

The Effect of Support To Non-State Armed Groups 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

Support to non-state armed groups is assistance—including “the provision of weapons, funds, logistics, military training and access to intelligence and sanctuaries” (Karlén 2017, p. 16)—provided by a foreign state to a non-state armed group (often referred to as a rebel group). This review does not include analyses of direct military intervention in support of a non-state armed group.

Connection between support to non-state armed groups and atrocity prevention strategies

If support to a non-state armed group enables the group to provide physical protection to civilian populations, to increase costs to other armed actors of committing atrocities (e.g., by attacking them in response to atrocities), or to destroy or degrade other groups’ capacities to commit atrocities, it would reduce the likelihood or severity of mass atrocities. In addition, if support to a non-state armed group enables it to defeat an abusive government and facilitate a political transition, it would reduce the likelihood or severity of mass atrocities.

This tool supports the following strategies:

- Dissuading potential perpetrators from committing mass atrocities
- Degrading potential perpetrators’ capacity to commit atrocities
- Protecting vulnerable civilian populations
- Facilitating leadership or political transition

Overview

Our research review includes 15 studies that address the effects of support to non-state armed groups 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 support to non-state armed groups on mass atrocities. Our research review found the following:

- A mix of findings as to whether support to non-state armed groups was effective in helping prevent mass atrocities or closely-related outcomes, and
- Limited evidence on which specific factors contribute to the effectiveness of support to non-state armed groups in helping prevent mass atrocities.

Case Illustrations

Support to non-state armed groups was used in both Libya and Syria to help prevent or respond to mass atrocities. Read the brief illustrations below to learn how this tool was used in these cases.

Libya (2011)

The Libyan conflict began in 2011 with a violent crackdown on protests against the Gaddafi regime. The regime committed atrocities against civilians in Libya's east with hundreds killed or disappeared and heavy weapons and illegal weapons including cluster bombs used indiscriminately against civilian areas ([HRW 2012](#)). In March 2011, a US-led NATO coalition intervened to enforce the UN-mandated no-fly zone and prevent an imminent assault on Benghazi. France provided lethal military assistance to opposition rebels in June 2011, while the United Kingdom provided non-lethal assistance ([Birnbaum 2011](#)). The United States provided \$25 million in non-lethal assistance to Libyan opposition groups throughout 2011 ([Blanchard 2011](#), p. 8). The United States also secretly approved the provision of arms and funding to Libyan rebels by Qatar and the UAE in the spring of 2011 ([Risen et al. 2012](#)). Together with the NATO intervention, the provision of external assistance to Libyan rebels appears to have helped the Libyan opposition overthrow the Gaddafi regime, which it did in October 2011. The longer-term effects are less clear, with continued instability and human rights abuses in Libya.

Syria (2011–present)

The Syrian conflict began in 2011 after the violent suppression of protesters by the Assad regime. The ensuing civil war has seen the significant and persistent perpetration of mass atrocity crimes. In mid-2012, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France began to covertly provide non-lethal logistical and intelligence support to “appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition and other appropriately vetted Syrian groups” ([Messinger 2014](#)), expanding to the provision of arms and military training in 2013. The United States initially provided nonlethal assistance to Syrian non-state armed groups through the Department of State ([Blanchard and Belasco 2015](#), p. 5). Overt military assistance was approved in 2014, through the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act ([P.L. 113-291](#)). Congress approved the transfer of \$500 million in assistance for training and equipping for vetted Syrian opposition forces, combatting both the Islamic State and the Syrian government ([Blanchard and Belasco 2015](#)). Running parallel was a \$1 billion covert operation called Timber Sycamore spearheaded by the CIA, which was canceled in 2017 ([Mazzetti et al. 2017](#)). As of 2021, total foreign assistance to Syrian non-state armed groups was worth \$2.54 billion ([Security Assistance Monitor](#)). Owing largely to Russia and Iran's support to the Syrian government, it appears that the arming of Syrian rebel forces failed to achieve the goal of defeating the perpetrators or of mitigating mass atrocities in Syria.

Selected informational resources on US government use of support to non-state armed groups

Congressional authorizations and restrictions:

- [10 U.S. Code § 333](#) allows the US Department of Defense to train and equip foreign forces, including some non-state actors, for the purpose of building partner capacity
- [10 U.S. Code § 127e](#) allows for the annual expenditure of up to \$100 million “to provide support to foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals engaged in supporting or

facilitating authorized ongoing military operations by United States special operations forces to combat terrorism”

- [10 U.S. Code § 362](#), known commonly as the Leahy Law, constrains US military assistance when there is risk of gross human rights violations

Covert support by US intelligence agencies - examples:

- [Syria](#)
- [Afghanistan](#)

Additional information:

- See the [Security Assistance Monitor](#), which tracks US security assistance worldwide

The Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide

of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum works to prevent genocide and related crimes against humanity. The Simon-Skjoldt 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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