Combating Genocide: Reassessing the Fight Against the Islamic State

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Brief Analysis

While Washington and its coalition partners have begun to roll back some of the Islamic State's territorial gains, what more can be done to defeat the group and, until then, protect civilians?

On April 5, Matthew Levitt, Naomi Kikoler, and James Jeffrey addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Kikoler is the deputy director of the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Levitt is the Institute's Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of its Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. Jeffrey is the Institute's Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, Iraq, and Albania. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MATTHEW LEVITT

The Islamic State (IS) adheres to a hardline Salafi jihadist ideology overlaid with an apocalyptic worldview, pitting those whom it perceives as true believers against apostates and nonbelievers. In this "us versus them" mindset, violence is a core part of the organization's DNA -- it is not just permissible to kill enemies and nonbelievers, but a religious duty.

According to its English-language magazine *Dabiq*, IS denies any chance of peaceful existence with people who hold different beliefs, including Christians, Yazidis, and others. Part of the group's strategy therefore includes eliminating what it calls the "grey zone," forcing Muslims to either join the caliphate or be labeled apostates. IS aims to convince Muslims that the West will never accept them, and every violent act has this goal in mind.

The Islamic State's propensity for violence is widely known to potential recruits prior to their arrival in Syria and Iraq. According to a Dutch intelligence report, "Anyone traveling to the so-called Islamic State is knowingly opting to join a terrorist group which regards all outsiders as 'infidels' and uses excessive violence on a daily basis." While IS claims to be defending its territory, the report adds that "its idea of 'defense' includes attacking, killing, raping, or enslaving Syrians and Iraqis who do not share its beliefs, or who resist in any way."

The group employs such wanton, barbaric violence as a means of instilling fear and subjugating populations. Extreme violence also attracts attention to IS propaganda and facilitates its recruitment and fundraising efforts. Crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocidal actions all play into the group's overall apocalyptic vision; for example, IS celebrates slavery as "one of the signs of the Day of Judgment."

Knowing that IS purposefully uses extreme violence, and given that the international community has a responsibility to protect civilians, humanitarian considerations need to be given higher priority than they have been to date. Evidence collection teams should be immediately dispatched to liberated territory in order to document atrocities. Civilian protection teams should follow behind the military to address the needs of individuals who have suffered under the yoke of IS rule. And military planners should integrate civilian protection into their strategy for defeating the group. As the anti-IS coalition sets the stage for efforts to retake Mosul, now is the time to explore military and nonmilitary strategies that can help stabilize newly liberated areas.

NAOMI KIKOLER

Interviews conducted by the Holocaust Memorial Museum make clear that genocide and crimes against humanity have been committed against Iraq's minority populations. The Islamic State is a terrorist group that is also genocidal. It commits atrocity crimes for the strategic purpose of controlling, expelling, or exterminating populations. Any counter-IS strategy needs to address this strategic targeting of civilians.

Interviews with survivors also show that the perpetrators of crimes against humanity in Iraq are diverse, including IS personnel, local and foreign fighters, and complicit or opportunistic neighbors. Devising strategies to prevent further atrocities requires dissecting the complex and diverse dynamics that enable and motivate perpetrators. For example, one impending massacre in Mosul was delayed by a few days because of key relationships between community leaders and former Baath officials.

Accordingly, intelligence gathering and sharing is critical to combatting IS and identifying vulnerabilities in local communities. Information should be shared with different stakeholders to help map weaknesses and develop protection strategies for vulnerable populations.

Documenting atrocities is vital as well, and satellite imagery should be used to record mass graves in a timely manner. Little has been done in this regard so far, and the migration of survivors complicates investigations. International efforts to preserve and collect evidence for future prosecutions and transitional processes would signal to minority communities that their concerns are taken seriously.

Regarding prosecution, referrals to the International Criminal Court for crimes related to various conflicts have sometimes spurred protests by China, Russia, and even the United States. Moreover, Iraq is not party to the Rome Statute, the treaty that established the court. Yet the Islamic State is a nonstate actor that no one wants to protect. There is also space for domestic prosecutions in Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and perhaps for genocide cases in the United States, Germany, and other countries that have generated foreign fighters.

