

EVAP Ep. 28 Naomi Kikoler

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SPEAKERS

Naomi Kikoler, Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:12

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Centre This podcast features one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention, and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. Today, I'm joined by Naomi Kikoler, Director of the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. She's an expert on genocide, and mass atrocity prevention, and a former colleague of mine at the Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect. Thank you for joining us today, Naomi.

N Naomi Kikoler 01:07

Thank you so much, Jackie. It's an honor to be here with you and to be supporting the great work that the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect is doing every day.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 01:17

Many people know the US Holocaust Memorial Museum is one of the preeminent collections, memorializing and educating people on the horrors of the Holocaust. But they may not know about the critical policy work that your Center does today. Can you give our listeners some background on what the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide does?

N Naomi Kikoler 01:35

Yeah, thanks so much for that question. You know, I think a lot of people are really surprised to

learn that there is a center focused on the prevention of genocide and related crimes against humanity, based within a museum. And when we talk about the museum, you know, it's really quite a unique institution. It encompasses an educational component on understanding the history in the Holocaust. There is obviously the exhibits, which is what most people interact with, either in person when they come to Washington, DC, we're located on the mall, or when they access us online. And then there is also the work that we do to try to educate the American public about the history of the Holocaust and the lessons of the Holocaust. And then finally, there's the part of the museum that I'm fortunate enough to run, which is the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide. We're the tiniest part of the museum, and maybe to take a step back, what few people maybe know is that the museum is actually an independent U.S. government institution. We were born out of a presidential commission that was led by former President Jimmy Carter. And it resulted in the creation of the museum and when the museum was being stood up, there was always a focus on this question about how to be a living memorial to the survivors and victims of the Holocaust and how to, in being that memorial, ensure that the museum was working to try to help prevent future genocides. And you know, one of the kind of founding fathers of the institution, Holocaust survivor, a Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, always said that a memorial that's unresponsive to the future violates the memory of the past. So as a result, our center was created. And really, we'd like to say that our mandate is to try to do for communities today, what was not done for the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust. We focus largely on what we consider to be neglected cases, situations that are not getting the sufficient attention, given the level of risk that populations are facing, or that communities- the crimes that communities are experiencing. And we do a number of different things. As I mentioned, as an independent U.S. government institution, a key part of our work is to undertake research to help the U.S. government think about how they can better strengthen their architecture for prevention. We do a lot of analysis and trying to understand the various factors that contribute to why these particular crimes occur. We dedicate a lot of research to understanding the early warning signs and monitoring the early warning signs, which we'll talk a little bit more about later. But we also do a lot of work in trying to understand what are the policy tools that can be used by governments, the U.S. government and other governments, and also multilateral institutions like the UN or regional bodies, to try to mitigate the risks, interrupt the violence that is occurring, advance justice and accountability. And so we have a pretty significant and robust kind of research component to our work, which is really there to help equip policymakers to be able to make decisions that hopefully will have greater outcomes in terms of actually preventing these atrocities from occurring in the first place and saving lives in the tragic situation in which they do occur. We also do a lot of work on countries that we consider to be either at risk or experiencing crimes. So for example, right now, we're prioritizing, from an early warning perspective, research looking at risks in countries like Uganda and elsewhere. We have been long engaged in looking at South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia. We have a large body of work, which we call kind of our bearing witness work, situations where we believe crimes are occurring of which each of those countries fits into that scenario. But we have a number of priority countries that include the Uighurs in China, looking at the Rohingya in Burma, the ongoing atrocities that are being committed in Syria. Trying, with that work, to put forward analysis on what are the risks and the crimes that those communities are experiencing. What are the policy options available, that could help again, to kind of mitigate the the commission of those crimes, halt the crimes, but also a large part of our work is actually advancing justice and accountability through the Ferencz International Justice Initiative. And so we tried to engage really in both the shaping of the kind of architecture for prevention, the more structural changes that need to occur, while at the same time working to help mobilize the political will to act, because we know that there's no one solution, when we're trying to kind of make that very lofty rhetoric, which I don't always like, of never again real. You know, it's not necessarily that we're living in a world where there's, you know, a significant

deficit, early warning, sometimes there's just a lot of noise. And it's hard to decipher which warnings need to really be heeded and acted on. And in some instances, what's missing is the political will. So we worked really on kind of two prongs, in both the kind of short term and long term, to try to improve the overall capacity of a number of different stakeholders, but with the U.S. government really being kind of our core priority stakeholder.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 07:27

In terms of, you know, the political will, and the U.S. government, how has, you know, since you quoted him earlier, how has the Elie Wiesel Act impacted the will and as well as your work with the government?

