High Risk

Within states at risk of genocide, there are typically localities in which the risk is particularly elevated. The nature of these regions can vary widely – they may be urban or rural, areas in which unrest has previously occurred, or potentially sites of religious or other significance. They may be areas in which the vulnerable minority resides in relatively sparse numbers, lacking the protection afforded by concentration. Alternatively, they may be areas in which the minority is heavily concentrated, thereby being perceived by the government or local population as posing a threat. Despite their diversity, both governments and the minority groups themselves can readily identify these "hotspots." Intensive management to reduce risk of escalation in these locations can work towards the prevention of escalation more broadly.

In the early 1980s, the Baha'i minority in Iran experienced increasing persecution. Experts feared the escalating violence could lead to genocide. In response, the Baha'i community, led by many in the diaspora, mounted a concerted campaign to bring global attention to the situation. International condemnation at the United Nations, by the United States and other countries, helped ease the repression experienced by the Baha'i, reducing the risk of genocide.

Historically, a common escalatory pathway begins with a local incident sparking a wider cycle of violence. Moreover, governments seeking to create an escalatory dynamic will often target such hotspots. They may provoke an incident that is then used to justify a disproportionate response. In high-risk circumstances, governments may target a hotspot for a "trial massacre," as these localized outbreaks of violence escalate the conflict more broadly.

Through intensive management, preventing localized escalations in areas where they are most likely thereby functions to prevent a broader escalation of conflict.

Ensure Robust and Sustained Reactions to Local Escalations of Risk

Local incidents of violence, irrespective of their origin or nature, can trigger a broader escalation of the risk of genocide. An incident may take the form of a protest that escalates into a riot, a violent episode perpetrated by one party to the conflict that triggers a wider outbreak of violence, or a massacre. Such events can break down previously established norms related to an "acceptable" level of violence, creating an escalatory dynamic. They can be used by governments to justify broad retaliatory or repressive measures targeting the vulnerable minority. Moreover, they can trigger a process in which political leaders are effectively rewarded by the violence.

For example, a population disturbed by continued violence may lend greater support to the government in the hope of deterring future outbreaks. Localized violence may also reduce scrutiny related to ongoing domestic issues. In either case, future incidents become incentivized. As the risk of genocide increases, governments also use trial massacres as a barometer to gauge international reactions.

In each of these cases, a robust international reaction raises the costs of the escalatory dynamic. This may include strong rhetorical condemnation, demands for investigations and legal redress, as well as policy responses. Appeasement, or a relatively muted reaction, gives a clear signal to potential perpetrators that escalation is a viable option. While a strong initial response is crucial, sustaining that response over the longer term is equally, if not more, important, though rarely recognized as such. The time period during which governments in at-risk states

review the international reaction to violent incidents is one of months or years, not days. An initial outcry is thus of limited value, should the incident in question not have a sustained impact on international relations.

Instead, the incident should remain part of the diplomatic conversation for an extended period of time and include a focus on the need for perpetrators to be brought to justice (nationally or internationally). There should be sustained attention on human rights and the need for mass atrocity risk reduction. A domestic or international inquiry into the incident and a focus on ensuring that any resulting recommendations are implemented should ideally be part of this process. This level of robust and sustained reaction, coming from as many sources as possible, can directly impact governmental decision-making processes regarding further violence.

Work with Governments of At-Risk States

Aid Governments in Implementing Domestic Proposals to Reduce Risk

Historical evidence demonstrates that there are opportune moments to work with governments in at-risk states, aiding them to implement domestic initiatives that may reduce the risk of genocide. Well before the kind of radical ideologies that result in genocide develop, governments commonly have periods during which they are actively seeking to reduce tensions through peaceable means. These efforts can be stymied, however, by a lack of resources or an absence of the required external support. The windows of opportunity then close and more radical solutions are considered. Strong diplomatic relations with at-risk states can aid in the identification of opportune moments for cooperative initiatives to build resilience to genocide.

