

## A Smart Use of Intelligence

### *Preventing Genocide and Mass Killing*

Lawrence Woocher

Each year, the top American intelligence official appears before Congress to present the intelligence community's assessment of worldwide threats to U.S. national security. In his 2010 testimony, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Dennis Blair included something new. Under the heading "Mass Killings," Blair wrote, "Looking ahead over the next five years, a number of countries in Africa and Asia are at significant risk for a new outbreak of mass killing." He defined mass killing as "the deliberate killing of at least 1,000 unarmed civilians of a particular political identity by state or state-sponsored actors in a single event or over a sustained period." This appeared to be the first time the senior-most U.S. intelligence official had called attention to the general phenomenon of mass killing—or the closely related and more common notions of genocide or mass atrocities—in his annual threat assessment.<sup>1</sup>

Blair's inclusion of mass killing in his assessment of threats to the United States raises questions about both the national security landscape and the business that we call "intelligence": Was his discussion of mass killing a distraction from "real" national security and intelligence matters or was he wise in drawing attention to an underappreci-

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ated threat? What, if anything, should the intelligence community (IC) do to support policy decisions related to mass killing and genocide? What are the broader implications for the future role of intelligence in national security decision making?

President Barack Obama and other senior policymakers have communicated that they believe preventing mass killing, genocide, and other mass atrocities is important, and recent policy actions create new opportunities to significantly improve the U.S. government's performance. When he introduced his appointees for the DNI and director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), then-President-elect Obama declared, "Good intelligence is not a luxury—it is a necessity." This certainly applies to preventing mass killing and genocide.

U.S. policy responses. If the IC can meet these challenges, it will not only help improve the U.S. government's record at preventing genocide; it will demonstrate that the IC is able to adapt effectively to the new demands on intelligence.

### **The Changing Security and Intelligence Environment.**

By any measure, the U.S. government's intelligence enterprise is vast, comprising 16 agencies, some 200,000 persons, and an annual budget of around \$75 billion—about one-and-a-half times the budget of the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development combined.<sup>2</sup> Despite recent reform efforts—especially after the 9/11 attacks and intelligence failures in Iraq—this system still retains much of the character of the

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Succeeding in this ambitious goal will require not only good intelligence on any particular situation but also the smart use of intelligence. This means devoting the unique assets and skills of the intelligence community to clarify the stakes of mass killing, drawing fully on open sources and outside expertise to improve warning of likely atrocities, to enhance understanding of their underlying situations, and to generate objective analysis about potential

Cold War era during which it originally developed. The IC was designed largely to collect and to analyze intelligence from and about the Soviet Union—a single state, bureaucratically and hierarchically run, which represented the dominant threat to the United States and its allies. The extreme risk of a nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union meant that all other global phenomena were seen as secondary.

The international security environment that confronts the U.S. intelligence community today is dramatically different. Threats to U.S. national security are more diverse and diffuse, ranging from a possible influenza pandemic to nuclear proliferation to piracy on the high seas. Many serious threats emanate from networks, not hierarchical organizations. Consequently, the IC must ask new questions, collect information from different kinds of sources, and develop a capacity to analyze a variety of subjects with which it may have little experience. While the intelligence community has made real progress, it will continue to grapple with these challenges for years to come.

At the same time as the security context has shifted, the information environment has radically changed. There has been a massive increase in the availability of information; on virtually any subject of interest today, it is a greater challenge to sort, organize, and understand the wealth of available information than it is to find information in the first place. The capacity of the U.S. intelligence community to process and analyze information is far outpaced by the one billion pieces of data it collects every day.<sup>3</sup> A significant proportion of the increase in information comes from so-called open source intelligence (OSINT)—in essence, anything that is freely available by non-secretive means. OSINT ranges from local radio or newspaper stories to commercial satellite imagery of Darfur or North Korea and professional political analysis by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like the International Crisis Group.

