

THE RELEVANCE OF THE 1948 GENOCIDE CONVENTION TODAY

Seventy years ago on Dec 9th 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. By the time it entered into force, in January 1951, thirty-nine countries had signed the document, which recognized genocide as a crime under international law, and defined it to mean “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”

The outlawed acts were:

- a) Killing members of the group;
- b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d) Imposing measures to prevent births within the group;
- e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Genocide was punishable, of course, but so were conspiracy to commit genocide, direct and public incitement to commit genocide, attempts to commit genocide, and complicity in genocide.

Leaving aside complicated questions regarding the efficacy of the United Nations as a body capable of prevention and/or punishment, we must nevertheless address the disturbing rise in massive outbreaks of hate-fueled violence and atrocities around the world. What are we, as individuals and as nations, prepared to do to thwart genocides present and future?

Researchers who specialize in the causes and stages of genocide are nearly unanimous in recognizing a buildup toward the crimes enumerated in the General Assembly’s declaration seventy years ago, a “nonlinear” progression that can be viewed as “predictable but not inexorable.” The three earliest, identified by Genocide Watch among the eight stages of genocide, are: “Classification, Symbolization, and Dehumanization.” Sound familiar? Immediate and preventive measures are urgently necessary, and the time is now.

We must all be on guard, individuals and societies alike, and condemn hateful speech whenever and wherever it arises, including among political and religious leadership. We must be proactive “anti-deniers”; we must intervene early by denouncing propaganda. We are all responsible for calling out hate.

Too often we think of hate of others, which can lead to genocide, as something abnormal, but it is part of the human condition. We may need help in figuring out whom to hate, but the hate instinct is in our makeup, the need to define ourselves as

part of a group, and other groups as potential or actual dangers. The emerging field of Hate Studies is shedding more and more light on this capacity. Hate makes the brain react differently. And no one is immune. If we flipped a coin and divided a room into two groups, after group identities are formed, people in each would see theirs as smarter and more attractive, even though they know the assignment to one or the other was a totally random act. Put groups in competition, and hate increases.

When social psychologist James Waller, who has written books on genocide and has analyzed the risk of genocide in countries around the world, looked at the U.S., he didn't see genocide around the corner, but didn't discount the possibility either. Some of the warning signs he underscored, such as increased social fragmentation, are obvious. His concerns should be taken seriously, and we should be even more alarmed today.

Strong democratic norms reduce the chance of genocide. Recently, we've seen corrosive attacks on our institutions, including on our security and law enforcement agencies, on the press as the "enemy of the people," and against the independent judiciary.

When hate is stoked by leaders, when it is normalized, when it used to "explain" what is wrong in the world, and what to do about it, genocide is more likely to result. Again, the point is not to predict imminent genocide in the U.S., but to identify warning signs in the form of legal exclusion, dehumanization, and escalating violence. Witness the pronouncements of certain political leaders and the silence of others—perhaps from a calculus that hate works in politics, while speaking out against it can be costly.

In contrast, practices among grassroots organizations like "United Against Hate" and "Not In Our Town" demonstrate our shared obligation to take preventive action in schools, neighborhoods, and communities. We can find inspiration among Muslim leaders who, immediately following the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue, "offered to stand [guard](#) outside synagogues to protect Jews while they worshiped and raised [money](#) to support the community."

Passivity and denial are not options in the face of signs and symptoms of eroding civil rights and human rights, whether locally or globally. We must not only be vigilant and aware, but also willing to speak out whenever anyone vilifies a group of our fellow human beings, claiming they are a danger to "us."

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