Working with governments in this way offers numerous advantages. First, it capitalizes on the expertise of local officials with respect to identifying strategies for building resilience that are likely to be feasible and effective. Second, working alongside national-level initiatives reduces the potential for criticism drawing on sensitivities to Western impositions. Nonetheless, independent analyses should ascertain that proposed actions are widely perceived as genuine measures to reduce risk (including by the vulnerable groups themselves) and are not likely to have otherwise unforeseen consequences. The best opportunities are likely to arise in states exhibiting a low or moderate risk of genocide, rather than those on the cusp of a crisis. While these states typically do not attract the attention or resources associated with crisis intervention, this type of support can lead to long-term and structural reductions in risk.

Build Deep Relationships with States Exhibiting Low to Moderate Risk Indicators

Engaging and building multifaceted relationships with states at low to moderate risk of genocide can have multiple benefits. Governments that foster these relationships can use diplomatic means to encourage at-risk states to pursue policies that reduce risk. They can offer markers of acceptable behavior within a community of friendly countries. States are also more likely to accept assistance

Memorial to Dimitar Peshev, Kyustendil, Bulgaria. As a member of the national parliament, Peshev prevented the Jews of Bulgaria from being deported to Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust. His campaign prevented the genocide from reaching Bulgaria and saved the lives of around 48,000 Bulgarian Jews.

in managing internal challenges from those that they perceive as "friends." This assistance may include mediation services, capacity building, independent election oversight, or other activities associated with pillar two of the Responsibility to Protect.

In the event of a crisis, states with deep relationships are likely to have better local sources of intelligence to enable rapid and accurate assessment. Their multifaceted relationships, moreover, may provide sources of leverage that can be used to help resolve the crisis. Relationships between civil society organizations (both internal and external to the country) and at-risk states offer many similar advantages.

Strong relationships are a cornerstone of effective knowledge-building and advocacy. In times of crisis, those relationships can be used to facilitate access, obtain knowledge, and provide beneficial assistance. In the event of escalating risk of genocide, tension can arise between the value of maintaining and building relationships and the need to clearly signal the unacceptability of discriminatory or persecutory policies toward vulnerable groups. In these circumstances, the benefits and costs of the relationship should be carefully analyzed on a case-by-case basis.

Minimize Perceptions of Threat

A key driver of risk escalation occurs in situations where a government perceives a threat to its continued existence by a vulnerable group. It is critical to note that, in this situation, the reality of an objective threat assessment is secondary in importance to the perception of an action or event as being threatening to the government.

For example, an attempt by a state to intercede diplomatically on behalf of a minority group in another state might be perceived by the latter power as infringing upon its sovereignty. This might take place in spite of any genuine humanitarian motives behind this diplomacy. Similarly, an appeal by a persecuted minority for international assistance might be perceived as a dangerous act of disloyalty or as part of a longer-term plan for secession.

Such perceptions of threat play a crucial role because they allow a government to reinterpret their persecutory actions as self-defense, breaking down important psychological barriers to instigating violence. Governments themselves also actively manipulate perceptions of threat. By portraying vulnerable groups as threatening, they can build support for eventual genocide within the wider population.

Conducting relations with at-risk states in such a way as to minimize any perceptions of threat reduces the risk of these escalatory processes. This requires sound knowledge of local conceptions of sovereignty, and specific areas of sensitivity to avoid. Where possible, a strong emphasis on working cooperatively and careful diplomatic language can minimize perceptions of threat. This does not negate the need for robust responses to outbreaks of violence or ongoing persecution, but highlights the necessity of careful framing for such responses.

The Importance of Words and Deeds

Build Relationships between the Vulnerable Group and Others

Bystanders can play a crucial role in preventing genocide. They may be individuals or groups within an at-risk state or external actors with the capacity to raise the costs associated with conflict escalation. Whether internal or external, however, bystanders are often motivated by an affinity with the vulnerable group. Internally, this may arise from individuals having personal or professional relationships with members of the vulnerable group. It may arise from groups perceiving a common interest, such as minority groups in a society building relationships with

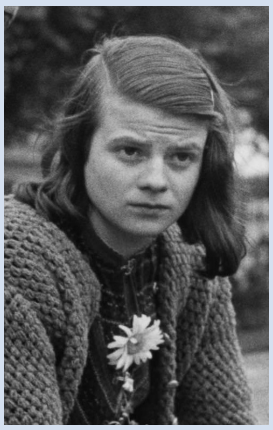
one another. Externally, it may arise from a diaspora community maintaining relations with the core; or another group or state perceiving a commonality of experience or outlook.

