

Preventing mass atrocities

What can UK parliamentarians do?

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Genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity diminish us all. In addition to the appalling human costs, mass atrocities force people from their homes, increase the risk of terrorism, and perpetuate international instability. These crimes also affect the UK's own security and prosperity. Around the world the incidence of mass atrocities is growing yet these crimes can often be prevented. And it is clearly in the UK's national interest to do so.

The responsibility to protect populations from all forms of identity-based violence is one that stretches from local communities to global leaderships. As elected representatives, parliamentarians can advocate for those who are voiceless, are able to scrutinise and influence Government policy, and have the capacity to provoke action.

The challenge of preventing mass atrocities can often seem insurmountable but there are modest yet meaningful actions all parliamentarians can undertake to ensure that the UK Parliament and the Government upholds their global responsibilities.

Mass atrocities: a non-legal catch-all term for ethnic cleansing, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Atrocity crimes can occur in peacetime or during conflict.

- **Genocide:** acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group
- **Ethnic cleansing:** The deliberate and systematic forcible removal of a racial, religious, ethnic, political, or cultural group from a specific geographical area
- **Crimes against humanity:** Acts committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population
- **War crimes:** Acts committed during an armed conflict that constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law

What is mass atrocity prevention?

While [the prevention of mass atrocities](#) may sometimes be seen as a specific and often overwhelming objective it is an agenda that straddles many global challenges and so affects us all. Much like climate change or violent extremism, mass atrocity violence poses one of the biggest threats to global stability. Mass atrocities need to be understood as a truly global phenomenon that cuts across many policy issues. Just like other global challenges, the effective prevention of mass atrocities requires a cross-departmental, holistic strategy. This approach is sometimes called an atrocity prevention lens. It does not necessarily mean inventing new mechanisms but rather simply applying a way of thinking to our decision making, whether as an individual, as a political party, or a government.

Mass atrocities are often predictable. What is happening in Myanmar today and has been happening in Syria for six years was predictable and indeed was predicted. Viewing issues through an atrocity prevention lens ensures that the central focus in decision making is how best to protect populations from these crimes. An atrocity prevention lens applied across Government would assist the UK in developing a more consistent, joined up approach to protecting lives.

Almost all mass atrocities are preceded by ample evidence of escalating identity politics, increased incidence of identity-based violence, unchecked hate speech, and the presence of state and/or non-state armed groups. Any mechanism or office – whether situated in Government, Parliament, or a political party – charged with viewing UK policy challenges through an atrocity prevention lens would have alerted others to the warning signs emerging from Syria or Myanmar and initiated a process of sharing information, scrutinising Government policy, and communicating with other atrocity prevention stakeholders here in the UK and abroad. It could have provided advice gathered from previous cases and monitored indicators of risk.

The absence of such an approach or lens leaves gaps; DfID's decision to end its modest bilateral aid programme with Burundi in 2011 and failure by the Stabilisation Unit to include Central African Republic in its 2013 risk analysis left the UK unprepared to respond to the recurrence of atrocities in both states.

Atrocity prevention mechanisms in Parliament, within party structures, and across Government would help close these gaps and facilitate early preventative action.

Many policy challenges faced by parliament are also issues of atrocity prevention.

These include but are not limited to:

- climate change
- migration and refugees
- international development
- arms sales
- violent extremism
- Brexit
- International & domestic justice

Atrocity prevention is therefore an issue of concern for:

- Department for International Development
- Foreign and Commonwealth Office
- Department for Exiting the European Union
- Ministry of Defence
- Ministry of Justice
- Department for International Trade
- Department for Communities and Local Government

What can parliamentarians do?

The Houses of Parliament already provide important spaces where the goals of prediction, prevention, and protection can be advanced. These mechanisms are already being utilised but could be more readily acknowledged and employed with specific regard to the challenges posed by mass atrocities.

Through parliamentary mechanisms:

- All Party Parliamentary Groups and Select Committees can apply an atrocity prevention lens to their activities. APPGs and Select Committees can apply their scrutiny to current UK policies, address gaps in UK strategy, advocate on behalf of populations at risk, and use their platforms to share information. A Select Committee inquiry into UK atrocity prevention policy would be a positive step
- Parliamentary questions, debates, and Early Day Motions all raise the profile of important agendas and therefore are crucial tools in the parliamentarian's atrocity prevention 'toolkit'
- The UK Parliament should be proud of its commitment to commemorate past atrocities. Holocaust Memorial Day (January 27th), and annual commemorations of genocides in Rwanda (April 7th) and Srebrenica (July 10th) provide useful and powerful markers in the parliamentary calendar to reflect and learn lessons. However, commitments to 'Never Again' ring hollow if they are not also accompanied by action

Through the parliamentary party:

Preventing atrocities is a matter of conscience, not partisanship. It is an agenda that should be prioritised by all political parties but can never belong to one party or another. While we know that atrocity prevention is most effective in parliaments when members from different parties work together to join forces with members of civil society, demonstrating party commitment to atrocity prevention remains important. Creating ministerial or shadow portfolios ensures that an atrocity prevention lens is applied to party policy making and for Opposition its scrutiny of Government.

Working with civil society:

There is a growing atrocity prevention third sector here in the UK, in Europe, and around the world, which should be used as a resource by elected officials and their staff for information, advice, and connecting with diaspora communities and survivor groups. Likewise, there are various international networks that bring together parliamentarians from around the world to facilitate the sharing of ideas, best practice, and solidarity. So far, UK parliamentary participation in these networks has been infrequent.

What you can do:

- Call for the prevention of mass atrocities to be acknowledged as a policy priority by your party and by Government for this to be reflected in your party's policies on arms control, asylum and development assistance
- Encourage the government to promote a responsible global leadership that protects the hard fought for gains made in atrocity prevention
- Support calls for an inquiry into UK atrocity prevention capabilities and the potential benefits of creating a national, cross-Government mechanism
- Scrutinise from the perspective of atrocity prevention the implications and risks of Government policies beyond issues of conflict prevention and conflict resolution
- During the Brexit negotiations ensure existing normative commitments and procedures that support the atrocity prevention agenda made via the UK's membership of the EU, such as sanctions, are replicated in domestic processes
- Support efforts within your party and in Parliament for new mechanisms such as ministerial portfolios and cross-party special advisors
- Support calls for the UK Focal Point for the Responsibility to Protect to become a more public role to improve transparency and accountability
- Build working relationships with civil society partners in the field of atrocity prevention