

Roundtable on the Improvement of the EU's Capabilities to Prevent Mass Atrocities

Organised by the European Union Institute for Security Studies and the Foundation for the International Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities

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Summary of the Debates

The Round Table aimed to take stock of the EU's current capabilities and practices in the domain of mass atrocity prevention and to discuss options for improving the warning-response linkage. The discussion feeds directly into the work of a Task Force for the Prevention of Mass Atrocities (<http://www.massatrocitiestaskforce.eu>), which was set up in London in January this year on the initiative of the Foundation for the International Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities (<http://www.genocideprevention.eu>) and whose report on the role of the EU in the prevention of mass atrocities will be released in December 2012. Participants in the Round Table shared their views and opinions whilst observing the Chatham House Rule and included representatives of the EEAS, the European Commission and individual EU Member States, as well as experts from NGOs, think tanks and academia in Brussels.

The presentations and subsequent discussions focused on the successes and failures of efforts to prevent mass atrocities, according to relevant literature and best practices, as a first step to identifying the strengths and gaps in EU actions and capacities. The main ideas and suggestions may be summarised as follows:

1. Policy-makers should broadly define mass atrocities as being the unlawful use of deadly violence against large numbers of civilians, but also remain sensitive to the specific causes and dynamics of perpetrators targeting specific groups for their perceived characteristics

such as occurs during genocide or politicide. This approach overlaps to a large extent with the crimes covered by UN endorsed responsibility to protect (R2P). Violent conflicts and mass atrocities are indeed correlated, but should not be conflated. Specific instruments are necessary to identify and address the mass atrocity phenomenon, a phenomenon which poses specific challenges to the gathering of intelligence as well as how to respond.

2. Early warning and response systems should be designed with the need to effectively respond in mind and avoid an over-investment and duplication of analysis. They should follow the 'subsidiarity principle' by establishing first what role local actors might have in recognising and responding to warnings about impending or actual atrocities. The potential victims of mass atrocities should be treated as subjects with a potential for providing autonomous early warning and response and who might benefit from the sharing of intelligence. The early warning systems of Western-based actors should concentrate on and collaborate in the processing of open source intelligence, developing filtering algorithms, and reviewing existing methodologies.

3. Overreliance on quantitative models is to be avoided due to problems with their accuracy, timeliness and credibility. Expert judgement is needed to review and challenge assumptions about early warning indicators, provide time-sensitive judgements, illuminate causal chains and offer feasible policy recommendations tailored to situations on the ground. Organisations should facilitate interaction between producers and consumers of intelligence and foster a culture of risk-taking, error-reporting and assumption reviewing.

4. A long-term structural prevention strategy should also be supported by consistent and credible development and human rights policies in which various elements related to mass atrocity prevention have been systematically mainstreamed and local structures for de-escalation and resilience strengthened. Policy responses need to be consistent in order to be effective, which means also that mass atrocities should not be overlooked when clashing with economic and strategic interests.

5. In situations where the risk of genocide and other mass atrocities is very high, and/or where low-level violence has already broken out, robust preventive diplomacy – carried out

by high-level or behind-the-scenes mediators/dialogue facilitators and backed up by other measures like monitors or peacekeepers – and reliable neutral monitoring mechanisms should be used as early as possible to make sure that potential perpetrators understand and heed their responsibilities with regard to civilians.

6. Despite a clear preference for prevention and a political preference for using other instruments, legitimate military intervention needs to be included in any strategy aimed at preventing and stopping mass atrocities as it can contribute in a number of ways to saving lives, particularly when combined with other civilian measures. Legitimacy in this context also extends to the manner in which coercive measures are implemented, which in particular requires that International Humanitarian Law is respected. This is best achieved by military actors subordinating their action to the needs of international and/or regional organisations and agencies directly involved in preventing and halting mass atrocities.

7. Mass Atrocities Response Operations (MARO) are a unique challenge for military organisations as their mission is nothing less (and nothing more) than to stop the killing of civilians, in particular by creating the conditions that allow for international civilian agencies to fulfil their respective human rights mandates. Advance planning, readiness, speed, clear rules of engagement, information assets tailored to mass atrocities and the ability to escalate responses and dominate any opponent are all crucial for the success of such operations.

8. Although conflict prevention is already a top priority for the EU, there is a need to better tailor EU policies, intelligence and response instruments in order to translate good intentions into effective action and to prevent mass atrocities specifically. The establishment of the European External Action Service provides a unique opportunity for drafting a comprehensive EU strategy with an emphasis on specific prevention and response, as well as developing ways to strengthen or initiate cooperation with the UN, regional organisations and EU Strategic Partners.