

The Effect of Security Assistance 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

Security assistance is support provided by a government in the form of “defense articles, military education and training, and other defense-related services to eligible foreign governments by grant, loan, credit, cash sales, or lease” ([Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Defense Exports and Cooperation](#)).

Connection between security assistance and atrocity prevention strategies

If security assistance increases the expected benefits of alternative courses of action to committing mass atrocities, it would reduce the likelihood or severity of mass atrocities. In addition, if security assistance enables a state 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.

This tool supports the following strategies:

- Dissuading potential perpetrators from committing mass atrocities
- Degrading potential perpetrators’ capacity to commit atrocities
- Protecting vulnerable civilian populations

Overview

Our research review includes 20 reports that address the effects of security assistance 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 security assistance on mass atrocities. Our research review found the following:

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

Case Illustrations

Security assistance was used in both Liberia and Ukraine to help prevent or respond to mass atrocities. Read the brief illustrations below to learn how this tool was used in these cases.

Liberia (2003–15)

Liberia’s civil war, which lasted between 1989 and 2003, killed around 150,000 people, mainly civilians, and displaced at least 850,000 people ([UNMIL](#)). Both government and rebel soldiers committed mass atrocities, including massacres of civilians and the recruitment and use of child

soldiers. The United States and the UN supported interventions by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), including logistical support to an ECOWAS intervention in 2003, which ended the civil war ([ABC 2003](#)). The United States took a leading role in the post-war reconstruction of Liberia, in particular its security forces. Through the UN and private military contractors, the United States funded and led security sector reform efforts and demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of over 100,000 combatants across multiple groups ([Islam 2021](#)). Between 2006 and 2015, the US Congress appropriated approximately \$2 billion in assistance to Liberia, about \$300 million of which was directed for stabilization operations and security sector reform ([ForeignAssistance.gov 2021](#)).

Ukraine (2022–present)

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 included large-scale attacks on civilians and prompted a sharp increase in US security assistance to the Ukrainian government. In just the first month of the war, more than one thousand civilians were killed, and more than ten million people in Ukraine were displaced ([OHCHR 2022](#); [UN News 2022](#)). In March 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken declared the US government’s assessment that Russian forces had committed war crimes in Ukraine, marked by indiscriminate attacks on civilians ([US State Department 2022](#)). The United States had “committed more than \$4 billion in State Department- and DOD-funded security assistance” to Ukraine between 2014 and 2022 ([CRS 2022](#), p. 1). In the first month following Russia’s invasion in February 2022, the Biden administration authorized \$1.35 billion for immediate security assistance to Ukraine, and Congress passed the Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022, which included more than \$4 billion of additional security assistance ([CRS 2022](#), p. 1). On March 26, 2022, Blinken announced an intention to provide \$100 million in new civilian security assistance to help Ukrainian forces protect civilians ([US State Department 2022](#)).

Selected informational resources on US government use of security assistance

- Congressional Research Service [report](#) (2020) about the president’s authority to regulate arms sales to foreign entities
- Congressional Research Service [report](#) (2018) on funding trends for US security assistance and security cooperation programs
- Congressional Research Service [primer](#) (2021) on US Department of Defense “Title 10” security cooperation
- US State Department [fact sheet](#) (2021) about the Leahy Law, which constrains US military assistance when there is risk of gross human rights violations
- Congressional Research Service [brief](#) (2020) on the Child Soldiers Prevention Act, which restricts US security assistance to countries that recruit or use child soldiers

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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100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW Washington, DC 20024-2126 ushmm.org