

Barack Obama -- Atrocity Preventer

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On April 23 I was comfortably seated in row six at the Holocaust Memorial Museum when President Obama declared that "preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility" of the United States. Amongst the small crowd of holocaust survivors, government officials and human rights activists around me, the message was well received.

Among other things Obama announced the establishment of an inter-agency Atrocities Prevention Board. This represents the first comprehensive attempt by a government to develop ongoing capacity to respond to genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. Obama made the obvious point that these most "conscience shocking crimes" did not disappear with the liberation of Auschwitz.

Strangely, however, in a speech dedicated to confronting modern crimes against humanity, Obama only mentioned the United Nations once, in reference to peacekeepers in Ivory Coast. There were allusions to "partners and allies" and the "global responsibility" to halt mass atrocities, but nothing specific about the key role of the U.N. in all of this.

Obama's coyness may stem from embarrassment over the U.N.'s obvious shortcomings. During the 1950s, Rueben Maury of the *New York Daily News* described the U.N. as "jampacked with pompous do-gooders, nervy deadbeats, moochers, saboteurs, spies and traitors." There are still many Americans today who believe that the U.S. would be a better place if the government would just reclaim 3 U.N. Plaza and restore it as a district of slaughterhouses. Less overblown diplomacy, more commercial butchery.

For American conservatives in particular the U.N. is a soft election year target. Ron Paul has called for the U.S. to withdraw from the U.N., echoing the sentiments of the bumper sticker to "Get the U.S. out of the U.N. and the U.N. out of the U.S.!" Rick Santorum wants to cut funding to the U.N. in half. Mitt Romney has called for a halt to the "slow motion genocide" in Darfur, but has also been playing political footsie with President Bush's former Ambassador, John Bolton, whose obstructionism at the U.N. was the stuff of undiplomatic legend. As for Newt Gingrich, he has only spoken about genocide when he accused Romney of taking kosher meals away from Holocaust survivors in retirement homes. He did, however, offer Bolton the job of Secretary of State in a Newt-led White House before he dropped out of the race.

By contrast, Obama's support for the U.N. includes being the first U.S. president to chair a meeting of the Security Council. His not mentioning the U.N. at the Holocaust Museum was especially curious as atrocity prevention is an area where the U.N. has some genuine achievements. While the U.N.-authorized intervention in Libya was the most dramatic example of an international response to atrocity crimes while they were in progress, there have also been significant improvements in holding perpetrators of past crimes accountable.

Former U.S. Ambassador for War Crimes David Scheffer has pointed out that the total cost of the U.N.-led war crimes tribunals for Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Cambodia equalled \$3.43 billion from 1993-2009. This appears to be fiscal malfeasance until you consider that the cost of this 16-year battle for international justice was less than two stealth bombers. Not perfect, but not quite profligacy. Especially given the evidence that ending impunity is an antidote to festering conflict.

Although Syria haunted Obama's announcement, the U.N.'s inadequacy in confronting the crimes of Damascus also needs to be put in context. For over a year the Syrian government has carried out mass murder while the U.N. Security Council has been unable to pass even a tepid resolution calling for sanctions. This failure has been a direct result of the anachronistic structure of the Security Council where five permanent members (called the P5) have vetoes. The United States has been a fierce critic of Russia's use of its veto in defence of the homicidal Assad regime. But all of the P5 have used and abused this partisan prerogative in the past, including the United States.

Despite this, an overwhelming majority of the world wants action. This was reflected in the 137-12 vote condemning Syria in the U.N. General Assembly during February and should be a cause for hope, not despair. It is also reflected in burgeoning support for a proposal from a group of states calling themselves the S5, or "Small 5", for the big P5 on the Security Council to refrain from using their veto in cases that involve mass atrocities. Idealism perhaps, but global moral pressure occasionally works wonders.

Beyond Syria, Obama's Atrocities Prevention Board needs to transcend rhetoric and U.N. vetoes in favour of meaningful multilateral engagement. Ghana, Australia, Costa Rica and Denmark are organizing "Focal Points" to uphold their global Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The intention is for these senior officials to act as mobilizers within their respective governments. More than a dozen countries, including the U.S., have already appointed a Focal Point and are actively building an international atrocity prevention network.

At the launch President Obama declared that, "remembrance without resolve is a hollow gesture." But for future action to occur in Syria or elsewhere, both political will and institutional capacity are essential. The Atrocities Prevention Board will need to work closely with partners at the U.N. The age of mass atrocity crimes might not be over, but the era of unilateralism certainly is.

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