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Naomi Kikoler 07:40

Yeah, that's a great question. You know, we were very involved in trying to help inform the, both urgency and need, for there to be legislation speaking to these issues, and also the kind of substance of the the legislation that was passed. And we're really grateful to Senator Cardin and others who've really championed this particular endeavor. I think for us, you know, we thought it was critically important that there'll be an articulation of Congress that reiterated the U.S. government's commitment that the prevention of atrocities is a core national security priority. And within that, you know, the request or kind of that there'll be a annual report provided to Congress is an important kind of accountability and transparency role that Congress can and should be playing, as was the call for training for foreign service officers that are going to countries that are at risk. There are a number of components just within the language of the Act that are useful. I think what's really key is it's a important step. It is not sufficient in and of itself, to have a determining effect. I think that there is consensus amongst many who work in this space on the U.S. side that we need to see continue building on the Elie Wiesel Act. And I would actually say that where there also needs to be, you know, kind of a real focus and attention is once the Act was passed, you know, part of the onus then falls to Congress to actually ensure that they are leveraging that Act to ask U.S. government officials to come and brief them, to do formal hearings on the substance of the reports that are being provided, to really ask for more information about which countries is the U.S. government prioritizing from an early warning perspective? What is it that the kind of task force that's working on these issues, working level individuals across the different agencies of the U.S. government? What is it that they are focused on and where can we see that perhaps there has been either changes of behavior, both within the USG and working methods perspective, or changes in behavior from countries where we perceive there to be a risk as a result of the atrocity prevention efforts that the U.S. government has taken. And what's really humbling, and I feel like this is kind of that word, you know, humility has to kind of pervade all of our kind of work that we do, you know, with a lot of humility, you know, I look at the current situation. And, you know, I'm confronted with the reality that though we have the Elie Wiesel Act, we haven't actually seen any hearings. We haven't seen members of Congress actually press the administration and play that important kind of checks and balances role to ask the really tough questions. And as a result, you know, I think we're not actually seeing the Act have the same level of impact that it could. I think what has been really positive is, you know, irrespective of the Act, we've seen the administration do certain things that are useful and will be helpful in the long term, again, more from a process perspective, through creating a national strategy to anticipate and prevent atrocities, which was a really important contribution that this

administration has made to, again, strengthening that architecture for prevention. But we we still have, I think, a long way to go in really seeing that kind of robust all of government kind of approach. But I don't want to in any way, kind of undermine the important steps that have been taken, because I'm constantly mindful, especially when I think about my time at GCR2P, engaging, you know, 193 countries, the U.S. remains the only country that has articulated clearly at the highest levels, that preventing atrocities is a core national security priority. It is the only country that has stood up a kind of complex mechanism, like the Task Force to work in an interagency way to to advance atrocity prevention. And that is dedicating actual resources, both in terms of people power, and financial resources, but also kind of political will towards some of these really critical cases that we're all deeply concerned about. More can be done. But I think it is really important to acknowledge where there has been important steps taken and leadership taken. And I continue to hope that other governments will begin in a more earnest way to do the same thing.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 12:28

Excellent. You know, it's interesting that you bring up the the lack of hearings on this, because I know that Congress has had hearings on, you know, some country situations where there are grave atrocity risks. You know, I've seen your testimony on the Uighur situation. I know that they have hearings on Myanmar under the Burma Act. And so, it's almost like there's still a divorce between looking at countries and understanding sort of the atrocity risk connection and important atrocity work of the government.

