



---

The purpose of this effort is to include the voices of Syrians – both in-country and expatriates – in the upcoming reports and papers presented by the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide regarding the ongoing Syrian conflict.

While parties with opposing viewpoints may contest facts and figures, it is generally accepted that the Syrian situation is, as the United Nations describes, one of the worst humanitarian tragedies since World War II. The statistics that have emerged from Syria (e.g., 400,000+ killed; 250,000 disappeared or in prison; 1,000,000 injured; more than half the population displaced either internally or as refugees) are gruesome, yet they continue to mount. As the number of atrocities committed in Syria rises, it seems to have become increasingly difficult for policy makers to understand a simple truth: every statistic and every atrocity a human face and a family story.

Could the Syrian tragedy have been prevented? Many Syrians believe that it could have, had the United States (and other members of the international community) been more determined to limit or put an end to atrocities committed against civilians. Many Syrians believe that the international community had an opportunity to take decisive action against the Assad regime, especially prior to Russia's open presence in Syria.

However, despite staggering statistics and evidence, the international community largely ignored the ongoing assault on civilians: the use of chemical weapons, starvation sieges, forced displacement, and air attacks against schools and hospitals. Arguably, all of these atrocities were known and preventable. In some cases, social media users were able to watch atrocities take place in near real-time. Yet despite this age of instant information and sophisticated technology, the international community did little more than utter harsh condemnations. Perhaps Arab Spring failures (such as in Libya and Egypt), or previous foreign policy disasters, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, informed the Obama Administration's inability to commit to a consistent position.

As Syria enters its seventh year of conflict, more political and academic institutions will likely review the Syria portfolio, issue reports, and make policy recommendations. These institutions have an opportunity to include representative voices of Syrians – with all of our diverse ethnicities, religious practices, and political beliefs. Otherwise, Syrians will continue to be ill represented in our own conflict, and will be mere pawns in regional and global proxy wars.

This upcoming report, conducted in collaboration with the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, offers an opportunity to include Syrian voices in its upcoming body of work on the Syrian conflict. To include those voices, FREE-Syria will survey 100 Syrian organizations and individuals, in Syria and abroad, to provide a representative opinion of what the United States could have done to prevent atrocities and reduce the impact when conflicts occur. In addition, the survey will cover the Syrian perspective on what the United States can and should do as other conflicts emerge.

This proposed effort builds on FREE-Syria's success in developing the Syrian Freedom Charter, a document that outlines Syrians' vision of the future. The Freedom Charter was completed after our team surveyed more than 50,000 Syrians throughout Syria; in refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan; and in expatriate communities in the United States, Germany, France, and Morocco.

The assertions, opinions, and conclusions in this paper are those of FREE-SYRIA. They do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

As part of the currently proposed survey effort, we will ask the following questions:

1. What was the United States government's responsibility in the face of ongoing atrocities in Syria?
2. What could the United States have realistically done to prevent atrocities in Syria?
3. How would airstrikes against regime targets or the use of a No-Fly-Zone—two policy recommendations offered by many Syrian activists since 2011—have affected the Assad regime's use of barrel bombs and other internationally banned weapons from the air?
4. What did Syrian opposition activists expect to receive from the United States, in terms of material and political support for the revolution?
5. What could or should Syrians have done to secure more support from the United States to prevent atrocities and minimize the forced displacement of civilians?
6. What can international powers do to help prevent future atrocities in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world?

Following the survey itself, we will present an in-depth analysis of the responses.

We sincerely hope decision makers in Washington use the findings of this survey and corresponding studies to develop policies and positions related to atrocities and human rights violations. The United States is in a position to establish minimum thresholds as it detects emerging conflicts, identifies humanitarian crises, and stops atrocities before they can occur. The human rights-focused narrative in the United States is part of America's identity, and we must all attempt to bring the cold reality of national security interests closer to that which separates us from dictatorship and tyranny.

Finally, we hope that the Syrian tragedy serves as a lesson on how to refocus on human tragedy. If "Never Again" is to be more than a slogan, the international community must establish standards, boundaries, and responsibilities to prevent future atrocities from the outset.