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Mass Atrocity Response Operations: an annotated planning framework

Michael C Pryce

Introduction

In early 2007 the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government joined the US Army's Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute in a partnership dedicated to making a substantial contribution to the anti-genocide community. The focus of the partnership was simple: to bypass the endless and unproductive debates over 'whether' to intervene in a mass atrocity and concentrate instead on the question of 'how' such an intervention might work. The project centred its efforts on using the US military's Joint Operations Planning and Execution System to develop a plan focused on intervention. By using an empirical planning process to find the middle ground between the anguished demand that governments 'do something,

anything – now’ and those within government who respond with the equally emotional ‘we can’t do anything – ever, because it’s just too hard’, the Mass Atrocity Response Operations (MARO) Project provides a viable way forward.

To develop such a prototype planning framework, the standard military planning paradigm was modified through the collective experience of a core planning group and combined with the latest academic research. Further modifications followed the introduction of the framework to various audiences ranging from military planners and senior leaders from the US and other nations to State Department experts, former ambassadors, UN officials and representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Two trial scenarios were used to test the structure of the framework and illustrate course of action development. Together, the annotated planning framework (APF) and scenarios help to answer the questions ‘What do we want to do?’ (mission analysis) and ‘How are we going to do it?’ (course of action development).

Success in this difficult mission depends on building the broadest possible consensus throughout the international community. This in turn depends on developing a common vocabulary and procedures that provide a point of entry for those outside traditional military and governmental decision-making circles. The MARO Project’s APF has the flexibility to be used as a template that can be shaped to fit the needs of a specific region. The concept and related documents have been shared with representatives of the United Nations with the goal of helping that organisation to develop a capacity to prevent mass atrocities from occurring. It can also be adapted by the African Union to realise a mass atrocity response capability designed and built by Africans, for Africans. This could be accomplished by working with various existing national peacekeeping centres within which the MARO products could be adapted for African planning systems.

The MARO planning framework can help decision-makers in any organisation to evaluate information about a potential mass atrocity and share their assessments, using a common lexicon and analytical framework to make coordinated decisions regarding action they could take now or later, separately or together. This decision cycle could establish universal priorities for evaluating the situation and concurrently set the criteria for the next round of the community’s ‘watch–decide–act’ cycle. Thus the community could stay abreast of the situation within the country by developing familiar, knowledgeable and trusted networks using a cumulative knowledge base that forms the basis of a continuous dialogue. The anti-genocide community could become more relevant to those who must write policy to prevent or intervene

Eight stages of genocide

Classification

Symbolisation

Dehumanisation

Organisation

Polarisation

Preparation

Extermination

Denial

in a mass atrocity, by understanding how the policymakers see these problems in language that is familiar and clear to them. It would also help policymakers and military planners understand how the problem looks to those leading NGOs and private sector organisations, pooling knowledge and making use of all eyes on the ground.

This kind of interagency communication and coordination, though vital to the success of a complex mission such as mass atrocity intervention, is notoriously difficult to achieve. Again, use of the MARO planning framework could facilitate that dialogue. Lessons in analysis and planning distilled from decades of military experience can be adapted to serve all agencies of government, allowing each to contribute its own expertise to the problem of mass atrocity prevention. Planning and forethought are required to achieve ‘across the spectrum’ coordination in an intervention. Reaction rather than coordination is typically the result when an intervention is improvised following a hasty decision to intervene in a mass atrocity in progress. As if this challenge were not enough, the following is even harder: what to do with the failed state once the killing has stopped? Without prior planning, the risk of significant post-intervention problems derailing the entire effort expands geometrically. The MARO Project offers the chance to address these problems before they arise in an environment that leaves little time for reflective thinking and detailed planning.

Prevention or intervention?