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Naomi Kikoler 13:04

Totally. I mean, there continues to be a disconnect. And I think that this is, you know, really a global phenomenon. But a disconnect between thinking holistically about atrocity prevention, thinking about R2P, and what is needed, again, from that kind of more comprehensive thematic kind of agenda, what is needed in terms of designing your institutions and structures in a way that enables greater, you know, abilities to do early warning and early action, which is what we're all kind of trying to advance. And the kind of focus, which is incredibly important, but is really only part of the solution, the focus on individual countries and individual crises, that usually occurs, sadly, once already the crimes have begun. And so, you know, we're seeing, you know, shifts with things like the Elie Wiesel Act, with the Global Fragility Act. But I do still think that there is an important role that Congress has to play in, you know, really kind of trying to spark that more holistic conversation, and they're only, you know, at the very beginning of leaning into that role. And, of course, as we go into a year where there's going to be an election, the bandwidth and the interest in doing that recedes greatly. And of course, you know, with every new crises, people's attention shifts and focuses and it's with great humility, that, you know, we reflect on the fact that, you know, we're marking the anniversary of the, you know, signing of the Genocide Convention, and we're also marking 20 years of Darfur, you know, being a country of real dire, you know, kind of concern, where tens of thousands of people are at risk today, if not more, and we're you know, there really needs to be a much more concerted focus and push because of the risk of genocide that exists there. So, you know, again, it's good when we have the specific hearings, you need to have those on on crisis situations. But we also need to be really continuing to try to apply some of the lessons of the past and have, you know, members of Parliament, members of Congress, and others, really kind of take a step back and and broaden their aperture, much more, to looking again, more

holistically at these particular issues. And asking the tough questions about just how, how prepared, are governments to be able to respond earlier, and help to save lives in that way? Since you just mentioned the lessons of the past, you know, how do you bring the museum's memorialization work into your Center's advocacy and research on the prevention of atrocities today? Are there lessons from the Holocaust that inform that work? We focus a lot on early warning, and on a recognition that in many instances, these types of crimes, especially when we're talking about, you know, genocide, they're not spontaneous. There are processes that have been in place and concerted efforts taken by individuals, you know, by governments, by a host of actors, to create an environment and enabling an environment in which these crimes can actually occur. And so, you know, one of the most important things we do is really tried to put an emphasis on early warning. The second thing that I think is really important, too, is just in the way that we do the work. You know, I think for each of us who works at the Center, it's critically important for us that we are trying to stand alongside contemporary survivors, and that we are working to try to center their voice in the efforts that were undertaken. I think that, you know, in my own context, my paternal grandparents were Holocaust survivors. And I often think, and I've talked to the team about, you know, if you were engaging with my grandparents, how would you want them to be treated? You know, how can we ensure that survivors, you know, Rohingya survivors, that their dignity, that their innate humanity is respected and seen? How can we, when we're doing our work in Iraq, ensure that we're not contributing to retraumatization of those that we interview? How can we, you know, make sure that in situations where crises are unfolding right now, like in the context of the Uighurs in China, that it's not just the voices of Uighurs survivors and their families that are being heard, but that in instances where there's been an effort to try to also eliminate any remnants of their culture, that, you know, we make space for like Uighur music to be heard, Uighur language, that when we do certain events, we're translating it into the language of the community that is facing these particular crimes. And, you know, I think that, for me is a key part of us incorporating some of the lessons from the past and our memorialization function into the work. We built an exhibit on the Rohingya and the genocide that they have been experiencing in the museum. It's on the third floor of the museum. And, you know, I think it's something that we all are very proud of. We're also, you know, deeply saddened by the fact that we even needed to do that, because in 2014, we, as did many others, warned about the risk of genocide. And then, of course, unfortunately, tragically saw that occur. But in building that exhibit, we really tried to center a lot of those principles that I just talked about, in the process for curating the exhibit. We had a Rohingya advisory group of Rohingya leaders, wanting to make sure that it was diverse, represented to different age groups, different genders, different locations that people were in the creation of the exhibit. We very much wanted to make sure that the Rohingya language was heard and as I said, also music. We end the exhibit with the kind of sounds and music of the Rohingya community. If anything, it's just again, a kind of show of just the immense resilience of the Rohingya community, and the resilience of so many of the survivor communities. I mean, I think that's one of the key standouts as well, from the experience of the Holocaust that we need to really honor and, you know, respect. And then, you know, when we released and we opened the exhibit, we worked with our Rohingya partners to ensure that there were showings of the exhibit online. For those who were in the, you know, close to one hundred camps in Cox's Bazar, so we made sure that there was a way in which people there could see that their story was being told, and that it was being told on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. And that ethos is something that we've tried to carry through, you know, including when Secretary of State Blinken came to the museum and made the determination that genocide had been committed against the Rohingya community, ensuring that our Rohingya partners were there, and that there was right after his announcement, an event done, largely for the Rohingya community, so that their voices could be heard, but also so that they were able to also kind of participate in, you know, kind of a moment that was significant

