



**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Hearing
on
MASS ATROCITIES PREVENTION**

**February 6, 2018 – 10:30 a.m.
2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

**Statement of Richard Fontaine
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Co-chairmen and members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to testify before you today. I'm grateful for the leadership this Commission has shown in supporting human rights, and for your interest in the critically-important effort to prevent mass atrocities.

Mass atrocities – genocide, crimes against humanity and large-scale, deliberate attacks on civilians – offend the values Americans hold dear. They damage our security and economic interests. And yet they can often be prevented, slowed or arrested, and at reasonable cost to the American people.

Mass atrocities certainly offends the universal values we hold dear. Americans take as self-evident that all people, everywhere, are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Widespread violence campaigns, of the sort we are discussing today, aim to extinguish each of these three rights. U.S. foreign policy is riddled with tricky human rights dilemmas – how far to push friendly autocrats on press freedom, for instance, or when to insist on elections that might bring to power a repressive government. Preventing mass atrocities shouldn't represent a dilemma. For all the debates over how much to prioritize the promotion of human rights, certainly we can all agree that mass atrocities represent the most manifest offense against human rights, as well as the values on which our country is built.

Yet preventing them is more than a "values issue" – it represents the hard-headed pursuit of national interest. Mass atrocities upend economies, distorting trade and investment flows and creating a demand for large-scale foreign aid, including American assistance. They create massive refugee flows which may radiate instability into neighboring countries and themselves become breeding grounds for extremism. They exacerbate or even create regional crises. And they generate calls for international action which can be exceedingly difficult, dangerous or costly to execute, and which tend to fall disproportionately on the United States.

We know all this because we've seen it firsthand. Consider Syria: the Assad regime's violence against peaceful protestors sparked a civil war that became a boiling cauldron of atrocity. The

horrors in Syria helped destabilize neighboring Iraq, created conditions under which the Islamic State established the largest terrorist sanctuary in history, produced millions of refugees that put pressure on Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and the European Union, and resulted in a major Russian military intervention. As a result, the United States led a costly, multi-year, multinational military campaign to oust ISIS, and the killings in Syria continue.

The effects of such atrocities can last generations. Just this week, the *New York Times* reported on the effects of the Nazi-imposed blockade of food supplies to the Netherlands in September 1944. By the time the Allies liberated the Netherlands nine months later, more than 20,000 Dutch had died of starvation. But many survived, including women pregnant at the time. Those who were in utero during the famine felt its malign effects throughout their lives, and scientists found a ten percent increase in their mortality rate, compared with their peers, some 68 years later.

I suspect that much of the skepticism about America's role in preventing mass atrocities, or about promoting human rights in general, stems from a sense that we are simply not very good at achieving our aims in this area, and certainly not at acceptable cost to the American people. If the price is another Iraq, an Afghanistan or a Libya, there will be few takers. Yet the cost is often far more modest, and the success rate far higher. U.S. prevention efforts likely avoided mass atrocities in Kenya and Burundi, for example, while military intervention helped reverse ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

The reality is that there exists an array of tools available to U.S. policymakers that can make – and have made – a positive difference, and at relatively low cost. I was a member of the Experts Committee on Preventing Mass Violence, and our 2016 report offered a series of specific steps through which the United States can work to prevent, slow and arrest mass atrocities. These tools will not work every time, everywhere, to prevent the worst from unfolding. But we can succeed in some places, some of the time. And sometimes is far better than never.

The Trump administration has the potential to be a prime mover in this regard. It has kept in place the Obama-era executive order on preventing mass atrocities, and the Atrocities Prevention Board continues to meet regularly. The Secretary of State has denounced ethnic cleansing in Myanmar and the President launched punitive strikes on Syria after its use of chemical weapons against civilians.

Given the scale of atrocities today in places like Syria, Yemen, South Sudan and Myanmar, however, the need for further action is pressing. Violence against the Rohingya represents an early test case for the Trump administration, and one that should elicit targeted sanctions on those responsible as well as pressure on Naypyidaw to allow the peaceful return of refugees now in Bangladesh. These and other steps would demonstrate that the administration will not stand by as mass atrocities take place. The world – including would-be abusive actors – will be watching Washington's response.

Congress has historically been at the forefront of human rights promotion – pushing in the 1970s for what became the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor; overriding a presidential veto to impose sanctions on apartheid South Africa in the 1980s; supporting, on a bipartisan basis, the Bosnian intervention of the mid-1990s; establishing the State Department's

trafficking in persons office in 2000; passing the Magnitsky and Global Magnitsky Acts more recently, and much more. Such leadership is needed now, and on this issue.

Members of Congress can raise awareness of what's happening, push the administration to take action, and appropriate funds necessary to execute. They can help to disabuse Americans of the notion that violence between Sunnis and Shia, Hutus and Tutsis, Sinhalese and Tamils or any other groups represent some ineradicable scourge we must simply accept. Mass atrocities unfold under direction and leadership. They require communications and weapons and people. They are employed most often to attain a defined political end. And they can be prevented and stopped.

Having worked on Capitol Hill, on the National Security Council staff and at the State Department, I am highly aware of the tradeoffs inherent in any human rights agenda. Yet even in these divided times, surely as Americans we can be united in opposition to the widespread destruction of our fellow humans, and our resolve to act against it. Thank you to the Commission for exploring how best to do so.





Richard Fontaine is the President of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). He served as a Senior Advisor and Senior Fellow at CNAS from 2009-2012 and previously as foreign policy advisor to Senator John McCain for more than five years. He has also worked at the State Department, the National Security Council and on the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Mr. Fontaine served as foreign policy advisor to the McCain 2008 presidential campaign and, following the election, as the minority deputy staff director on the Senate Armed Services Committee. Prior to this, he served as associate director for Near Eastern affairs at the National Security Council (NSC) from 2003-04. He also worked in the NSC's Asian Affairs directorate, where he covered Southeast Asian issues.

During his time at the State Department, Mr. Fontaine worked in the office of former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and in the department's South Asia bureau, working on issues related to India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Mr. Fontaine began his foreign policy career as a staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, focusing on the Middle East and South Asia. He also spent a year teaching English in Japan.

A native of New Orleans, Mr. Fontaine graduated *summa cum laude* with a B.A. in International Relations from Tulane University. He also holds a M.A. in International Affairs from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, and he attended Oxford University. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and has been an adjunct professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. He also served as the chairman of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on the United States.

Mr. Fontaine lives in Falls Church, Va., with his wife and four children.