Generally the international community’s interest in a fragile state peaks as a result of the recognition that one party is preparing to launch actions that could lead to a mass atrocity. A state’s descent toward mass atrocity may be measured by the stages of genocide.¹ These stages, although not always occurring in order, do provide a starting point for placing known events within a reasonably predictable framework. Though perpetrators typically work very hard to conceal their actions from foreign and sometimes domestic view, mass atrocities do not just happen: they are quite visible provided one knows where to look and what to look for.

For a comprehensive policy based on preventative diplomacy to be effective, moral imperative must drive the political will to prepare for physical intervention, even while acknowledging that this is the least desirable course of action. Without political will directing the development of a military force specifically trained, equipped and organised to conduct such a mission successfully, there can be no credible threat of military intervention. If, on the other hand, a military response to a mass atrocity was formed and ready, it could become the ‘teeth’ for effective preventative diplomacy.² The intent here is to underscore how the interrelated elements of moral imperative, political will and capability are balanced within the context of diplomacy. Rather than turning a blind eye as a failing state descends toward mass atrocity, assertive prevention

becomes the overarching policy uniting the efforts of government, NGOs, multinational corporations, regional security organisations, and so forth on the broadest possible front to exert diplomatic pressure. Backing up this diplomatic pressure is the demonstrated will and capability to intervene physically if all else fails.

How the framework works

The annotated planning framework was written from the perspective of a geographic combatant command planning staff, which is the level within the US military at which strategic thought and guidance are translated into military action. It is where the original planning for such an operation would take place and also where significant coordination between different agencies of government occurs. In that light it is important to re-emphasise that while this document is military in origin, it is not solely a military planning tool. It was an accepted premise of the core planning group that any military action undertaken without a specific and obvious connection to an overarching diplomatic effort is a recipe for certain failure. These vital connections with larger diplomatic and economic issues are taken into consideration at the beginning of the mission analysis process, while establishing the facts and assumptions regarding the operation. In this way the APF is designed to acknowledge and integrate the views of others by allowing their perspectives to drive and colour the very onset of planning.

Perhaps the most important divergence from the standard military planning model is that the bright line between ‘enemy and friendly’ must be replaced with a categorisation reflecting the reality of this complex mission. The APF recognises four categories of actors in a potential intervention: perpetrators, victims, interveners and ‘others’. The last, seemingly ambiguous, category refers to a variable with perhaps the most power in the entire equation – the observers. These could be people in the subject country who are not part of the killing, those in neighbouring countries, members of the international community, the media, or the domestic population of the intervening nation(s). In the age of information they wield the greatest control over responses to a mass atrocity. These are the people who determine whether or not a mass atrocity is taking place, who is whom within the maelstrom, the ease with which an intervening force can stage or move within a region, and crucially, whether or not the intervention has been successful.

Perpetrators	Victims	Interveners	Others
Identified as the dominant element controlling the environment and information	The subordinate element, unable to escape or present a message	Outsiders willing to impose an end to violence forcefully and reshape society	Not part of the killing; could be within the region or part of the international community, or the domestic population of the intervening nation(s), and so on

This category of 'others' might also encompass a potential international peacekeeping force under a specific mandate to maintain stability following the intervention and facilitate the transition to peaceful self-government by the indigenous society.

Mission analysis

The planning framework and scenarios together illustrate the entire planning process. Because the APF addresses the concept of intervention in a generic fashion it can only demonstrate the first half of the planning process (mission analysis) which answers the question: 'What do we want to do?' The scenarios take this generic process and pin it down to specific, though fictional, situations in order to illustrate the practical application of the mission analysis and answer the follow-on question: 'How are we going to do it?' Mission analysis proceeds more or less through the following steps: establishing facts and assumptions, mission parameters, critical variables, drivers of conflict analysis, tasks, end states, mission statement, commander's intent, critical information requirements and commander's planning guidance for course of action development.

Facts

As the first step in the planning process, facts generic to many mass atrocities have been identified and referenced based on Carr Center research with regard to the development of a typology of mass atrocities. Having this research available well before any planning effort is directed in response to a real-world scenario allows planners to better understand the complexities of a specific mission and illuminates pathways for further, more specific research, outlining materials they could use and experts they might contact. With such a 'stepping stone' approach to understanding how to plan to prevent or intervene in a mass atrocity, planners gain a better appreciation of such a mission and can move into the next step by making clearer assumptions.