Not only is open source intelligence expanding, but it is becoming increasingly relevant. A 2007 Congressional Research Service review concluded, “A consensus now exists that OSINT must be systematically collected and should constitute an essential component of analytical products.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, because of the IC’s historical emphasis on secrets and classified products, “far too little attention has been paid to the importance of open sources,” according to CIA officials Carmen Medina and Rebecca Fisher.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it is not enough for a lone intelligence analyst to draw on all sources. Because expertise on matters of interest is distributed more widely than in years past, the IC has begun—slowly—to expand its outreach to knowledgeable persons outside the community.

**New Intelligence Debates.** The 2009 National Intelligence Strategy describes the fundamental challenge for the IC in the contemporary security context as keeping “a steady focus on enduring challenges in and among nation-states and persistent transnational issues, and also [being] agile in adapting to emerging threats and harnessing opportunities.”<sup>6</sup> But striking the appropriate balance is much more difficult than stating the goal. If the IC defines its domain too narrowly, it will overlook important threats to U.S. national security emanating from previously unstudied phenomena, or make analytic errors by seeing only part of a larger, more complex system of connections among global phenomena. There are parallel risks associated with defining the IC’s ambit too widely: the IC may

expand beyond its core capabilities into substantive areas where it lacks adequate expertise, or it may suffer from simple overstretch, leading to a lack of focus on the most pressing analytic needs.

**The Threat of Mass Killing.** What do these debates about the boundaries of national security concerns and the proper role of intelligence mean for the prevention of mass killing and genocide? On the one hand, mass killing

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A similar debate surrounds the role of OSINT. Some argue for a renewed focus on intelligence collection via secret, technical, and clandestine means, since these are the domains where the IC has special expertise and unique capacities. According to this view, the IC should not try to provide full service information and analytical support to U.S. government decision making when the question of interest can be adequately answered with information from open sources.

These debates are closely related. In general, the broader one's view of national security threats, the more important are OSINT and outside expertise. For example, the 2008 national intelligence assessment of the geopolitical implications of climate change—not a traditional security concern—relied almost entirely on OSINT and unprecedented collaboration with non-IC experts.<sup>7</sup> If the IC embraces a broader conception of national security matters, it will need to significantly enhance its analysis of open sources and its outreach to experts beyond the community as standard practice.

and genocide are nothing new. Governments have been massacring their own populations for many decades, even predating the term “genocide” and its proscription in international law by the 1948 Genocide Convention. On the other hand, genocidal violence shares characteristics with archetypal new or emerging threats. It frequently arises in weak states previously thought to be of little strategic importance; non-state actors, such as militias, often play a central role; and its effects on U.S. interests, though significant, may be obscure or indirect. Combating this and similar threats requires timely and flexible U.S. government action, drawing on multiple capacities and informed by strategic warning and accurate analysis of complex socio-cultural and political dynamics.

Whether seen as an enduring challenge, an emerging threat, or outside the bounds of U.S. national security concerns, it is perhaps most important that senior U.S. officials appear to believe that preventing genocide is an important objective. Upon his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, President Obama stated, “More and more,

we all confront difficult questions about how to prevent the slaughter of civilians by their own government . . . When there is genocide in Darfur, systematic rape in Congo, or repression in Burma—there must be consequences.”<sup>8</sup> The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, a key Defense Department planning document, included response to mass atrocities among the contingencies for which the U.S. military should be prepared. Several members of Congress—including the chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Dianne Feinstein—have expressed support for the recommendations of the Genocide Prevention Task Force, a group of former high-level officials that issued a “blueprint” report in late 2008. Together, these kinds of declarations and actions should indicate to the IC that many of their most important customers consider preventing mass atrocities an important national security concern.

