The new strategic framework laid out in the Integrated Review commits the UK government to placing greater emphasis on atrocity prevention. For those pushing for strategic emphasis on UK prevention of genocide, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and war crimes, this is welcome news. However, the commitment falls within the government’s new approach to conflict and thus risks replicating the same assumptions that undermined UK contributions to the prevention of atrocities in Syria or Myanmar, and the same practical policy gaps that meant UK atrocity prevention so often fell between the cracks of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DfID).

Some atrocities occur in the context of armed conflict, but many do not. Where atrocity crimes do take place during war, their deliberate perpetration is either part of the political strategy of a party to the conflict, such as the targeting of civilians by Muammar Qadhafi in Libya, or they are committed under the cover of a wider conflict – for example, the crimes of the Islamic State against the Yazidis in Syria, or the Nazi genocide against Europe’s Jews during the Second World War. However, contrary to prevailing UK policy, mass atrocities are often committed outside of conflict – even in so-called peacetime. Examples include the atrocities committed by the North Korean government against its own citizens and the treatment of the Uyghurs by the Chinese state.

The assumption that identity-based mass violence and atrocities only occur in fragile states or contexts of armed conflict is no longer – if indeed it ever was – sufficient to guide prevention and protection policy. Syria was not a failing state in 2011; nor is China today. Ten years ago, Alex Bellamy estimated that roughly one-third of atrocities occurred outside of situations of armed conflict; today this ratio is likely higher. And as the dynamics and manifestations of modern mass atrocities change, state and civil society approaches to their prevention must also change. To this end, the Integrated Review and the FCO–DfID merger create an opening for a more comprehensive UK strategy, but only if it can move beyond the conflict-centric preoccupations of its forerunners.

Untangling Complex Problems: Atrocities and Conflict

The rationale for linking conflict and atrocities is understandable: war often spawns systems of insecurity, reciprocal cycles of grievance, and a zero-sum logic that can enable and encourage mass violence. In Tigray, for example, the scope and scale of atrocities clearly increased after hostilities broke out in November 2020, with approximately 2,000 people ‘killed in more than 150 massacres by soldiers, paramilitaries and insurgents’. Many of these incidents have been facilitated by the conflict, which has become increasingly characterised by occurrences of ethnic cleansing, civilian massacres, sexual and gender-based violence, and the alleged use of rape as a ‘weapon of war’. Following deliberate asset-stripping, aid blockages, harvest disruption and the degradation of economic infrastructure, there is also a growing risk of mass starvation, with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimating 4.5 million people are ‘in need of food assistance’ and some analysts describing this manmade famine as a crime against humanity.

The government needs to take an approach to modern atrocities within and beyond its conflict strategy

But even when atrocities accompany or drive armed struggles, preventing international crimes and, ultimately, protecting the populations at risk requires tools, expertise and strategies that are distinct from those more traditionally used in conflict resolution. A manmade famine, for instance, requires its own bespoke response. The dynamics in Ethiopia are also nested within a wider web of political and inter-communal tensions that contribute to the risk of both mass atrocity and conflict in different, if sometimes related, ways. Various factors including stresses on the country’s ethno-federal framework, institutional upheaval, and the conflation of demography
and power, particularly at the regional level, have created space for local elites and political entrepreneurs to reshape Ethiopian social capital in an increasingly identity-based, factional manner, tipping expressions of provincial autonomy into riots, mob violence and militia attacks in areas across Amhara, Oromo and Benishangul-Gumuz. These cleavages may be exacerbated by the military intervention against the Tigrayan Defence Forces, but they have already led to massacres that preceded, and persist outside of, Tigray’s ‘hot conflict’. While the deliberate targeting of populations and other forms of widespread or systematic violence are more likely to occur as a propellant or under the cover of armed conflict, our understanding of mass atrocities cannot therefore be confined to the realm of war alone.