Assumptions

Making assumptions is one the most critical steps in planning, and any assumption that proves false must immediately be considered against the risk a commander is willing to incur during the operation. Assumptions must be constantly validated and, as they become facts or are proven false or discarded, any changes required to the plan must be recognised and accounted for throughout the entire operation.

Mission parameters and force structure

The MARO Project alters the traditional mission analysis process at this point to formalise the connection between two distinct but inexorably linked strategies: prevention and

intervention. It is relatively new ground in the military to formally plan a preventative operation, but this concept is gaining traction. Prevention is obviously the preferred choice in dealing with a potential mass atrocity, but it is a much more difficult strategy to describe in generic planning terms than is intervention. (It is incidentally also impossible to prove success in this mission, since it might be argued that a mass atrocity that does not occur had never actually been imminent.) Because the whole concept of deterrence rests on capabilities, planning for intervention, at least to a certain extent, is also planning for prevention. It thus becomes very easy to blur the line between the two missions, and it was hoped that explicit recognition of the mission parameters at this point in the mission analysis would help to maintain clarity throughout future planning.

Another unique aspect of planning a mass atrocity response operation is the manner in which a planner must shape the potential intervention force. The following military organisation is proposed for either a preventative show of force or an actual intervention operation:

- *Immediate intervention force* – ready and prepared to enter the target country as the name suggests: immediately. This force would be highly mobile, with a large communications capability and specifically organised medical and law enforcement capabilities tailored to the specifics of the known mass atrocity site(s). Their primary objectives would be to stop the killing, protect the population, care for the wounded, examine the mass graves and hold those accused as perpetrators for law enforcement officials.
- *Sustainment and response force* – designed to protect the stabilisation assistance elements, ensure the overall security of the area, provide quick-response combat reinforcements and synchronise humanitarian support.
- *Stabilisation assistance force* – designed to support immediate and prioritised large-scale medical, sanitary and infrastructure requirements once the mass atrocity has ended.

Once the parameters of the operation (prevention or intervention) have been established, planning can move to the next step, aimed at broadening the planner's awareness of the nation in question and opening the planning effort to other expert opinions.

Twelve critical variables

Written annually, the joint operational environment is a document intended to help the planning community broaden its view of the environment within which the US is likely to employ force. A working draft of the 2007 edition yielded 12 elements of the environment that are most likely to impact military operations.³ The variables (listed in the side bar on the next page) are used to keep the planning logic flowing, while formally weaving that

thread of logical thought through important aspects of the situation on the ground, the region and events surrounding a crisis. They also help the planners to understand how to structure their own organisation, not only for the physical intervention, but for the transition from military control of security to civilian control and its associated short- and long-term ramifications for the region and the role of the country internationally.

Drivers of conflict analysis

In traditional mission analyses, once the facts and assumptions have been set, the next step is to consider the centre of gravity analysis. This analysis has two elements: one focuses on the enemy and the other on the friendly centre of gravity. The four-category approach of the framework requires a further cognitive shift to accommodate the increased complexity of this mission and still provide a vehicle for considering the crux of the conflict and its component parts. The Interagency Conflict Analytical Framework, developed by the US Administration for International Development and used by the Department of State's Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) in their planning framework,⁴ addresses the challenge of resolving a multi-level, complex problem with many actors and more connections, using the following four-step process for diagnosing conflict:⁵

- Context
- Core grievances and sources of social/institutional resilience
- Drivers of conflict and mitigating factors
- Windows of vulnerability and windows of opportunity

Clearly, this shift to an approach more receptive to 'shades of gray' is much more likely to arrive at a conclusion closer to the centre of the problem. Following this analysis of the problem from a broad interagency perspective, the APF takes the analysis one step further by combining the drivers of conflict analysis with a US Marine Corps planning process that is traditionally used to consider the concept of critical capabilities, requirements and vulnerabilities.⁶ In this process the focus is on what an actor is *capable* of doing, what is *required* for them to do this, and how those requirements open them to *vulnerabilities* that can be exploited by an opponent.

