

A Nonviolent Strategy to Defeat Genocide

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It is a tragic measure of the depravity of human existence that genocide is a continuing and prevalent manifestation of violence in the international system, despite the effort following World War II to abolish it through negotiation, and then adoption and ratification of the 1948 Genocide Convention.

According to the Genocide Convention, **genocide is any act committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group by killing members of the group**, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group and/or forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

While this definition is contested because, for example, it excludes killing of political groups, and words such as 'democide' (the murder or intentionally reckless and depraved disregard for the life of any person or people by their government,) and 'politicide' (the murder of any person or people because of their political or ideological beliefs) have been suggested as complementary terms, in fact atrocities that have been characterized as 'genocide' by various authors include mass killings, mass deportations, politicides, democides, withholding of food and/or other necessities of life, death by deliberate exposure to invasive infectious disease agents or combinations of these. See ['Genocides in history'](#).

While genocide and attempts at genocide were prevalent enough both before World War II (just ask the world's indigenous peoples) and then during World War II itself, which is why the issue attracted serious international attention in the war's aftermath, it cannot be claimed that the outlawing of genocide did much to end the practice, as the record clearly demonstrates.



A Rwandan boy covers his face from the stench of dead bodies in this July 19, 1994 file photo. (Source: [About Rwanda](#))

Moreover, given that the United Nations and national governments, out of supposed 'deference' to 'state sovereignty', have been notoriously unwilling and slow to meaningfully respond to genocides, as was the case in Rwanda in 1994 and has been the case with the Rohingya in Myanmar (Burma) for four decades – as carefully documented in ['The Slow-Burning Genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya'](#) – **there is little evidence to suggest that major actors in the international system have any significant commitment to ending the practice**, either in individual cases or in general. For example, as official bodies of the world watch, solicit reports and debate whether or not the Rohingya are actually victims of genocide, this minority Muslim population clearly suffers from what many organizations and any decent human being have long labeled as such. For a sample of the vast literature on this subject, see ['The 8 Stages of Genocide Against Burma's Rohingya'](#) and ['Countdown to Annihilation: Genocide in Myanmar'](#).



Burma's Rohingya genocide (Source: [The Cutting Edge](#))

Of course, it is not difficult to understand institutional inaction. Despite its fine rhetoric and even legal provisions, the United Nations, acting in response to the political and corporate elites that control it, routinely fails to act to prevent or halt wars (despite a UN Charter and treaties, such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact, that empower and require it to do so), routinely fails to defend refugees, routinely fails to act decisively on issues (such as nuclear weapons and the climate catastrophe) that constitute global imperatives for human survival, and turns the other way when peoples under military occupation (such as those of Tibet, West Papua, Western Sahara and Palestine) seek their support.

Why then should those under genocidal assault expect supportive action from the UN or international community in general? The factors which drive these manifestations of violence serve a diverse range of geopolitical interests in each case, and are usually highly profitable into the bargain. What hope justice or even decency in such circumstances?

Moreover, the deep psychological imperatives that drive the phenomenal violence in the international system are readily nominated: in essence, phenomenal fear, self-hatred and powerlessness. These psychological characteristics, together with the others that drive the behaviour of perpetrators of violence, have been identified and explained - see ['Why Violence?'](#) and ['Fearless Psychology and Fearful Psychology: Principles and Practice'](#) - but it is the way these (unconsciously and deeply-suppressed) emotions are projected that is critical to understanding the violent (and insane) behavioural outcomes in our world. For brief explanations see, for example, ['Understanding Self-Hatred in World Affairs'](#) and ['The Global Elite is Insane'](#).

Given the deep psychological imperatives that drive the violence of global geopolitics and corporate exploitation (as well as national, subnational and individual acts of violence), we cannot expect a compassionate and effective institutional response to genocide in the prevailing institutional order, as the record demonstrates. So, is there anything a targeted population can do to resist a genocidal assault?

Fortunately, there is a great deal that a targeted population can do. The most effective

response is to develop and implement a comprehensive nonviolent strategy to either prevent a genocidal assault in the first place or to halt it once it has begun. This is done most effectively by using a sound strategic framework that guides the comprehensive planning of the strategy. Obviously, there is no point designing a strategy that is incomplete or cannot be successful.

A sound strategic framework enables us to think and plan strategically so that once our strategy has been elaborated, it can be widely shared and clearly understood by everyone involved. It also means that nonviolent actions can then be implemented because they are known to have strategic utility and that precise utility is understood in advance. There is little point taking action at random, especially if our opponent is powerful and committed (even if that 'commitment' is insane which, as briefly noted above, is invariably the case).

There is a simple diagram presenting a 12-point strategic framework illustrated here in the form of the ['Nonviolent Strategy Wheel'](#).

In order to think strategically about nonviolently defending against a genocidal assault, a clearly defined political purpose is needed; that is, a simple summary statement of 'what you want'. In general terms, this might be stated thus: To defend the [nominated group] against the genocidal assault and establish the conditions for the group to live in peace, free of violence and exploitation.

Once the political purpose has been defined, the two strategic aims ('how you get what you want') of the strategy acquire their meaning. These two strategic aims (which are always the same whatever the political purpose) are as follows:

1. To increase support for the struggle to defeat the genocidal assault by developing a network of groups who can assist you.
2. To alter the will and undermine the power of those groups inciting, facilitating, organizing and conducting the genocide.

While the two strategic aims are always the same, they are achieved via a series of intermediate strategic goals which are always specific to each struggle. I have identified a generalized set of 48 strategic goals that would be appropriate in the context of ending any genocide [here](#). These strategic goals can be readily modified to the circumstances of each particular instance of genocide.

Many of these strategic goals would usually be tackled by action groups working in solidarity with the affected population campaigning in third-party countries. Of course, individual activist groups would usually accept responsibility for focusing their work on achieving just one or a few of the strategic goals (which is why any single campaign within the overall strategy is readily manageable).

As I hope is apparent, the two strategic aims are achieved via a series of intermediate strategic goals.

Not all of the strategic goals will need to be achieved for the strategy to be successful but each goal is focused in such a way that its achievement will functionally undermine the power of those conducting the genocide.

It is the responsibility of the struggle's strategic leadership to ensure that each of the strategic goals, *which should be identified and prioritized according to their precise understanding of the circumstances in the country where the genocide is occurring*, is being addressed (or to prioritize if resource limitations require this).

I wish to emphasize that I have only briefly discussed two aspects of a comprehensive strategy for ending a genocide: its political purpose and its two strategic aims (with its many subsidiary strategic goals). For the strategy to be effective, all twelve components of the strategy should be planned (and then implemented). See [Nonviolent Defense/Liberation Strategy](#).

This will require, for example, that tactics that will achieve the strategic goals must be carefully chosen and implemented bearing in mind the vital distinction between the political objective and strategic goal of any such tactic. See '[The Political Objective and Strategic Goal of Nonviolent Actions](#)'.

It is not difficult to nonviolently defend a targeted population against genocide. Vitally, however, it requires a leadership that can develop a sound strategy so that people are mobilized and deployed effectively.

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