



By: Aarif Abraham

Atrocity prevention - a national-security, economic, and legal necessity



“Never again” to genocide is one of the international community’s most brittle postwar promises, often invoked only after the killing has begun. Yet mass atrocities seldom arrive without warning.

Attacks on the rule of law, discrimination, dehumanization, and impunity for earlier crimes are familiar, easily discernible precursors.

These signals are increasingly visible globally. We are witnessing the largest number of **active armed conflicts** since 1946.

Around **one in five countries** has recently dealt with a mass atrocity, and people in **half the world’s countries** say they experienced some form of mass atrocity in 2024. Only 6.6% of the world’s population now live in **full democracies**.

War crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and aggression are becoming part of the international system’s operating environment.

This troubling trend is being intensified by an illiberal convergence on the United Nations Security Council, where three of the five permanent members have, to varying degrees, challenged the postwar legal order and moved to weaken the institutions charged with interpreting and enforcing it.

For the world’s middle powers—countries like Canada, Brazil, and Japan—this new reality is as much a practical concern as a moral one.

Atrocity crimes drive human displacement, destabilize entire regions, disrupt markets, and demand costly responses.

The Institute for Economics & Peace’s **Global Peace Index** estimates that violence cost \$21.8 trillion in 2025, equivalent to 18.5% of global GDP.

Accountability for human-rights abuses

No state can insulate itself from such disruptions, and the danger only grows when states target the institutions that seek to deliver accountability for human-rights abuses.

Sanctions and political attacks directed at the **International Criminal Court**, for example, are not merely jurisdictional disputes.

Accountability is an essential condition for durable peace and security

They strike at one of the few mechanisms capable of imposing legal consequences for atrocity crimes, making future atrocities more likely.

The recent accolades for South African jurist **Navi Pillay**, the recipient of this year’s Nobel Peace Prize, and the Anglo-French legal advocate Philippe Sands, who received the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, underscore the same point: accountability is an essential condition for durable peace and security.

Atrocity prevention is not conflict prevention by another name

I write this having recently conducted an 18-month inquiry, alongside Baroness Helena Kennedy and other leading legal experts, that culminated in **The Atrocity Crimes Review**.

Though our findings concern the United Kingdom, failure to act against atrocity crimes is not uniquely British.

Many governments have leverage (through diplomacy, intelligence, sanctions, and other economic channels), yet lack the machinery to turn warnings into consistent, accountable action.

The UK has no cross-government strategy, ministerial mandate, or specified budget for

atrocities prediction, prevention, and response, and many other democratic governments are similarly lax.

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Atrocity prevention is not conflict prevention by another name. Atrocities also occur in peacetime through detentions, forced labor, surveillance, persecution, and organized expulsions, all of which can in turn drive conflict.

Moreover, the warning signs, perpetrators, and policy responses differ. Mediation can end a conflict, but it will not necessarily stop an atrocity.

When bad actors are preparing mass violence against civilians, the task is to deter, disrupt, and, where necessary, punish.

The UK, as a middle power, does valuable accountability work. But its approach remains ad hoc and reactive.

In Ukraine, it has **supported investigations**, sanctions, and training since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022.

But the warnings were sounding before Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea. Even today, the UK lacks a process to assess atrocity-specific risks, escalate warnings, and coordinate action.

Legal and strategic risk

This is a bureaucratic failure that creates legal and strategic risk. Under the Genocide Convention, a state's duty to prevent arises when it learns, or should normally have learned, of a serious risk of genocide.

Discharging that duty requires assessing the

situation, escalating when appropriate, and acting before it is too late.

Governments may object that formalizing prevention would fetter foreign policy or constrain strategic relationships. But this is a false choice.

A formal framework need not compel interventions or condemnations in every case.

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Rather, it would require consistent risk assessments, recorded decisions, and processes to preserve lawful options.

Without a proper process, ministers may find themselves hostages to late crises, litigation, or public outrage.

The United States under President Donald Trump offers a cautionary lesson. The US was the only state that had an advanced, actionable atrocity-prevention program; now that it has been largely dismantled, the global consequences have been dire.

The fiscal case for a formal process is equally strong. Early warnings, specialist staff, civil-society partnerships, and rapid escalations cost a fraction of what it does to respond after atrocities destabilize regions or displace millions.

The peace dividend from averting atrocities is measured in lives and economic costs, just as the defense dividend is measured by wars averted.

What can the world's middle powers do?

What a credible strategy looks like is straightforward: appoint a responsible minister with coordinating functions; create an independent advisory body; preserve the

specialists whom you might need on short notice; establish early-warning and escalation channels; engage with survivors and civil society; scrutinize sanctions, arms exports, and supply chains; and report to legislatures.

Finally, in seeking to prevent atrocities, states should also address aggression, since unlawful wars often enable other international crimes, as the second- and third-order effects from the wars in Ukraine and Iran show.

No state can prevent every atrocity.



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But the world's middle powers, acting collectively, can use Security Council seats, regional organizations, intelligence-sharing, sanctions, trade, and development partnerships to deter perpetrators, support accountability, and strengthen the rule of law.

States can act diplomatically and lawfully before violence escalates, and defend international courts before harm becomes irreversible.

As we witness another civilian bombing in Kyiv or unlawful attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, coordinated action by likeminded states has grown more urgent.

“This isn’t a call for sentimentality,” former UK Prime Minister **Gordon Brown** explains, “but a call for statecraft, so that the law becomes operational, not ornamental, and early warning leads to early action.”

Atrocity prevention is a national-security, economic, and legal necessity. States that built the postwar legal order, including Britain, need to meet it head-on.

Aarif Abraham is a barrister at Doughty Street Chambers and Co-Convener of the Standing Group on Atrocity Crimes.