Twelve critical variables
Geography and physical environment
Nature and stability of critical actors
Sociological demographics
Culture
Regional and global relationships
Military capabilities
Information
Technology
External organisations
National will and will of critical actors
Time
Economics

The centre of gravity lens is useful not only for determining core strengths and weaknesses in the perpetrator, it can and should also be used to examine and understand the intervener's centre of gravity or drivers of conflict. Omitting this self-analysis leaves the job half done and a significant amount of risk to the mission unevaluated. Completing this part of the mission analysis is imperative for understanding the heart of the problem and developing the next step, which is to outline the tasks forming the foundation of the mission statement.

Main operating tasks

Traditional military planning organises an operation into 'phases'. The APF again deviates from tradition by adapting instead the 'stages' approach employed in the S/CRS essential task matrix, namely intervention, transformation and fostering sustainability.⁷ The tasks were thus categorised into their proper stages, and one additional level of planning detail was added to facilitate correct sequencing and prioritisation of tasks. These further subdivisions within each stage are:

- Main tasks, which are imperative to the mission during a particular stage. Main tasks demand the highest priority of supervision and resource application, and stand as the foundation for later tasks
- Supporting operational tasks, which flow directly from the main tasks and constitute the bulk of the 'daily work' of that particular stage. These tasks are normally divided by specialty

As the supporting operational tasks are concluded, the final sequence for the intervention and transformation stages is 'setting conditions for the next stage'. These are the precursors for the main tasks of the next stage and serve to mark the changing situation as it moves toward greater stability.

At this point in the developing the annotated planning framework, the MARO core planning group took the opportunity to address a persistent problem that has long plagued planning staffs. Experience shows that if a particularly critical planning assumption proves false, there is a substantial risk to the related tasks and ultimately to the mission. This risk has in the past been countered by experienced staffs keeping constant watch on the assumptions and rapidly gauging their influence on the related tasks and support requirements throughout the plan. In the APF the main tasks from each stage have been linked to a specific assumption, in an effort to add a degree of risk calculation regarding the severity of the issue, should an identifiable task fail. Presumably this structure could be used to calculate that impact on subsequent tasks and probable ramifications on the next stage, which, though beyond the scope of the original MARO Project, stands as an open invitation for further exploration.

Identifying the end states

In actual planning it is best to focus first on writing down the intervener's desired end state as it is usually the clearest to articulate. That will simplify the process and leave time to further develop the other actors' end states, based on the results of this process and the greater detail that should become available as the situation develops. This is also a good place to doublecheck the results of the analysis thus far against the original guidance documents, such as those that first directed planning to begin, and whatever standing regional strategy or policy had been in effect before the planning started. It is possible that several of the original assumptions will need to be re-evaluated and priorities shifted as detailed information that is discovered during planning may replace generalities or eliminate knowledge gaps. It is crucial to have a clear and detailed understanding of the desired end state for the country and region in question following the intervention; such as being free of revenge killing and with positive social structures developed to prevent the mass atrocity from recurring.

State the mission

This is the most critical paragraph in the entire mission analysis: it lays out *who* is going to do this, *what* they intend to do, *when* they are going to do it, *where* they are going to do it and *why* this is going to happen. It consists of the main tasks that were categorised earlier in the process and sorts them into the five 'w's'. The mission statement is the foundation of all the further planning and establishes the guidance for course of action development.

