

Towards a national approach to atrocities

A response to growing scrutiny

Policy brief, May 2018

This policy brief has been prepared in response to growing calls from Parliament and civil society for Her Majesty's Government to more clearly define its approach to predicting, preventing, and responding to mass atrocities (genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and war crimes). Support for British leadership in the prevention of mass atrocities and identity-based violence more broadly has been publicly expressed across the British political spectrum and across Whitehall in recent months. Recent parliamentary debates on the plight of the Rohingya and how best to respond to the chemical attack in Douma have highlighted once again that absence of clear strategy causes the will to do more to falter.

This policy brief is the first in a series called 'Towards a UK Strategy on Mass Atrocities' intended to help highlight gaps in current policy and draw attention to possible ways forward. A longer paper drawing on the global best practice of national approaches to atrocity prevention will be released in summer 2018.

Despite the breadth and grievousness of mass atrocities, the United Kingdom, unlike the United States and many other countries around the world, has yet to adopt a national strategy or mechanism for atrocity prediction, prevention, or response. In addition to their appalling human costs, mass atrocities generate cross-border refugee flows, increase the risk of terrorism, carry economic consequences beyond those of 'regular' civil wars¹, and perpetuate global instability. Such crimes therefore directly affect Britain's own security and prosperity. The incidence of mass atrocities is rising - yet these crimes can often be prevented, and their root causes interrupted. It is in the UK's national interest to do so.

Towards a joined-up approach

Following inquiries into UK policy in Burma, both the International Development Committee (IDC) and Foreign Affairs Select Committee (FAC) have recommended that Government prioritise its approach to mass atrocity prevention.² The FAC concluded that '[t]here was too much focus by the UK and others in recent years on supporting the 'democratic transition' and not enough on atrocity prevention'.³ The March 2018 report of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JC-NSS) has similarly highlighted that HMG should consider improving its approach to tackling instability overseas in order to provide a more suitably 'joined-up, effective and efficient' approach to UK national security challenges.⁴ The broader 'strategic' recommendations of the JC-NSS should be understood as reinforcing the need to take on board lessons offered by the more case-specific FAC and IDC reports.

In light of recent UK actions in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan, this includes, but is not limited to, consideration of 'whether the UK has a responsibility to intervene overseas, through military means if necessary, if civilians are at risk of harm,[...]whether the UK risks doing more harm than good through intervention, especially (but not only) in relation to

military intervention, [...and] whether the UK should focus its efforts on the causes of instability [...] rather than seeking short-term, and often military-led, responses'.⁵

It is evident that there are gaps in current UK approaches to predicting violent crises and that, once the point of violence has been reached, lack of strategic and departmental clarity obscures where responsibility for decision making lies. The absence of specific mass atrocity related expertise in Government further encourages reliance upon reactive and inconsistent policies aimed at alleviating suffering and contributing to civilian protection.

We recommend that, in order to address this, HMG recognise atrocity prevention as a distinct national security issue and a matter of national interest, making explicit that which is already implicit within the commitments outlined in National Security Objective 2 of the 2015 NSS-SDSR.

Atrocity prevention remains a grievously under-examined policy area in the UK, to the extent that the UK risks falling behind many likeminded states. Far from being a narrow agenda, atrocity prevention cuts across various elements of National Security Objective 2 of the 2015 NSS-SDSR.⁶ However, it has yet to be suitably identified as an overlapping but distinct agenda that requires the insertion of an 'atrocity prevention lens'⁷ into existing policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms. The insertion of such a lens –supported by appropriate institutional platforms such as, an FCO-DFID Joint Analysis Unit, a well-resourced R2P Focal Point to connect national strategy with activities at the UN, and a Ministerial portfolio - would assist with developing exactly the type of 'joined up, effective and efficient' approach to UK national security issues as identified by HMG.

While the UK performs world-leading work through soft power and via a number of related international development and security concerns, its approach to the specific issue of atrocity prevention remains ad hoc and disjointed. The absence of a clearly articulated strategy has led at times to incoherent policies, as identified by the Foreign Affairs and International Development Select Committees regarding UK policy in Burma. However, without an explicit policy commitment, articulated strategy, or mechanism situated within Government, British contributions to predicting, raising warning of, and responding to atrocity crises have too often fallen between the gaps of foreign affairs and international development. As a result, the UK falls short of the holistic understanding of atrocity crimes that is intrinsic to successfully tackling conflict and instability overseas and - by extension - to strengthening the rules-based international system in a time of considerable duress. Moreover, national security concerns arise too from wider global perceptions of the UK's role in response to mass atrocity situations. This can be seen in analysis of UK's Syria policy where 'the failure to prevent mass atrocity radicalises opinion in ways that may have a direct bearing on UK national security'.⁸

Crafting an identity of a new 'Global Britain' holds the opportunity to redefine British leadership on the world stage. Effective atrocity prevention requires both the tools of development and diplomacy; the UK is world leading in both. Responsibility in current HMG policy for preventing, predicting and responding to atrocities implicitly crosses many departmental briefs but also at times falls between gaps. The DFID Building Stability Framework and both DFID and CSSF programme designs as they currently stand – as well as existing UK approaches to military intervention overseas – all neglect to incorporate an 'atrocity prevention lens' that would enable HMG to far more effectively and efficiently tackle conflict and instability.

