



# Atrocities Prevention Board

## Background, Performance, and Options

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By John Norris and Annie Malknecht      June 13, 2013



Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

A little more than a year ago, President Barack Obama, during an address at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., announced the creation of the Atrocities Prevention Board, a White House-led initiative that would make the deterrence of genocide and mass atrocities “a core national security interest and core moral responsibility.”<sup>1</sup> The president’s remarks signaled that the prevention of wholesale violence would be a key focus of his administration’s foreign policy as he said, “We’re making sure that the United States government has the structures, the mechanisms to better prevent and respond to mass atrocities.”<sup>2</sup>

The Atrocities Prevention Board, or APB, a standing interagency committee led out of the White House, is the cornerstone of this effort.

With the APB having just completed its first anniversary and the nomination of Samantha Power to be U.N. ambassador, it is a useful time to take stock. This report details the history of the Atrocities Prevention Board and its current functions, assesses its relative accomplishments and challenges to date, and articulates a series of alternatives for how the APB might be institutionally organized and funded to best ensure that atrocity prevention within the U.S government is made both more effective and enduring.

The Atrocities Prevention Board’s record to date is decidedly mixed. On the positive side of the ledger, the APB has been highly active in its work, and it has helped focus participating agencies on atrocity prevention in important ways. Perhaps the board’s most notable successes have come in getting agencies that have traditionally paid little attention to atrocity prevention, such as the Departments of the Treasury and Justice, to develop new tools to pursue major human-rights abusers. The board has also done an admirable job working on important structural issues, such as employee training, that have the potential to yield significant benefits over the long term. By almost every account, APB members have been highly motivated and dedicated to their shared task.

But there are also serious concerns. First and foremost, the continuing tragedy in Syria has cast a pall over the board's work and has led many to sharply question its overall efficacy. In part because of the Syria situation, the board has also been troublingly reluctant to engage Congress and outside groups regarding its activities. Although this has improved somewhat in recent months, the board still operates with a level of minimal transparency, and its reluctance to share unclassified findings regarding its work ultimately makes that work less effective.

Because the Atrocities Prevention Board committed itself to being "budget neutral" when it was established and it is chaired at the National Security Council, or NSC, the board has also encountered some challenging operational limits as it has begun its work. It remains unclear whether the APB has sufficient public, institutional, and congressional support to survive a change of administration.

This report also proposes a number of budget and operational alternatives for the board going forward, ranging from largely maintaining the status quo to shifting where the APB is chaired and housed. At a bare minimum, the Atrocities Prevention Board will need to carry out its functions more transparently, and the administration should establish a bipartisan oversight mechanism for its operations.