Commander's intent

The commander's intent is a clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the military end state. It provides focus to the staff and helps subordinate and supporting commanders take actions to achieve the military end state without further orders, even when operations do not unfold as planned. It also includes where the commander will accept risk during the operation.⁸

While it contains specific details, such as a precise operational purpose and a military end state, it must also be so expansive that the intent can be clearly understood even if the situation changes substantially. This will be particularly true in a mass atrocity, where the perpetrator and victim labels can be very swiftly exchanged and leave the intervening force in a difficult predicament. A well-written commander's intent can explain to the members of the intervening force (and the 'others') what their role is during the intervention and what it will evolve into after the killing has ended. It will also become an important aspect of the information campaign by reflecting the need for intervention and reaffirming the

desire to help end the conditions that led to the mass atrocity. Finally, a commander's intent written for a mass atrocity response operation must, by default, describe a significant amount of action taken by non-military agencies and non-governmental organisations. That requirement also turns the commander's intent into an important nexus aligning all participating organisations' separate planning processes.

Commander's critical information requirements

The US Department of Defense defines a commander's critical information requirement (CCIR) as information 'critical to facilitating timely decision-making'.⁹ Because of the complexity of combining MARO's four-category approach with the various levels of CCIRs, this part of the mission analysis was simplified by keeping to the traditional planning groups: strategic, political, economic, and military. The MARO Project has also proposed changes to the CCIRs that are a reflection of the unique demands that mass atrocity response operations place on information requirements, but these must themselves first be tested through a series of workshops and exercises.

Conclusion of mission analysis and start of course of action development

By the end of the first half of planning, everyone involved in planning understands the 'who, what, when, where and why' behind the intervention. This marks the end of the relatively unconstrained, imaginative half of planning, in which a multitude of potential outcomes can and should be considered. On entering the second half of the planning process, concrete realities take the place of intellectual constructs. This shift is necessary in order to answer the 'How?' question regarding the intervention, which is confined to the physical realities of time, space, distance, manpower, resources and budgets. In this step, organisational planners must prioritise the results from the mission analysis into a single document which will be repeatedly referred to in resolving the myriad compromises arising within the real world of moving people and things over great distances, with or without broad international approval or support. A clearly written planning guidance document will ease the transition into these limited planning parameters and help keep the planning effort on the rails.

The publication *Joint operation planning* has an extensive, checklist-like definition of what the commander's planning guidance should contain:

As a minimum, the planning guidance should include the mission statement, assumptions, operational limitations, a discussion of the national strategic end state, termination criteria, military objectives, and the Commander's initial thoughts on desired and undesired effects. The planning guidance

should also address the role of agencies and multinational partners in the pending operation and any related special considerations as required.¹⁰

The MARO Project starts with the final sentence of this paragraph, placing those ‘agencies and multinational partners’ at the forefront of the planning effort where their ‘special considerations’ can inform the core of planning priorities and ensure that the operation represents a unified effort from its conception. Naturally, broadening the base of planning beyond the military model brings with it complexities that will have to be accommodated within the traditional operational planning process. This is precisely the rationale for promoting the MARO planning framework far beyond the Department of Defense and the United States. Non-military participants who nevertheless understand the military planning process are in the best position to have their agendas and concerns addressed within that process. Ideally, they will be able to enter the process seamlessly at the point where they can be most useful, articulate their contributions in a manner that can be assimilated most easily, and then coordinate their own actions throughout the operation with the overall effort, thereby reducing substantially the risk of having the entire operation blindsided by an otherwise predictable obstruction. Because of its broad moral appeal, the mission of mass atrocity intervention provides an ideal test case to spearhead this kind of interagency and multinational planning effort.

Course of action development

Though the process can vary, course of action planning basically follows a four-step progression: development, war gaming, comparison, and recommendation/selection. The first step involves developing several (at least three) options which are capable of accomplishing the mission, feasible with the resources available and unmistakably different from each other. War gaming then takes each of these courses of action and attempts to predict how each category of actors might respond to a specific action. There are numerous ways of accomplishing this, but all basically adhere to the concept of action-reaction-counteraction. At the end of the war gaming step planners have a reasonable expectation of how much each course of action will demand in terms of resources and the degree of risk each entails. Next, the courses of action are compared in a side-by-side analysis to the most important elements of the commander’s guidance. By the final step the advantages and disadvantages of each course of action will have been logically sketched out for the decision-makers, thus giving them the best practical options for conducting the operation.

