

# The Effect of Diplomatic Sanctions 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](http://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/simon-skjodt-center/work/research/lessons-learned)*

## Definition

Diplomatic sanctions include “severing formal diplomatic ties with a country or significantly downgrading ties from the normal level of diplomatic activity for foreign policy purposes” (Maller 2009, p. 512). Diplomatic sanctions may specifically entail not recognizing a regime in public statements, withdrawing staff from or closing an embassy, “restrictions on travel for specific leaders” (MacGregor and Bowles 2012, p. 445), and “suspension of membership or expulsion from international or regional bodies” (ICISS 2001, p. 31). Diplomatic sanctions are intended to “signal disapproval of the target regime’s behaviour, and also to signal the possibility of subsequent punitive measures should that behaviour not change” (Krain 2014, p. 27).

## Connection between diplomatic sanctions and atrocity prevention strategies

If diplomatic sanctions impose reputational costs on potential perpetrators and/or increase their expectation that external actors will impose other costs in the future in response to atrocities, they would reduce the likelihood of mass atrocities. In addition, if diplomatic sanctions damage an abusive leader’s domestic standing, they would reduce the likelihood or severity of mass atrocities by helping facilitate a political transition.

This tool supports the following strategies:

- Dissuading potential perpetrators from committing mass atrocities
- Facilitating leadership or political transition

## Overview

Our research review includes 5 reports: 1 that addresses the effects of diplomatic sanctions on mass atrocities and 4 that address the effects of diplomatic sanctions on closely related outcomes, such as civilian killings, human rights violations, and conflict recurrence. It found the following:

- A mix of findings as to whether diplomatic sanctions were effective in helping prevent mass atrocities or closely-related outcomes,
- Limited evidence on which specific factors contribute to the effectiveness of diplomatic sanctions in helping prevent mass atrocities, and
- No factors with at least 2 findings about their association with the effectiveness of diplomatic sanctions.

## Case Illustrations

*Diplomatic sanctions were used in both Syria and Burma/Myanmar to help prevent or respond to mass atrocities. Read the brief illustrations below to learn how this tool was used in these cases.*

## Syria (2011–present)

The United States has used diplomatic sanctions in its efforts to draw attention to the Syrian government’s campaign of violence against its civilian population and to ostracize the Assad regime. Diplomatic sanctioning of Syria began in February 2012, when the United States, alongside a number of other nations, suspended consular operations and closed its embassy in Damascus, while criticizing the Syrian government for its brutality (Shadid 2012). In response to a government-led massacre of 108 civilians in May 2012, the United States then expelled the *chargé d’affaires* at the Syrian embassy in Washington (Keating 2012). The United States further ratcheted up diplomatic sanctions against President Assad in early 2014, shuttering the Syrian embassy in Washington and mandating the removal of all non-US citizen Syrian consular staff across the country (DeYoung 2014). Secretary of State John Kerry said that Assad had lost the legitimacy to govern, and the US State Department recognized the Syrian opposition as the “legitimate representative of the Syrian people” (Reuters 2014; Gordon 2014).

## Burma/Myanmar (1988–2019)

Following a violent coup in 1988, the United States applied economic and diplomatic sanctions (Singh 2006). The US ambassador to Burma refused to meet with regime leaders in order to prevent legitimizing their brutal and undemocratic actions (Steinberg 2010). After the military rulers nullified the 1990 elections, which had resulted in a resounding victory for protest leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the United States officially downgraded diplomatic ties from the ambassadorial to the *chargé d’affaires* level (NPR 2013; Steinberg 2010). The United States implemented a visa ban for junta members and others that benefited from military rule and lobbied for ASEAN countries to reject Burma’s membership in the regional intergovernmental organization (Singh 2006). In 2012, the United States lifted some sanctions and took steps toward normalizing relations with Burma, following initial steps toward democratization (Myers and Fuller 2012). In response to the military’s genocidal attacks against the Rohingya in 2017, the US State Department instituted visa sanctions against Burmese officials and extended sanctions to two top military leaders in 2019 (US Department of State 2021).

## Selected informational resources on US government use of diplomatic sanctions

*US government use of different types of diplomatic sanctions - examples:*

- Diplomatic expulsion:
  - [Russia](#) (2021)
- Withdrawal of or changes to diplomatic recognition:
  - [Venezuela](#) (2019)
- Travel bans:
  - [US bans 12 officials for human rights violations](#) (2021)
- Diplomatic boycott of sports or cultural events:
  - [Beijing Olympics](#) (2021)

**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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