

The Effect of Arms Embargoes on Mass Atrocities and Closely-Related Outcomes

Tools for Atrocity Prevention: Evidence Brief

The 1979 Report of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, which led to the creation of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, stated, "Only a conscious, concerted attempt to learn from past errors can prevent recurrence to any racial, religious, ethnic, or national group."

The "lessons learned" project of the Museum's Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide is one way the institution seeks to carry out the charge to identify lessons from history that can potentially contribute to saving lives by preventing future genocides and related crimes against humanity.

To identify these insights, we reviewed academic articles and think tank reports, and interviewed experts. We then distilled this body of policy-relevant knowledge into an accessible, practical resource.

Read more about our approach at: www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/simon-skjodt-center/work/research/lessons-learned

Definition

Arms embargoes prohibit arms transfers to a whole country (“blanket arms embargoes”), specific areas or forces within a country (“selective arms embargoes”), or individuals or groups regardless of location (“global arms embargoes”). Arms embargoes can target one or all sides of a conflict (“partial” and “impartial” arms embargoes, respectively) (SIPRI 2007, pp. 2-3).

Connection between arms embargoes and atrocity prevention strategies

If arms embargoes deny potential perpetrators access to arms or raise the costs of acquiring arms, they would reduce the likelihood or severity of mass atrocities by constraining their capacity for violence. If arms embargoes increase the expected cost of committing mass atrocities, potential perpetrators would be more likely to choose alternative options (Brubaker and Dörfler 2017, pp. 2, 8).

This tool supports the following strategies:

- Dissuading potential perpetrators from committing mass atrocities
- Degrading potential perpetrators’ capacity to commit atrocities

Overview

Our research review includes 14 reports that address the effects of arms embargoes on closely related outcomes, such as civilian killings, human rights violations, and conflict recurrence. We did not find any studies meeting our inclusion criteria that addressed the effects of arms embargoes on mass atrocities. Our research review found the following:

- A mix of findings as to whether arms embargoes were effective in helping prevent mass atrocities or closely-related outcomes, and
- Relatively strong evidence on the association of one factor—*using arms embargoes concurrently with other atrocity prevention tools*—with greater effectiveness of arms embargoes in helping prevent mass atrocities.

Success factors

We list below only those factors on which we found relatively strong or moderate evidence that the factor is associated with arms embargoes being more effective at decreasing mass atrocities or closely-related outcomes. These include contextual factors, which describe the circumstances in which the tool is used but which are beyond the control of policymakers, and design factors, which describe the manner in which policymakers use the tool.

Contextual factors

CONTEXTUAL FACTOR	DESCRIPTION	STRENGTH OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE	OUTCOMES STUDIED
Absence of external assistance or foreign troops	There are no foreign troops active in the ongoing conflict situation nor are external actors offering assistance to the conflict parties.	Moderate	Conflict

Design factors

DESIGN FACTOR	DESCRIPTION	STRENGTH OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE	OUTCOMES STUDIED
Concurrent use of multiple tools	The tool implementer or other actors are simultaneously implementing other tools that are consistent with the goals of the tool.	Stronger	Conflict
International support or coordination	There is a high degree of international support for the use of the tool, or the tool implementer coordinates with other international actors on the use of the tool.	Moderate	Conflict
Committed implementer	The tool implementer has a high level of commitment, resolve, or credibility, or has committed a great deal of resources toward use of the tool.	Moderate	Conflict

Case Illustrations

Arms embargoes were used in both Central African Republic and South Sudan to help prevent or respond to mass atrocities. Read the brief illustrations below to learn how this tool was used in these cases.

Central African Republic (2012–present)

Violence in CAR erupted in December 2012 and escalated in March 2013 when a loose coalition of Muslim-majority militias, known as the Séléka, violently ousted President François Bozizé. Fighting quickly devolved along ethno-sectarian lines as the Muslim-majority Séléka faced armed opposition from Christian-majority Anti-Balaka forces (CFR 2022). Reprisal attacks targeted civilians, with an estimated 3,000-6,000 civilians killed between January 2013 and December 2014 (UNSC 2014). In response to these atrocities, the UN Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passed Resolution 2127 on December 5, 2013, leading to the implementation of a complete arms embargo on CAR, as well as mandating a Commission of Inquiry and an African Union Mission (GlobalR2P 2013). The United States also implemented its own arms embargo on armed militia groups and a sanctions regime against militant actors in CAR through Executive Order 13667 in 2014 (Federal Register 2014). Despite porous borders and an active black market for weapons (Harding 2015), the arms embargo remains in place and has been extended by the UNSC until July 31, 2022.

South Sudan (2013–present)

It is estimated that nearly 200,000 people were killed in the first five years of South Sudan’s civil war, which began in December 2013 ([London School of Tropical Medicine 2018](#)). An arms embargo was considered in the early months of the civil war, but the Obama administration withheld support for an embargo until 2016, due to concerns that it might inadvertently alter the dynamics of the conflict in favor of rebel forces, given a lack of enforcement capacity and large amounts of weapons already available ([Temin 2018](#)). The United States backed an embargo in 2016 but Russia and China blocked its adoption at the UNSC. In February 2018, the Trump administration implemented a unilateral arms embargo and the UNSC imposed a multilateral arms embargo in July 2018. Amnesty International ([2020](#)) has recorded multiple violations of the embargo, though the identity of the suppliers is unknown. In May 2021, the UNSC renewed the arms embargo for one year, while expressing readiness to review the embargo depending on South Sudan’s progress on five peace-related benchmarks ([UN 2021](#)).

Selected informational resources on US government use of arms embargoes

Reports related to legislative authorities to regulate arms sales to foreign consumers and to enact arms embargoes:

- Congressional Research Service [report](#) (2021) about US arms sales and human rights regulations
- Congressional Research Service [report](#) (2020) about the sale and export of US-made arms to foreign entities
- Congressional Research Service [report](#) (2020) about the US export control system

Arms embargoes enacted by the UN Security Council - examples:

- [Central African Republic](#)
- [Somalia](#)
- [South Sudan](#)

The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum works to prevent genocide and related crimes against humanity. The Simon-Skjodt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multi-pronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity.



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