For the purposes of illustrating this process the MARO Project proposes the following generic courses of action for intervention: safe havens, separation and saturation. (Though these courses of action represent a wide range of possible responses, as generic courses of action suitable for a generic planning framework, they are not intended to

cover all possible contingencies.) In examining these courses of action, it becomes obvious that each one builds on the previous by increasing the degree of commitment by the intervening coalition. In fact, depending on the scenario, one could nearly forecast the probability of a mission creeping from safe havens on the periphery to total occupation (saturation) of a country. The odds of losing control of the intervention and moving from one end of the commitment spectrum to the other are high. The intervention force has to ask itself: how much of the problem are we willing to own? To answer that question, planners must evaluate each course of action in terms of decisiveness, sustainability and risk. The selected courses of action should be nested within these overarching themes:

- Mitigate risk to the force and mission
- Save as many people from mass atrocity as possible
- Address the underlying causes of the atrocity as directly as possible
- Provide all possible support to agents of reconciliation and justice

Once coalition leadership has narrowed its options for action to prevent a mass atrocity, the primary effort, led by diplomats, can confidently focus on how to combine the military capacity to intervene with the determination to resolve the situation without bloodshed if possible.

Conclusion

By using proven planning and operational processes to address a mission that has been ignored in the past, the MARO Project has taken a first step toward stopping mass atrocities. More than that, it has opened a door to a larger opportunity, that of beginning a true dialogue that includes various governments, their government agencies, the military, private sector and NGOs. The MARO Project brings a practical perspective to what can be a polarising, emotional argument. Intervening in a mass atrocity may be costly in terms of money and lives, but by thinking about the problem within a regimented planning framework, the considered difficulties of intervention become the evidence to strengthen arguments for prevention that previously were anchored in emotion, not reason. Considering the challenge from the perspective of *how* rather than *whether* to intervene makes viable the conviction that prevention and intervention can become realistic policy options for governments around the world. Unfortunately, no such policy options currently exist. If we do not do something about developing the capability to intervene in mass atrocity, we will likely stumble into a problem we cannot hope to resolve with the tools that are currently available to us. Recognising that risk

and the related paucity of planning on the subject of intervention, the MARO Project reconsiders the problem using the traditional strength of the military in planning complex missions.

None of this negates the very real and complex problems confronting a planning staff directed to write a plan for this mission. Much work beyond a planning framework and a couple of scenarios must be done to truly understand how to intervene and stop a mass atrocity. All of these issues and more will need further thought and study, and the cause of mass atrocity prevention can only be strengthened by bringing to bear the expertise and dedication of as broad and diverse a group as possible to its challenges. The MARO Project's focus on inclusion has been a driving force since its inception. Ultimately, it is our hope that all major regional security organisations such as the African Union and NATO will embrace the concept.

Notes

- 1 Gregory Stanton, Genocide Watch, International campaign to end genocide, *The eight stages of genocide*, <http://www.genocidewatch.org/aboutgenocide/8stagesofgenocide.html> (accessed 10 October 2009).
- 2 The economic element of that coercive power is beyond the scope of this article and outside that of the project as well, but the need for such tools to answer this challenge is as evident as the need for a viable military capacity.
- 3 US Joint Forces Command, *Joint operational environment*, Working draft, 2007, 14.
- 4 US Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, Principles of the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework, 2008, 8.
- 5 Ibid, 4–5.
- 6 Marine Corps Warfighting Publication, 5–1 (2001), 2–5.
- 7 US Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization, Essential tasks matrix, 2005, 5.
- 8 US Department of Defense, Joint Publication 5–0, *Joint operation planning*, III-26.
- 9 US Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1–02, *DOD Dictionary of military and associated terms*.
- 10 US Department of Defense, Joint Publication 5–0, *Joint operation planning*, III-25-26.