Modern mass atrocities come in many guises. It is, for example, becoming common for government-directed atrocities to be outsourced to militias or other pseudo-non-state combatants, either for the purposes of expediency or deniability, as seen in Bosnia during the 1990s, southern Sudan, and Darfur. These devolved structures of violence seek to mask the continued dominance of the state in localised strategies of ethnic cleansing or other mass atrocities, allowing the crimes to be presented as inter-communal conflict rather than deliberate political strategy. In other cases, mass atrocities may be symptomatic of compromised institutions, embedded structural inequalities and a culture of immunity enjoyed by security forces. Genocide scholar Martin Shaw describes the crime as being ‘chameleon-like’: when mass atrocities occur in complex violent contexts such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, they are perceived as inevitable and so persist; when they are committed across rural Rakhine in Myanmar, they are attributed to wider conflict dynamics until it is too late.

Sometimes such acts may be committed in contexts that are not considered ‘fragile’ at all. The network of detention camps in Xinjiang, for instance, challenges the prevailing assumptions of modern atrocities by revealing the apparently systematic persecution of an ethnic minority by a centralised superpower. Over a million people – mostly Muslim Uyghurs – are thought to be incarcerated in what Chinese authorities have dubbed ‘re-education’ and ‘counter-extremism’ centres, the culmination of long-running discriminatory policies and restrictions on cultural and religious activities. While Beijing justifies these measures under the rubric of ‘national security’, media and human rights reports describe instances of forced labour, sexual abuse and mass indoctrination, with the US State Department explicitly branding these dynamics as ‘genocide and crimes against humanity’. Such acts offer ‘devastating proof’ that mass atrocities can be conducted in strong, peaceful and politically stable environments, exposing the shortfalls of a framework that primarily interprets atrocity through the prism of conflict. For Xinjiang, the case for a UK atrocity prevention strategy distinct from its approach to conflict is evident.

Any framework that sees conflict as the primary destabiliser will consequently continue to ignore or deprioritise the drivers of mass atrocities that differ from the causes of conflict. Such a starting point will inevitably bypass not only the distinctions between the conflict and atrocity drivers in Tigray and the camps in Xinjiang, but also the deliberate destruction of indigenous populations in Brazil as a result of deforestation, which meets definitions of genocide, and the war on drugs in the Philippines, which constitutes crimes against humanity. It is therefore imperative states recognise that strategies to prevent conflict will never be sufficient for – and at times may obstruct – the prevention of many modern mass atrocity crimes.

This differentiation is important because conflict prevention
and atrocity prevention are not synonymous. They subscribe to qualitatively different logics, with separate objectives and assumptions that may coincide in certain times and places but become contradictory in others. Nor is this argument a new one. Drawing on the work of Lawrence Woocher, Bellamy argues that conflict prevention prioritises consensual agreement and compromise between all relevant parties, in contrast to the application of direct measures designed to ‘persuade, deter and even coerce’ specific actors seeking to commit atrocities. More simply, conflict prevention generally seeks to treat parties to a conflict in a similar manner through a commitment to impartiality, whereas atrocity prevention aims ultimately to deter international crimes, meaning that it would be wrong to treat would-be or actual perpetrators and victims similarly. While conflict prevention seeks to ‘deescalate all forms of tension and reduce all instances of violence, atrocity prevention acknowledges that not all violence is equal and differentiates between violence that is employed to commit an atrocity, violence that is employed in self-defence or to prevent an atrocity occurring, and violence that occurs outside of atrocity contexts, and prioritises its responses accordingly’ (author’s forthcoming paper). These distinctions have practical implications, as massacres and war crimes are sometimes ignored under the exigencies of ‘peace-making’ to ensure a settlement is agreed, with Bellamy going as far as to suggest such activities can ‘inadvertently’ incentivise atrocities by encouraging armed groups to signal their resolve and ‘earn a seat at the negotiating table’.

Thus, not only do mass atrocities clearly represent manifestations of violence that are distinct from armed conflict, but the tools of conflict prevention are necessarily different to those of atrocity prevention. It follows, therefore, that the UK and other states that seek to make contributions to the global prevention of such crimes require sufficiently distinct strategies on modern atrocity, or they risk missing opportunities to mitigate, mediate or prevent.

where does the UK go from here?

There is evidently a need to apply an atrocity prevention framework to ‘every stage of the conflict cycle’ and, where appropriate, complement generic conflict prevention and resolution activities with more specific responsibility to protect (R2P) based and atrocity-focused responses. While warfare may not always involve such acts – statistically most armed groups do not massacre civilians even when presented with ‘the means and opportunity’ – situations of conflict provide a more permissive environment that can facilitate or expedite war crimes, mass killings, population displacement and identity-based violence, either as part of a deliberate strategy enacted by elites, or as a result of more opportunistic local grievances only loosely affiliated with the conflict’s ‘master cleavage’.