It is not the first time that U.S. policymakers have called on the IC to support policy decisions related to genocide or mass killing. In 1998 President Bill Clinton announced a new genocide early warning center sponsored by the Department of State and the CIA. As then-Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues, David Scheffer stated, “Our diplomatic and intelligence communities will collect and analyze information with a keen perspective on the warning signals of these heinous crimes against humankind.”<sup>9</sup> This initiative included the creation—within the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research—of a War Crimes and Atrocities Analysis Division, which exists to this day, and an interagency

group headed by Scheffer, which lapsed in 2001 after the change in administrations.

#### **Four Types of Analytic Support.**

Earlier this year, the Obama administration established a new high-level interagency committee under the National Security Council dedicated to preventing mass atrocities and genocide. This new body is bound to be a principal end-user of existing intelligence on this subject and a generator of new intelligence requirements. Building an effective working relationship between the IC and the new policy committee will be a prerequisite for the committee’s success and a challenge that may typify much of the IC’s work on “emerging” threats in the coming years. The new committee could benefit from four types of intelligence analysis.

First, the IC can help clarify the stakes involved in preventing mass killing and genocide by assessing the geopolitical implications of these crimes globally. As with its assessment of climate change, the IC can supply objective analysis to inform the debate about the connection between mass atrocities and U.S. national security, going beyond anecdotal evidence to evaluate claims about regional spillover, long-term effects, and costs to the United States of failing to prevent mass violence. Independent analysis by the IC can help policymakers determine where preventing mass atrocities should fit in the scheme of U.S. foreign policy and national security priorities. It may also persuade skeptics in the bureaucracy that claims about the importance of preventing mass atrocities are grounded in fact as much as political preference.

The second analytical challenge is to assess the relative risks of genocide or mass atrocities across the globe. For an actor with global interests like the United States, it is important to identify those states or regions where mass atrocities are most likely to occur so that

racy should come from comparing the results of different approaches over time—for example, as Philip Tetlock has suggested, via “forecasting tournaments that would shed light on the relative performance of competing approaches.”<sup>11</sup>

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additional attention and resources can be efficiently allocated. The main result of a global risk assessment is a “watch list” that identifies the most worrisome situations and briefly describes the reasons for the judgment of risk.

The IC has regularly produced a classified Atrocities Watch List since 1998. This was based partly on results from CIA-commissioned work by academics to develop risk models for genocide and mass killing.<sup>10</sup> Knowledge about the factors that predispose states to genocidal violence owes a debt to the IC for supporting this painstaking, empirical work. This job is not complete, however. The best extant risk models are not precise enough to identify the very small number of states that are most likely to experience an episode of mass killing without also catching a large number of “false positives.” Since it is unlikely that global risk assessment would rely on secret intelligence, the IC should encourage academics and NGOs, working in cooperation or competition, to conduct their own public risk assessments. Progress in forecasting accu-

The third challenge is to develop and to maintain a deeper understanding of high-risk situations. A watch list, naturally, is only a starting point. Warning of events that can trigger mass atrocities in the near-term and identifying potential openings for external action that can avert or mitigate mass violence demand detailed knowledge of diverse social, political, economic, and cultural contexts and of specific actors.

In some instances, the unique ability of the IC to collect information by technical or clandestine means can prove critical in understanding the risks of mass atrocities. For example, imagine the value of eavesdropping on Slobodan Milosevic’s private discussions in the lead-up to the 1999 negotiations over Kosovo at Rambouillet, or tracking movements of janjaweed militias in Sudan in 2003. More often, however, IC analysts have few special advantages compared with Foreign Service Officers or regional specialists in think tanks and universities. Particularly when the country of interest is not of inherent importance to the United States, the

IC should go beyond its own house to compile expert judgments and to identify critical uncertainties.

Once significant risk and the possibility of positive U.S. involvement is established, preventing genocide requires a fourth kind of analysis: support for designing and implementing preventive strategies. To select the most effective combination of political, diplomatic, economic, and military measures, policymakers need accurate analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, and potential leverage points of relevant actors, as well as the foreseeable effects of various alternative courses of action.