DfID: Development as prevention

DfID now appears to be shifting part of its focus towards upstream prevention and joint working methods, both of which are to be welcomed. However, while some recent announcements suggest DfID is reevaluating its approach to atrocity prevention, its public strategy remains unclear and key indicators of identity-based violence and atrocity violence remain largely absent from decision making or programme development.

Recent positive steps:

- Increasing focus on tackling root causes of instability through cross-departmental and holistic strategies
- DfID announcement of Humanitarian Innovation Hub to help 'protect people who cannot protect themselves' will focus on resilience and reconciliation⁹
- Jo Cox Memorial Grants Theme 2, prevention, prediction, and prevention of identity-based violence including mass atrocities¹⁰

The March 2018 JC-NSS report identified both the DFID pledge to spend 50% of ODA on fragile and conflicted afflicted states and the proposed increase in funding for the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) as key commitments that will enable HMG to address the 2015 NSS-SDSR pledge that it is "firmly in our national security interests to tackle the causes and to mitigate the effects of conflict". The JC-NSS recommends that HMG should consider both that DFID ensure this budget directly targets the causes of conflict and instability, and that HMG would benefit from incorporating DFID's 2016 Building Stability Framework as a cross-government replacement for the 2011 Building Stability Overseas Strategy.

The CSSF is now one of the world's largest mechanisms for addressing conflict and instability, and both its multilateral and various regional and major country programmes offer substantial means for directly addressing potential 'at risk' atrocity situations. It should be noted here that 13 of the 15 highest risk countries within the 2016-2020 forecast¹¹ of the ANU-based Atrocity Forecasting Project are FY2017-18 CSSF recipient countries.¹² However failing to comprehensively integrate atrocity-specific indicators into DfID programming limits the contribution UK aid and aid-funded activities make in addressing the common root causes, drivers, and pathways of atrocity crimes.

A cross-departmental strategy would help clarify DfID's role. It is worth noting, for example, that USAID, since the creation of the Atrocities Prevention Board, has acknowledged the contribution development activities can make to prevention and, for example, published in 2015 a field guide 'Helping Prevent Mass Atrocities.'¹³

The absence of a strategy, lack of departmental clarity, and reluctance on the part of HMG to acknowledge atrocity crimes as a distinct global challenge has led to inconsistent integration in DfID decision making of key indicators or risk factors of atrocities. Confusion persists over where responsibility for the prevention of mass atrocities lies in Government, with many in DfID believing it falls to the FCO, seeing prevention as a diplomatic and political challenge rather than a long-term, holistic process in which many development agendas and working methods play a key role.

FCO: Mainstreaming R2P

In 2005 the UK and all other UN member states committed to uphold the Responsibility to Protect civilians from atrocity crimes. This is a commitment that this and all UK governments since 2005 have firmly reiterated. The UK's commitment to the Responsibility to Protect Protocol was renewed in the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review in 2015 through to 2025. The UK prides itself on being a flag bearer of the norm and as a champion of global human rights. However, the UK has yet to integrate these commitments into wider FCO decision making or much beyond its activities via the United Nations.

Mainstreaming atrocity prevention throughout FCO structures, bolstering the role of R2P focal point, and articulating atrocities as a distinct global challenge would be in line with global best practice. The 2017 UN Secretary General's report 'Implementing the Responsibility to Protect: Accountability for Prevention', calls upon states to strengthen their contribution to and accountability for atrocity prevention worldwide.¹⁴ The absence of an atrocity lens or articulated approach to atrocities in the FCO has led to inconsistent policies, patchy analysis, and confused public policy.

The 2016 Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry into the intervention in Libya concluded that 'the UK Government focused exclusively on military intervention' and assessed that the Committee had 'seen no evidence that the UK Government carried out a proper analysis of the nature of the rebellion in Libya.'¹⁵ The recommendations from the Foreign Affairs Committee on the need for the FCO to learn lessons on atrocity prevention from the Burma case support this need for joined up thinking and clearer analysis.

