

March 2021

From Building Bombs to Building Futures: A new U.S. approach to mass atrocity prevention



While the U.S. claims that atrocity prevention is a national security priority, the militarized and reactive U.S. approach often fails to prevent mass atrocities from occurring. Lessons from three recent U.S. interventions pave the way for a new approach that seeks to prevent atrocities by addressing insecurity and violence writ large.

Lessons Learned from Previous U.S. Atrocity Prevention Efforts:

SYRIA

- **An atrocity prevention failure:** Despite climate and demographic indicators, the U.S. didn't take early action.
- **A military-first approach that has exacerbated violence.**

BURMA

- **Robust prediction, No Prevention:** U.S. government was aware years prior of the high risk of Rohingya genocide.
- **Lack of accountability** empowers further abuses.

KENYA

- **Robust prediction** thanks to deep local civil society capacity and partnerships.
- **Semi-successful prevention:** The U.S. centered local demands in diplomacy that helped halt cycle of violence.

The Current U.S. Approach has Failed Because:



It is reactive and not preventative.



It presents a false choice between inaction and war.



It allows impunity for perpetrators.

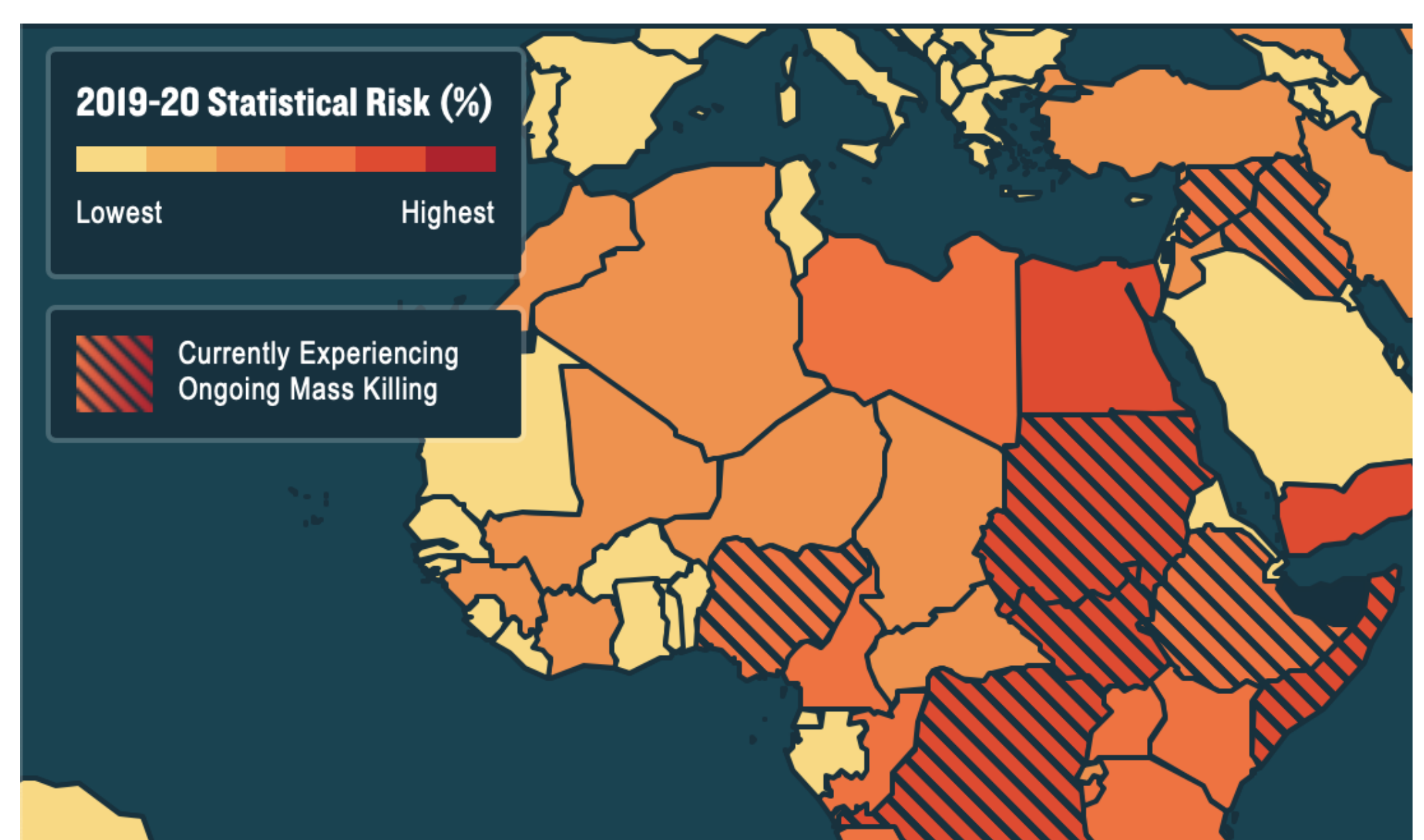
A New Approach: Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding

- 1 **Stop using a crisis management approach to violence:** Instead of intervening only in a crisis, make long-term investments to address underlying challenges to human security. While these issues may not always seem urgent, addressing them is necessary to prevent future violence.
- 2 **Reform the U.S. approach to insecurity and violence writ large, rather than incrementally:** Instead of identifying low-level violence on the verge of a mass atrocity, focus on preventing violent situations in the first place.
- 3 **Focus on economic empowerment through local investment, not military assistance:** Instead of militarizing crisis response, empower local civil society with flexible grants so it can nimbly address indicators of conflict as they arise.

