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A Step Forward

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Introduction

I begin this commentary with a general appreciation for the report of the Genocide Prevention Task Force (the Albright-Cohen Report).¹ The contents of the report are a decisive step forward in the debate over how to prevent and stop genocide and other forms of mass violence. The report synthesizes in a coherent and accessible fashion a significant body of research, policy analysis, and insights from actors inside and outside government; it provides a menu of concrete and sensible policy options that are likely to frame debate on genocide prevention in the short term. These strengths, and a few more I shall discuss, constitute a major advance on policy and academic discussions regarding the question of genocide prevention. Such is my overall assessment, even if I will push back on a few points.

Before moving to the substance of the report, I want to comment on the process of commenting. The Albright-Cohen Report brings to the fore a substantive tension in the field of genocide studies. On the one hand, many scholars in the field maintain and insist on a traditional scholarly approach to genocide-studies research. Their focus is on theory, evidence, methods, and argument. On the other hand, many scholars take a more normative and practical approach, often demonstrated by interest in the policy questions surrounding prevention and intervention.

Scholars of the former rightfully approach their research topics from a value-neutral position, and they do not want policy concerns to drive the research design, results, and analysis. Indeed, a not particularly helpful but somewhat common response to scholarship is—I am paraphrasing—“How will your theory help us stop genocide?” This response is not helpful for a number of reasons. To thrive as a field—to attract serious scholars, to advance research and understanding, and to earn recognition from and integration with other established scholarly arenas—a value-neutral scholarly approach that prizes theory, evidence, and methods is paramount. At the same time, it does not follow, as some researchers in the field maintain, that scholars should be uninterested in the normative and policy implications of scholarship. While researchers should aim for a value-neutral approach, the topic, in my view, is one that has unavoidable normative and ethical dimensions. Genocide studies is thus not a typical field of scholarly inquiry.

The community of scholars in the field of genocide studies will benefit if there is room for the theoretical and normative approaches to cohabit a common intellectual space. To be sure, many scholars already bridge a theoretical/scholarly approach with normative/policy concerns, and, indeed, *Genocide Studies and Prevention* embodies that synthesis, as its title indicates. But there is also a need, in my view, to articulate the importance of a scholarly community that respects these two positions and aims for mutual engagement. In the end, the health of the field will improve if both positions thrive. The best scholarship will likely contribute the best ideas and information, which in turn will shape policy options for the better, even if the policy implications are not immediately clear. Genocide scholarship should not put policy first, but that does not mean that the former will not inform the latter. At the same time, it is a chimera to

think that the normative, ethical, and policy dimensions of research on genocide can be bracketed out of the discussion. These dimensions are ineluctable, and to wish them away is to alienate students, scholars, and policy makers who are drawn to genocide studies.

Strengths

Turning to substance, I argue that the Albright-Cohen Report substantially broadens public and policy debate about the question of genocide prevention. Many existing public, policy, and even academic discussions of genocide prevention are narrow, usually revolving around the concepts of “political will” and “humanitarian intervention” (i.e., coercive military action to stop atrocities). The report does not ignore these issues; through careful language, concrete recommendations, and disaggregation, it provides significant substance and nuance to them. In addition, the report opens new domains of analysis in the debate. Below I identify five specific areas of strength.

First, the report identifies and addresses a significant and underappreciated gap in policy discussions of genocide prevention—namely, that the United States (like other powerful states, to my knowledge) lacks a coherent policy framework for genocide prevention. Moreover, there is no standing inter-agency process or substantial dedicated institutional capacity for addressing the question of genocide prevention. The fact that the United States lacks a coherent policy framework for genocide prevention may seem like an obvious point, but it is one that rarely attracts specific attention. Yet the report states this point clearly: “Simply put, the U.S. government does not have an established, coherent policy for preventing and responding to genocide and mass atrocities” (3). Highlighting this problem (and providing recommendations on how to solve it) is in itself a significant contribution, one that gives substance to the concept of “political will,” which can be nebulous and circular. The political will to take preventive action will be much more plausible if there are dedicated institutional mechanisms and a policy framework within which to make difficult decisions.

Second, the report takes a comprehensive strategic approach that highlights five domains (early warning, early prevention, preventive diplomacy, military options, and international engagement). This is a perspicacious view of genocide prevention, one that emphasizes US leadership (which is appropriate for a policy statement aimed at influencing US policy) but still recognizes the importance of international processes and actors; one that addresses long-term processes of prevention as well as short-term processes of halting and reversing escalating and genocidal conditions; and, finally, one that presents a set of concrete and sensible recommendations for implementation. The report recognizes the importance of conditions that make states, over the long term, vulnerable to mass violence; it recognizes the importance of diplomacy and of non-violent actions but does not shy away from the potential use of force; and it recognizes the importance of scholarship in designing early-warning mechanisms. These are all valuable perspectives and insights on genocide prevention without a clear omission.