In its response to the Foreign Affairs Committee Rakhine report, the Foreign Office reiterated Government 'support for mass atrocity prevention and for the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)'. However, all mechanisms enumerated in the response as vehicles of delivery for HMG support of atrocity prevention were international.¹⁶ The only domestic mechanism that currently exists within Whitehall tasked specifically with these responsibilities is the Focal Point for the Responsibility to Protect.¹⁷ Lack of transparency and stretched resources risks the role of focal point becoming unfit for purpose.

It remains unclear what role the office of the UK's focal point played within HMG, the global network of focal points, or in conversation with UN stakeholders in response to early warnings in the past 12 months from Burma, or in April this year following the chemical attack in Douma. Resourcing the overstretched Multilateral Directorate within FCO and clarifying DfID/FCO responsibilities regarding early warning, initiating internal and external processes of information sharing, of raising alarm, and coordinating Government response would likely, for example, strengthened UK policy in Burma.

The announcement in the 2018 National Security Capabilities Review of a Global Britain Board to 'coordinate Global Britain activity across departments, agencies and our overseas network', provides an opportunity to ensure atrocity prevention is given a 'seat' at the 'policy-making table'¹⁸ and to make sure it is added to the Global Britain agenda.

Recommendations to Government

Take a whole of Government approach to mass atrocities, including a single cross-government Ministerial decision-making body, better civil society and community engagement, and a national atrocity prevention centre.

A UK cross-departmental unit, a well-resourced office of the R2P focal point, and a publicly available national strategy would enhance Government capacity for early prediction and timely response to early warnings, with an emphasis on early and effective non-violent interventions that help address root causes, disrupt harmful processes and mitigate escalation. Any such mechanism could be tasked with sharing information, assessing risks, communicating with relevant networks, and providing Government and Parliament with policy options.

In order to better articulate a national strategy on predicting, preventing and responding to mass atrocities, HMG could:

- Assess feasibility of a joint-departmental or a whole of Government unit
- Resource and elevate the position of the UK's Focal Point for the Responsibility to Protect, in line with global best practice¹⁹
- Place UK contributions to the prediction, prevention, and responses to mass atrocities within the portfolio of a Minister

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¹ Anderton, C. H., and Brauer, J., *Economic Aspects of Genocides, Other Mass Atrocities, and Their Preventions*, Oxford University Press, 2016, p.138.

² Foreign Affairs Committee, [Violence in Rakhine State and the UK's response, First Report of Session 2017–19](#); International Development Committee, [Bangladesh and Burma: the Rohingya crisis, Second Report of Session 2017–19](#)

³ FAC, Violence in Rakhine State, p.3.

⁴ Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, [National Security Capability Review: A changing security environment](#), p.31-33.

⁵ JCNSS, National Security Capability Review, p.31-32.

⁶ [Sections: A. Global Britain / B. Allies, partners and global engagement / C. Strengthening the rules-based international order and its institutions / D. Tackling conflict and building stability overseas]

⁷ Bellamy, A. J., [Reducing Risk, Strengthening Resilience: Toward the Structural Prevention of Atrocity Crimes](#), Policy Brief, Stanley Foundation, April 2016

⁸ Ralph, J., [Mainstreaming the responsibility to protect in UK strategy](#), United Nations Association UK, 2014

⁹ International Development Secretary on UK aid - The Mission for Global Britain, [International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt sets out her vision for UK aid: 12 April](#), 2018.

¹⁰ Tugendhat, T., 'The Jo Cox Memorial Grants Are A Fitting Tribute to An Inspirational Leader And Friend', Huffington Post, 7 March, 2018

¹¹ Australia National University, [Atrocity Forecasting Project 2016-2020](#)

¹² Goldsmith, B. E., and Butcher, C., [Genocide Forecasting: Past Accuracy and New Forecasts to 2020](#), *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol 20:1, 2018; See AFP model of reliability.

¹³ USAID, [Field Guide: Helping Prevent Mass Atrocities](#), 2015.

¹⁴ United Nations General Assembly Security Council, [Implementing the Responsibility to Protect: Accountability for Prevention, Report of the Secretary-General](#), General Assembly Seventy-first session Items 13 and 117, 10 August 2017.

¹⁵ Foreign Affairs Committee, [Libya: Examination of intervention and collapse and the UK's future policy options, Third Report of Session 2016–17](#).

¹⁶ FAC, Violence in Rakhine State, p.15.

¹⁷ Currently Mr Paul Williams, also Director of the Multilateral Directorate, FCO.

¹⁸ Bellamy, A. J., 'Operationalising the "atrocity prevention lens"' in *Reconstructing Atrocity Prevention* edited by Sheri P. Rosenberg, Tibi Galis, Alex Zucker, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

¹⁹ Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, [National R2P Focal Points Recommendations](#).