Applying the New Approach to the Sahel

Prediction tools indicate the need for early action to prevent atrocities in the Sahel. Instead of pursuing a military-first approach, the U.S. should:

- Center the demands of local civil society like the People's Coalition for the Sahel.
- Fund climate resiliency, and seek comprehensive global solutions to the climate crisis to prevent violence.
- Address youth disenfranchisement by pivoting resources away from security assistance and toward local economic empowerment.
- Create a timetable for military withdrawal, suspend security support, clarify U.S. law to prevent obstacles to humanitarian and peacebuilding assistance, and work with civil society to support conflict resolution and accountability for abuses.



To prevent atrocities, it is essential to first know when they might happen.

Prediction

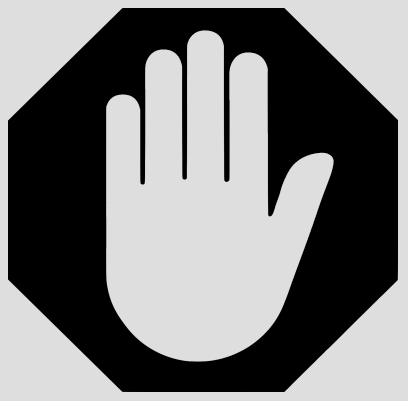


What's missing? Predictive tools, or early warning systems (EWS) both within and outside of government can provide advance warning of potential atrocities. But the U.S. has often failed to act until it's too late, in part because the government does not have a centralized EWS, creating barriers to collaboration.

A new approach: In addition to strengthening, coordinating, and acting in response to existing tools of prediction, the U.S. should incorporate lesser-used indicators of human security into predictive models, including indicators of climate shocks and sexual and gender-based violence.

Once risks are identified, swift action is needed to prevent atrocities before they occur.

Prevention

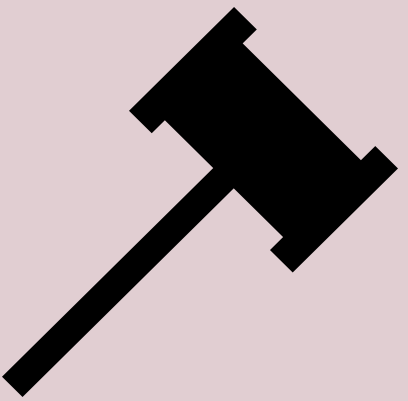


What's missing? There are a host of non-military tools to avert atrocities before they begin, from peacekeeping to targeted sanctions to civil society capacity building. But these tools are often sidelined, underfunded, and inconsistently applied in favor of more tangible "hard security" tools.

A new approach: Prevention must not be an afterthought. The U.S. needs a whole-of-government approach to put diplomacy, peacebuilding, and development at the forefront. It must prioritize, fund, and systematically apply its existing atrocity prevention tools and end securitized policies exacerbating harm. The U.S. should expand its diplomatic corps and dramatically increase flexible, local funding for civil society in order to address the root causes of violence and build long-term, sustainable peace.

If mass atrocities do occur, the U.S. must ensure accountability for those responsible.

Accountability



What's missing? U.S. policy has largely undermined multilateral accountability mechanisms like the International Criminal Court. The U.S. has also repeatedly failed to leverage its counterproductive arms sales and security assistance programs in order to hold perpetrators of atrocities accountable.

A new approach: The U.S. must hold itself accountable for harms it has perpetrated, and buy into multilateral accountability mechanisms. The U.S. should also withhold security assistance and arms sales to governments that perpetrate violence, and use *targeted* (not broad-based) sanctions on the specific individuals responsible. These mechanisms must be applied universally by objective criteria, not political expediency. The U.S. should also prioritize *transitional* and *restorative* justice over punitive justice.

Members of Congress and the Biden administration can implement a new U.S. approach to atrocity prevention by working towards the following goals for FY21 and beyond:

1. **Reduce** the Pentagon and nuclear weapons budgets by \$200-350 billion per year and **double** the State Department and USAID budgets.
2. **Empower** local changemakers by focusing State and USAID funding on flexible grant making.
3. **Enable** State and USAID to lead interagency crisis prevention efforts.
4. **Create** a unified security budget and appropriations process with a more holistic view of security spending.
5. **Support** and reform multilateral institutions to promote conflict resolution and accountability. Join the ICC and recommit to the ICJ.
6. **Undo** broad sanctions imposed during the Trump administration. Require congressional approval for broad sanctions, and use targeted sanctions only as a tool, not a diplomatic strategy.
7. **Require** congressional approval and strong human rights controls for U.S. weapons sales and security assistance.
8. **Conduct** oversight and enforce existing laws on conflict prevention, including the Global Fragility Act and the Elie Wiesel Act.
9. **Hold** regular meetings, hearings, and briefings that include administration officials, atrocity prevention experts, civil society, and impacted community members.

ADDRESSING U.S. COMPLICITY

While this report focuses primarily on the U.S. failure to prevent other parties from committing atrocities, there are also many instances in which U.S. foreign policy has had a more direct role in atrocities: imposing broad-based sanctions, providing political cover for abusive "partners", and launching illegal wars. Any reform of the U.S. approach to atrocity prevention must be linked to this a wider transformation of U.S. foreign policy strategy that meaningfully seeks accountability for U.S. complicity.