Third, several of the short-term recommendations in chapters one and two deserve particular recognition. The suggestions not only are sensible and specific but also seem eminently doable. The recommendations that stand out include the notion that Congress appropriate a specific dollar amount for genocide prevention, that an inter-agency commission—the Atrocities Prevention Committee—be created, that the

president issue a policy directive on the importance of genocide prevention, that the director of national intelligence include an assessment of the risk of genocide in annual testimony to Congress, that foreign-service professionals be trained in early warning, and that genocide prevention be a candidate for an “automatic trigger.” These recommendations strike me as appropriate, doable, sensible, not obvious, and potentially significant in their impact—that is, they strike me as significant contributions to the debate. Others, such as the recommendation that the “American people” establish a “permanent constituency for the prevention of genocide,” are reasonable and important but perhaps less appropriate for a document aimed principally at policy makers.

Fourth, the report performs a service by identifying a series of specific coercive and non-coercive measures that can be taken to prevent genocide. In fact, the language of the report is more specific and careful; it discusses “tools available to the United States to help halt and reverse escalating threats of genocide and mass atrocities” (61). The measures in question are found principally in two smart tables, one on page 61 and one on page 83. I count twenty-four specific non-military options on page 61. These may not be earth-shatteringly new recommendations—they include everything from supporting dialogue to referral to international courts. But at the same time, having thoughtfully specified a range of concrete measures, the report enriches public debate on the issue and provides concrete measures to frame policy choices. The table on page 83 addressing “graduated military options for genocide prevention and response” is especially valuable. The table presents four sets of military options, both defensive and offensive. The defensive strategies aim to protect targeted populations through, for example, positioning militaries in deterrent positions or protecting safe areas; the offensive options aim to disrupt or defeat the military capacity of perpetrators, through, for example, precision targeting and deploying ground troops. To be sure, some of these military options will not work well in certain situations; some could backfire; and some might invite significant international reputational costs. In other words, I am not advocating the merits of any one particular action; as the report notes, a policy response is likely to be case specific. But the presentation of these options specifies a reasonable and specific range of military responses, thereby broadening and complicating the debate on “humanitarian intervention.”

Fifth, the report does a good job of engaging and incorporating scholarship and debates in the field of genocide studies. For example, it does not sidestep the knotty conceptual questions of what “genocide” means but, rather, from the beginning refreshingly states that it takes an expansive view of the outcome of interest—“large-scale and deliberate attacks on civilians” (xxii). The chapter on early warning does a particularly good job of engaging scholarship. The report is honest about gaps in knowledge: “while scholars have had some success in identifying long-term risk factors, it has proven much more difficult to find generalizable near-term indicators, ‘accelerators,’ or triggers” (21). The authors note that hate speech is often seen as a warning sign but that there are many cases of hate speech that did not lead to genocide or mass violence. The report calls for more research on the dynamics of escalation and argues that, in the mean time, case-specific indicators are important. Finally, to the extent that there is consensus on causes, the report argues that the presence of armed conflict and change in regime character are the most reliable indicators. These are all serious, thoughtful, and not obvious appraisals and syntheses of the existing genocide-studies literature, ones that recognize a place for and encourage more scholarship.

Weaknesses

Despite the strengths of the report, I see four major weaknesses, or, at least, four areas that deserve greater elaboration. Not a policy insider, I do not have a beat on the particular feasibility or likely success of the proposals I highlight in the previous section. What I like is that the report is smart, comprehensive, and specific; it makes good use of scholarly research; and it deepens and broadens existing discussions. Nonetheless, I see four areas for improvement.

First is the question of national interest. To come to fruition, the report's recommendations require making genocide prevention a priority. If implemented, the suggestions would necessitate significant action, energy, time, and resources, including diplomatic capital, on the part of policy makers. The report recognizes that for these outlays to occur, the American public and US politicians need to recognize that taking such actions would be in the national interest. Here the case should have been stronger. The report should also have provided more language about why genocide prevention, as opposed to some other policy priority, is a standout issue, given that any US administration will face a myriad of domestic and international policy needs and priorities. When discussing the national interest, the report points to four issues—genocide is an assault on universal human values; genocide fuels instability in states where terrorist recruitment and training occur; genocide has negative regional consequences, including refugee flows, that are expensive; and the United States' standing in the world is negatively affected if the government is perceived as a bystander. These are generally valid claims, but none of them is particularly compelling. There is thus something of a missed opportunity to produce a synthesis on why preventing genocide is so important—making the strength of the report lie with the recommended policy measures and options. Moreover, the connections between genocide and some of the stated national-interest concerns, such as terrorism, are tenuous; while genocide does have major negative regional repercussions, so do other types of disasters. It is also debatable how the rest of the world perceives the US position on genocide, and the report underestimates opposition to US leadership on genocide prevention, especially if such action is military and taken outside a UN framework (a point to which I will return). For example, the American leadership on Darfur has been met with significant international skepticism (as well as some support), which suggests that the issue of international reputation is more complicated than the report contends. In short, given how important making the case for genocide prevention is, the issue of national interest deserved the same attention, thoughtfulness, and research devoted to other topics in the report.