Thus far, the government of Iraq and the international community have failed to prevent crimes perpetrated by IS. Protection of minority communities has not been prioritized despite clearly documented risks over the past ten years. In Ninawa, for example, one can find a long record of increasing attacks against minorities, growing extremism, and an expanding IS presence. Yet neither the KRG, Baghdad, nor the international community formulated a protection strategy in response to these warning signs.

Protecting minorities and civilians is therefore integral to the credibility and efficacy of any counter-IS strategy going forward. Absent this, continued atrocities will create a future Iraq without minority communities. Secretary of State John Kerry's acknowledgement of genocide is significant and necessitates action, including preparations for stabilizing areas liberated from IS. In fact, atrocity prevention needs to be a component of any national security conversation. This requires innovation and leadership, not necessarily new resources.

Finally, liberating Mosul will probably force around 600,000 people from their homes, and they will need physical protection. Many women and children currently held by IS are likely to be used as human shields during the liberation effort. There is also significant risk of reprisal killings after operations conclude. Communities seeking to return to their homes will need protection as well, preferably from international forces, though there are ways to incorporate Baghdad and the KRG. Any local forces will require training on proper adherence to international human rights standards.

JAMES JEFFREY

There is overlap between humanitarian interventions intended to protect at-risk populations and realpolitik interventions. Even purely geopolitical interventions such as the liberation of Kuwait always involve at-risk populations, while humanitarian interventions such as the Libya operation have various geopolitical dimensions.

The West has extraordinary resources, but it frequently becomes mired in debate about interventions because many past examples have not turned out well, such as Beirut in 1983, Somalia in the early 1990s, and Afghanistan and Libya more recently. Once initial operations are over, the United States and its partners are often at risk of losing support and solidarity due to fears of quagmire, mission creep, and casualties. Yet there are examples of successful interventions. Operations in Bosnia and Kosovo met their goals. And in Iraq, a small number of troops along the Green Line prevented hostilities between Kurdish and Iraqi forces, while other positions allowed the United States to empower certain local populations to fight IS precursors.

In general, greater international support increases an intervention's legitimacy and likelihood of success. Monopoly of force is also critical, but population protection efforts have to be integrated with other efforts, and locals need to be empowered.

Having an endgame in mind is crucial, but goals need to be distinct from the effort and process. Whenever the losers in a given conflict are able and willing to respond with violence, they can restart the cycle of bloodshed that prompted the intervention in the first place. In Somalia and Beirut, the United States went in for humanitarian purposes but developed geopolitical endgames that created new enemies. And in the midst of the 1994 NATO effort in Bosnia, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke was reluctant to prioritize war crime accountability above other considerations, believing that those marked for prosecution would see it as a political challenge and respond with open hostility. War crime accountability is necessary, but it must be separated from and subordinate to the initial

establishment of monopoly of force and civilian protection.

In Iraq and Syria, there are several separate conflicts currently targeting civilians. In addition to the Islamic State's atrocities, many civilians face a larger threat from the Syrian regime and its supporters. In Iraq, the civil conflicts exacerbated by the presence of Shiite militias in Sunni areas persist in small but significant remnants, as do conflicts between Kurds and Arabs.

That said, civilians in IS-held territory face the worst human rights abuses and persecution. There are other reasons to target the group, but liberating the millions under its control is a worthy goal for its own sake. Once these areas are liberated, however, IS will still be able to infiltrate, attack, and retake territory, further underlining the need for a monopoly of force. And while U.S. troops are typically seen as an objective balancing force in post-crisis situations, maintaining a long-term U.S. presence absent local forces often generates geopolitical hostility.

Planning for "the day after" is always a challenge, and the White House needs to decide who has the authority and competence for these efforts. The armed forces employ stability doctrine as part of their military efforts, but they have not received clear orders for this in Iraq. Additionally, NGOs have an important role to play in relief efforts.

This summary was prepared by Patrick Schmidt. ❖

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