

America has given up on Syria
By James Kirchick, Haaretz.com
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The Barack Obama administration gussies up everything it says and does in meaningless, New Age diplospeak. Its Atrocities Prevention Board is but the latest, and most ridiculous, example.

Last week, U.S. President Barack Obama unveiled the latest artful attempt at avoiding responsibility to prevent genocide. With his newly created "Atrocities Prevention Board," the president has bestowed new meaninglessness to the term "never again," that mantra mouthed by countless world leaders before Obama, and one that will no doubt be repeated endlessly after the current occupant of the White House leaves office.

Established last year by presidential directive and headed by presidential aide Samantha Power, author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about America and genocide, the body was formed with the realization that, "preventing mass atrocities and genocide is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States of America." Its main function will be nothing less than to "strengthen the United States' ability to prevent mass atrocities."

To be sure, the motivation behind the board's creation is sound. Even when it has intervened to prevent wide-scale killings, the United States has often acted late. Too often, diplomats on the ground miss the telltale signs of impending mass murder. Bureaucratic inefficiencies stand in the way of action. Yet in response to the perceived problem of bureaucratic torpor, the administration has added just another level of bureaucracy.

The attempt to unwrap red tape with more red tape signals what is really the heart of the problem. When confronting genocidaires and other mass murderers, the crucial determinant is not one of diplomacy or interagency efficiency, but of will. It is reflected in the perennial question that has confronted the civilized world since the Holocaust: Will we stand by while states murder en masse? The answer to that question, most of the time, has been "yes." The United States did worse than little to stop the extermination of Europe's Jews; it turned many refugees away from its shores (it was grimly appropriate that the president made his announcement at Washington's Holocaust Museum). But it has become evident that this administration is only gesturing at a substantively different approach to genocide when one witnesses its reaction, or, rather, inaction, with respect to the ongoing events in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad has slain some 10,000 of his own people, and is on course to kill many, many more.

Syria has emerged as the 21st century's Spanish Civil War, as London Observer columnist Nick Cohen perceptively wrote earlier this year. This is not due to the scale of the slaughter, but the global implications of the struggle. The world's worst actors, from Iran (whose Revolutionary Guards are aiding Assad's goons) to Russia (which continues to supply Assad with weapons), have chosen a side in this battle, and the least that can be said of them is that they have put their money and guns where their mouths are. The United States and its allies, however, have stood on the sidelines. Never mind the moral imperative of stopping Assad's slaughter; the regime's fall would be a major coup for America and its allies in the region, as it is Iran's sole Arab ally and the conduit through which Tehran arms Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Rather, Washington supports lame efforts - like the "peace plan" of former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan - that only prolong the killing. Needless to say, Annan's record on such matters, from Rwanda to the Balkans, does not instill confidence. Indeed, if one is a civilian on the wrong side of some mass-murdering dictator in a benighted land, there are few phrases more soul-crushing than, "I am Kofi Annan and I'm here to help."

The Obama administration's record on preventing mass atrocities is not all bad. It did intervene in Libya, albeit at the last minute and at the instigation of France and the UK, where it managed to prevent there what would certainly have been a mass murder. The late and unlamented Muammar Gadhafi had explicitly promised to hunt down his subjects "like rats."

But even here the administration has learned the wrong lesson, believing that its "leading from behind" was a shrewd display of statecraft and not a deferral of responsibility. At the end of the day, it was American missiles, planes and logistics expertise that stopped Gadhafi, and the mission would have ended far sooner, and with fewer costs in both blood and treasure, had the United States assumed a leadership role earlier, rather than wait to be publicly hectored into acting by the French and British.

But the Obama administration is not just hesitant to embrace the use of military power and global leadership - it retreats from them. It gussies up everything it says and does in meaningless, New Age diplospeak, its Atrocities Prevention Board but the latest, and most ridiculous, example. The communique establishing the body, written by Power and David Pressman (who may bear the most unfortunate title in all of Washington, "Director for War Crimes and Atrocities"), is replete with the sort of graduate school, liberal internationalist jargon that characterizes the too-clever-by-half attitude of this administration and its supporters in the press corps. Did you hear about the "full court diplomatic press" in South Sudan, "engagement at the highest levels" in Kyrgyzstan, or the "robust international effort" in Cote d'Ivoire? Syrians would prefer simple "targeted air strikes" and "weapons dumps."

"The Syrian people have not given up, which is why we cannot give up," President Obama said last week. That pledge will come as cold comfort to the denizens of Homs and Idlib, for it appears that America has already given up on them.

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