These relationships that extend beyond the group are beneficial to those at risk. Bystanders may choose to advocate with, or on behalf of, vulnerable groups, and can be very effective in doing so. Historically, bystander agency has played a vital role in building the resilience of vulnerable groups in circumstances of low to moderate risk. Bystander agency has also directly prevented genocide in multiple instances. There is no one clear path through which internal or external bystanders have reduced the risk of genocide, but many different paths. This highlights the fact that the key element to reduce risk is not a specific bystander action, but relationships themselves. Building and strengthening relationships between the vulnerable group and others, both internal and external to the at-risk state, increases the protective potential of such relationships.

Challenge Narratives

Narratives play a very important role in creating – or combating – the conditions that lead to genocide. Risk of genocide is often closely aligned with the presence of dominant narratives that mischaracterize a nation's history, misrepresent vulnerable groups, justify persecutory policies, and promote polarization. Challenging these narratives can stall attempts to build support for genocide within the broader population.

The role of the press is crucial. Working to maintain the rights of a free press to challenge laws and policies that inhibit the press, and to challenge the political persecution of media activists, is an important component of enabling the presence of a plurality of narratives. Working to safeguard or promote digital freedom and unfettered internet access further supports this goal. In some societies, segments of the population may gain the majority or the totality of their external information from a single source, such as the radio. Awareness of such local realities can further subvert attempts to present a singular narrative. In circumstances of high risk of genocide, countering propaganda needs a multipronged approach. Propaganda not only presents misinformation as fact, but makes an emotional appeal based upon it. Therefore, effectively combatting it requires both informational and emotive components.



Sophie Scholl, along with her brother and a small group called the "White Rose," illegally published pamphlets challenging Nazi ideology in 1942-1943 in Germany. Caught distributing them at the University of Munich, Scholl was executed for treason. Allied forces obtained a smuggled copy of one such leaflet, and later dropped millions of copies over Germany, challenging the dominant narrative of the Nazi party.

Policy Approaches in Circumstances of High Risk

Avoid Idle Threats

During periods of risk escalation, or when a state is at high risk of imminent genocide, the response of the international community can play a crucial role in determining whether this risk escalates into genocide, or whether there is a process of stabilization and risk reduction. Strong and sustained signals from the international community are essential and such signals must be unequivocal in their condemnation.

Yet, at the same time, it is imperative to avoid threatening intervention in specific circumstances unless there is a genuine

commitment to action. When leaders identify a "red line," beyond which there will be a specific policy response and fail to adhere to their own statements, this indicates to regimes that they can pursue genocidal policies with impunity. As such, this dynamic may directly contribute to the onset of massacres and/or genocide. Leaders should avoid this style of rhetoric unless they are absolutely committed to following through on the proposed course of action, should circumstances warrant.

Facilitate Refugee Corridors

In periods of crisis, the inability of vulnerable groups to flee markedly increases the risk of genocide. Governments pursuing policies of forced migration or ethnic cleansing, which are then stymied in their attempts, are more likely to radicalize these policies further to the point of massacre or genocide. Governments that themselves seek to curb such flight are quite likely to have already decided upon mass killing as a possibility. In these extreme circumstances, facilitating refugee corridors is likely to be most effective at saving lives in the short-term and offers a better prospect of allowing the crisis to pass without escalation to the level of mass killing.

In the current international environment, this can be a challenging undertaking. It must also be recognized that such policies need to be managed carefully and discreetly in such a way that governments of at-risk states do not actively pursue a policy of expulsion or ethnic cleansing in response. Nonetheless, the ability of vulnerable groups to flee a crisis is crucial to both saving lives and potentially avoiding escalation.

Conclusion

Preventing genocide is an urgent yet daunting challenge. Using proven and practical measures to build resilience in at-risk nations offers a clear path forward. Doing so will save countless lives.

Further Reading

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