Second, the chapter on early prevention strikes me as a wish list of current foreign-policy nostrums with no clear focus or specific ties to the dynamics of genocide. The chapter advocates a tripartite approach that focuses on leaders, institutions, and civil society. On the question of altering leaders' calculus, the authors advocate the use of sanctions on particular industries, restricting funds and weapons, and changing a "zero-sum" mentality through training programs. However, sanctions often affect the vulnerable and poor, not the leaders; arms embargoes are very difficult to enforce, and genocides can be low-tech; and the idea of changing mentalities through training programs appears naïve. The report goes on to stress the importance of power sharing and democratic transition (even as it identifies political instability as one of two major known risk factors for genocide), strengthening the rule of law, reforming the security sector, developing civil society, supporting economic and legal empowerment, and supporting a free and responsible media. Here again the report does not demonstrate

the same sophistication of engagement with the existing literature that is evident elsewhere. Most of these recommendations are very difficult to achieve from the outside, and they do not have established links to genocide prevention. Establishing the “rule of law,” for example, is problematic in a host of ways—not because the rule of law is bad but because it develops in quite a complicated way and is not easily created through external actions. Perhaps more importantly, since contemporary genocide is usually a crime of state—a state policy—rule of law, *per se*, is not the main problem. A similar point can be made about civil society. Two decades’ worth of democracy promotion that included significant aid to civil society has had mixed effects at best. Not only is promoting civil society from the outside not necessarily effective, there is no clear link with genocide prevention. In short, this chapter seems less careful and specific than others, appearing more like a wish list taken from current democracy-promotion policies.

Third, the chapter on employing military options includes a diagram titled “Process of Violence: A Military Planning Tool” (82). On the one hand, the diagram is an important starting point, and the fact that the report disaggregates genocide into a five- or six-stage process is quite valuable. On the other hand, there is significant room to grow analytically, and, given how important understanding the process of violence is, more research is needed on this issue—a point made elsewhere in the report. There are a few problems with the diagram. One is that several key stages are analytical black boxes. For example, a key stage is when “leaders judge that target group seriously threatens their intent to keep/gain power or impose an ideology.” At another stage, “leaders see genocide as the way to prevail in ideological, political, or military contest.” There are questions here: Which leaders? How does one measure how leaders perceive threats? And so forth. There is also no discussion of local-level dynamics, which are often critical. But the key issue, from a theoretical perspective, is why leaders would hold these positions. The diagram, which is as close to a model of genocide as anything in the report, does not address that issue clearly. There is thus a need to have better analysis of the conditions, structures, and circumstances that lead to the process of violence; to create indicators of these stages; and to test whether or not this model does, in fact, apply to cases where genocide did and did not occur. Doing so will help provide a better model of how, when, and where genocide is likely to take place, which, in turn, is critical for genocide prevention.

Fourth, while the report recognizes the importance of international context—and stresses a normative context and capable international institutions—it does not provide strong enough legal, normative, and political arguments in this domain. The report claims that the United Nations can be a forum for action; if not, then NATO; and if not, then the United States should form a like-minded coalition. In part to support this claim, the authors assert that there has been a “revolution in conscience” (100) in the international community for support for genocide prevention. This claim is an exaggeration. If the United States were to take coercive military action outside the framework of the United Nations, such action would undoubtedly invite significant opposition, from powerful and less powerful states alike, but almost certainly from states that matter to the United States. The United States would need to provide a strong legal and normative justification to such states, as well as to domestic actors who would be worried about the costs of coercive US action. Here again the report has missed an opportunity to articulate a normative foundation for a robust response to genocide. If US leadership did invite significant opposition, it is not clear how policy makers should reconcile other diplomatic priorities or respond to such opposition.

My point here is simply that the report should have gone further in articulating an international doctrine or providing the legal and normative tools and language for justifying potentially diplomatically costly action.

But—to return to where I started—notwithstanding these concerns, the report is a critical advance on existing debates and establishes for the first time, to my knowledge, a largely cogent framework for developing a national policy on genocide prevention.

Note

1. Madeleine K. Albright and William S. Cohen, chairs, *Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers* (Washington, DC: Genocide Prevention Task Force, 2008), http://www.usip.org/genocide_taskforce/report.html (accessed 12 June 2009), xxi. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.