



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE INTRODUCED "CONTEMPORARY PRINCIPLES OF HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD"
Armenia, Yerevan, "Ani Plaza" Hotel
November 30, 2023

"Twenty-First Century Tools for Genocide Prevention"

**Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, PhD,
Executive Director, Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention**

Good morning!

I would like to thank Isabella Iskandaryan, the European University of Armenia, and all the organizers of this important conference for the invitation to speak. I am sorry that I cannot be there with you in beautiful Yerevan, but it is an honor to appear on this esteemed panel from my home in Philadelphia.

I will start by saying that this has been a terrible fall for genocide prevention, one that has led to some soul searching within the Lemkin Institute and some recommitment to our primary mission of pursuing genocide prevention from the global grassroots – that is, from the bottom up.

As everyone here knows, painfully, this fall we have seen the commission of two genocides in full view of the global community and with the apparent support of the Western democracies.

One case, here in Armenia, has led to the almost total depopulation of the ancestral lands of the Artsakh Armenians by Azerbaijan. The other, which is now occurring in Gaza, may result in a similar total forced displacement after this horrific air bombardment and ground invasion is over, which has now claimed the lives of 15,000 people, 2/3 of whom are women and children.

While in the first case the Western world gave tacit consent to Azerbaijan's actions by refusing to take any preventative measures – despite so many warnings from so many experts – in the second the Western world has come out with strong and explicit support and approval for the collective punishment being meted out by Israel on the Palestinians of Gaza.

For the Lemkin Institute these two tragedies have posed a serious question: If the Western world is joining the world's authoritarian regimes, such as China and Russia, in justifying and supporting genocide when genocide serves its interests, to whom exactly should we appeal for help in preventing genocide and supporting the post-1945 rules-based order?

Though we asked ourselves this question, we had no misperceptions of the Western world's commitment to human rights. Naturally the Western world has committed and supported genocide before this fall. What is very different in the present day, however, is that the Western world used to try to conceal its support for genocidal regimes and seemed to care about appearing to support human rights – and that concern about reputation is something to which a genocide prevention organization can effectively appeal.

But now that Western leaders are openly ignoring the Artsakh genocide and giving a green light to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to commit genocide in Gaza, we can no longer appeal to their desire to maintain a reputation for democracy and multilateralism or even respect for international law!

This is a major shift – and will have enormous consequences on the organization of the international world in the coming decades.

The only other large government body to which an organization like ours can appeal directly is the United Nations, but it has shown itself to be far too weak to engage in productive and effective prevention, especially in the past few years.

We even began to wonder: In a world where might makes right, is there even a role for genocide prevention? Or must we all become arms dealers and soldiers if we wish to protect threatened communities?

Fortunately or unfortunately, there is no place for nihilism or cynicism in genocide prevention.

And I truly believe that global efforts at genocide prevention have been so inconsequential, so ineffective, because we have been working with a very limited set of tools.

Genocide prevention did not emerge as a field of study or practice until the 21st century. In the space of about twenty years, the world has created institutions, knowledge, skills, protocols, and tools that we have never had before.

The case law of several special tribunals, the creation of the international Criminal Court, the UN's Five Point Action Plan to prevent genocide, the development of the doctrine of the

Responsibility to Protect, the establishment of the positions of the Special Advisors on the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect, early warning systems, academic programs, specialized scholarship, professional training in genocide prevention – all these steps have created a world aware of the crime and increasingly unified around the goal of its prevention. Genocide prevention has become an important consideration in foreign policy, it has also become a focus of some national institutions, and, with the introduction of the Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes by the UN Office of the Special Adviser, we have gained some clarity in the shared language that we use to talk about it.

However, none of this has translated into effective action – and at the Lemkin Institute we believe the reason for this is that genocide prevention has remained an elite field that operates within the elite circles of governments, diplomatic institutions, and militaries. This means that the people who have the least to lose from genocide are the ones we are asking to protect us.

Now, there is good reason to educate and train and pressure powerholders to prevent genocide – as power holders they are also the most likely to commit the crime and they are the only people who have any chance of putting a stop to genocide once it has started.

But, as Artsakh and Gaza have shown, we cannot continue to make these institutions the primary focus of genocide prevention work.

One of the reasons we founded the Lemkin Institute was to address this problem of the elite nature of genocide prevention. This is why we emphasize working with the global grassroots, people and communities who have the most to lose and the least to gain from genocide, who have the creative power to create the values necessary to resist genocide, and who can place pressure on their governments and institutions to do better, even when those governments are autocratic.

Having said all of this, I want to emphasize some of what I believe to be the most promising tools and mechanisms for genocide prevention in the 21st century:

- 1) International Law: In this sphere, we are making enormous strides in terms of accountability for genocide and other atrocity crimes. We know that accountability is the most important factor in preventing a genocidal state from committing genocide in the future and it is also one of the only ways to create the conditions for restorative justice, reparations, and the return of lost territories. So we should all be pushing international legal bodies to pursue genocide cases in the robust way envisioned by Raphael Lemkin and the 1948 Genocide Convention.
- 2) Youth: The youth-led global protests against genocide in Gaza are an example of grassroots genocide prevention in action. Such mobilization can expand to other cases going forward and serve to network people around a “no genocide” agenda for the 21st century.
- 3) Climate justice movement: Now that our species faces the possibility of its own extinction, by its own hand, a sort of self-imposed omnicide, that is, genocide of

everyone, we have an opportunity to work together to focus on human security globally, which will require climate justice as well as economic justice and other innovations that lessen the pressures on populations to compete for land and resources and that might help reduce the completely irrational power now held by a few multinationals and billionaires.

- 4) BRICS countries: These countries, in particular its smaller members, hold the potential to act as a counterweight to the three great powers, all of whom are now actively supporting genocide.
- 5) International coalitions of people and what we can all “enlightened states”: Enlightened states will be states that are willing to take on the cause of genocide prevention and become the moral voice of humanity. Two states that I think could play a really important role in this coalition are Armenia and Bangladesh – both have experienced horrific genocides and have cultures and civilizations that offer the world very important lessons and values for avoiding the ruptures that cause genocide.

When viewed from these four points, I think we have a right to feel positive. There is a great deal of work to be done, but I believe there are promising paths forward that might bring about the evolutionary or civilizational leap that humanity needs to put an end to this very species-specific moral wrong that homo sapiens has committed since we emerged as a life form on our beautiful planet.