The Integrated Review’s commitment to growing UK contributions towards atrocity prevention, alongside a new Conflict Centre that recognises and responds to the breadth and complexity of violent ecosystems, will surely seek to strengthen such approaches, and should open new avenues for preventing atrocities conducted within or connected to contexts of war, an area widely considered to be ‘conceptually and practically under-developed’.

In many respects these promised reforms are the logical extension of the UK’s 2019 National Approach to Preventing Mass Atrocities, which situates the ‘responsibility to protect’ agenda across development, defence and diplomacy. Historically, the only Whitehall office tasked with the portfolio was the Focal Point for the Responsibility to Protect, held by the Director of the Multilateral Directorate, and more recently supported by a single desk officer on atrocity prevention.

The position of Focal Point has always been one of limited bandwidth, further waylaid by inconsistencies and poor communication between DFID and the FCO. But in specifically drawing out atrocity prevention in the Integrated Review, the government is signalling a commitment to build its vision for its contributions to the agenda. Consultation around the new conflict strategy, decisions on the staffing structure of the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) directorates, and the creation of both a Conflict Centre within the FCDO and Situation Centre in the Cabinet Office offer the chance to think through the coordination and resourcing that have long constrained UK capabilities in this space.

For Xinjiang, the case for a UK atrocity prevention strategy distinct from its approach to conflict is evident

This is not just wishful thinking. The new Director Open Societies and Human Rights, Paul Williams, who was UK R2P Focal Point until 2018, told the Foreign Affairs Committee last month that the implementation of the Integrated Review’s new strategic framework and the merger of the FCDO and DFID are good news for atrocity prevention. While the new internal architecture is still unclear (as is the continuity of the position of Focal Point itself), the infusion of political capital and cash, including £874 million to the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, could provide the means to bridge inter-departmental gaps and establish the necessary systems of monitoring, analysis and warning. It may even provide a basis for setting out the national strategy for atrocity prevention long called for by parliamentary committees, NGOs and academics.

However, to do so requires going beyond the assumptions and conflict-oriented strategy that have so far characterised much of the UK approach to atrocities. Building out new warning systems, capacity and resources for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation and for Open Societies, and resilience to threats to democracy, could address
these limitations if leveraged effectively. It is a chance to be bold and creative, better integrating the government’s related thematic priorities such as organised crime, modern slavery, counterterrorism, climate change, development, peacebuilding, open societies and human rights in ways that tackle mass atrocities in their totality.

If the UK is serious about prioritising atrocity prevention, it will need to become a cross-government agenda analogous to organised crime or climate change that is integrated into ministers’ briefs. Atrocity prevention might well end up sitting in Open Societies rather than the political directorate, and so long as the political commitment, skills and coordinating systems are in place, that would be no bad thing. For too long, the UK has simply ‘passed up’ its responsibility to protect populations from mass atrocities via the UN. But if these crimes continue to increase in frequency and their primary drivers – identity politics, human rights deficits and climate change – keep deteriorating, atrocity prevention also requires a seat in the Cabinet Office and on the National Security Council, not only so that the UK can meet its aspiration to be a force for good in the world but also to protect its own interests.

On a more operational level, UK atrocity prevention requires technical expertise and capabilities in Whitehall and within embassies to better identify and respond to prospective crises. Many of these prescriptions are already well known. Returning to the case of Tigray, the International Development Select Committee recommended in April:

‘that FCDO arranges atrocity prevention training for staff at the British Embassy in Addis Ababa and neighbouring posts as a matter of urgency and designates a named atrocity prevention lead. Staff in these posts should have clear lines of communication to colleagues in Whitehall so they can quickly raise and respond to concerns about human rights abuses. Furthermore, the FCDO should embed an atrocity prevention strategy in its updated country strategy for Ethiopia and neighbouring states’.

These are entirely feasible reforms that should be folded into the strategic openings offered by the Integrated Review. The government needs to take an approach to modern atrocities within and beyond its conflict strategy. Now, surely, is the time to do it.

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