This means answering questions such as: Would an arms embargo meaningfully restrict the ability of potential perpetrators to commit violence, or would it just freeze an imbalance of firepower between groups? How likely is it that permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council would support a UN peace operation with a robust mandate to protect civilians? Would economic sanctions against regime leaders impose significant costs? Whose assets should be frozen, and where do these assets reside? Equally important, the U.S. government must assess the impacts of any new measure—as well as other changes in the overall situation—so that it can recalibrate or refine its actions rapidly, before adversaries are able to adjust fully.

The 2009 National Intelligence Strategy cites the support of effective national security action—as distinct from policies—as one of the IC's four strategic goals. While ongoing counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations stand out in this regard, one can

similarly argue for the value of intelligence in support of U.S. government actions to prevent genocide. Analytic needs in support of policy implementation and revision will more often focus on the decision making of key individuals and small groups, such as government or militia leaders. Leveraging the full potential of the IC's sophisticated collection capacities can make a decisive difference.

Across each of these four types of analytic support, it is above all the unique role and analytic tradecraft of the IC that make it so critical to effective policymaking and implementation. Even when most relevant information is open source, no other U.S. government actor is independent of the policy process so as to provide objective analysis, while being close enough to policymakers to ensure relevance. Likewise, no other U.S. government actor promotes adherence to analytic standards designed to combat common cognitive and group decision-making biases. The impacts of these biases are heavy when concerning rare, hard-to-imagine events involving large numbers of people, such as genocidal violence. In particular, the IC's independence and analytic rigor should guard against "clientitis"—when members of the Foreign Service begin to represent the interests of the foreign government where they serve instead of their own—and against policymakers' natural reluctance to accept that current policies may be failing, which can be catastrophic in situations at risk of mass atrocities.

It is often asserted that preventing mass atrocities and genocide hinges on the "political will" of senior American decision makers. But for a U.S.

official's will to translate into policy success, it must be channeled into the right government actions, in the right place, at the right time. This requires rigorous, objective analysis to evaluate the stakes of the problem, assess global risks, enhance understanding of

particular situations, and support decisions about alternative policy measures. Devoting intelligence resources to these analytic tasks in support of preventing genocide—an objective that the President himself has articulated—would be a smart use of intelligence indeed.

NOTES

1 Michael Abramowitz and Lawrence Woosher, "How Genocide Became a National Security Threat," *Foreign Policy*, 26 February 2010.

2 Dennis C. Blair, Media Conference Call with the Director of National Intelligence, 15 September 2009. The FY2010 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill totaled \$48.8 billion.

3 Dennis C. Blair, "Remarks and Q&A by the Director of National Intelligence" (The Commonwealth Club of California, 15 September 2009), 3.

4 Richard A. Best, Jr. and Alfred Cummings, "Open Source Intelligence (OSINT): Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, 5 December, 2007.

5 Carmen Medina and Rebecca Fisher, "Thinking About The Business of Intelligence: What the World Economic Crisis Should Teach Us," *Studies in Intelligence* 53, no. 3 (2009): 14-15.

6 Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "The National Intelligence Strategy of the United States of America," August 2009, 1.

7 Thomas Fingar, "National Intelligence Assessment on the National Security Implications of Global Climate Change to 2030" (Statement for

the Record to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, 25 June 2008).

8 Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize" (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 10 December 2009).

9 David Scheffer, "The United States: Measures to Prevent Genocide" (Remarks at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Conference "Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity: Early Warning and Prevention," 10 December 1998).

10 These studies have been undertaken under the auspices of the Political Instability Task Force (PITF), a group of academics convened to develop statistical risk models for major political changes using open-source data. One PITF study on genocide and "politicide" is Barbara Harff, "No Lessons Learned from the Holocaust? Assessing Risks of Genocide and Political Mass Murder since 1955," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 57-73.

11 Philip Tetlock, "Reading Tarot on K Street," *The National Interest*, September/October 2009.