for their particular community. So I would say that, you know, there's a couple of different ways in which memorialization is really important to the work that we do. And, you know, it's funny, because like, we've probably talked about this before, you know, I find that tragically, a lot of the human rights work that is done, and I'm glad that this gets a lot more attention today than in the past, but it is in many ways, extractive, it feels like you're part of an extractive industry, especially when you do some of the work that I have been privileged to be able to do over the years, which is kind of going and meeting with people who have experienced some of the most horrific things that, you know, anyone can endure, and being entrusted by them with their stories. I mean, I think that that is an immense act of courage on their part, to entrust their stories with someone else. It's also, I think, a burden on all of us that do that type of work, to make sure that we are engaging in as respectful a manner as possible, that we're mindful about the risks of retraumatization, that we explain what we intend to do with the information that was shared. And this isn't perfect, but you know, especially in the context of Iraq, it was really important for me to try to go back and find people that I interviewed to give them copies of the report, to tell them after the U.S. government made a finding of genocide that had been perpetrated against the Yazidis, and others, to tell them that their stories were heard, you know, in the White House, in the State Department, and that it made a difference. And I had just an unbelievable experience a few months ago, in August. There was someone who had been looking for many years, to give a copy of the report to and to tell her and her family just how impactful their words had been. I hadn't been able to find them. Because of course, with so many displaced communities, sometimes it's hard to kind of stay in contact. And it was amazing, because I met someone and I just said, "Hey, like, do you have any chance to know so and so?" And it turned out that it was for cousin. And so, you know, I just keep thinking like, pretty certain that no one, if anyone interviewed my grandparents in a displaced persons camp in Germany, pretty sort of no one came back to, you know, tell them what came of that. And so, if we can, in a small way, just remember our humanity, their humanity. And in doing so, pay tribute to all of the victims of genocides around the world and all the survivors that exist, and try to help improve the way we as a community work, then I think that's also part of our memorialization function. It's on a small scale. We're a tiny, tiny organization. But I think it's a contribution that we can make.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 24:30

No, your work is absolutely critical and important. And you know, the Rohingya exhibit that you just mentioned, I guess it was last year, we held the R2P Focal Points Meeting in D.C., and you spoke at it, so you know how the meeting went. You know, it's a group of policymakers in a conference room for two days talking about how we can get better at prevention, how we can get better at, you know, identifying when to respond early warning signs. And during that meeting, we made a point of making sure we had people from communities being able to speak, tell their story in a way that wasn't, hopefully, it wasn't extractive, and you know, gave people perspective on the human side of this. It's not just, you know, atrocities in a far off place, they're actually like people who are being affected. And so one of the communities represented was Myanmar and Rohingya. And afterwards, we ended the meeting going to the museum and seeing the exhibit with you. And I remember how moving that final room is. It sort of, the lights go down, you have the Rohingya language, the music, and people telling their stories. And I think that it gave a new perspective to these policymakers beyond just what they had heard in the conference room. But for me, personally, I went through the exhibit with a Rohingya person from the community, and she, you know, kind of held my hand as we walked through, and she's pointing at the wall saying, "Oh, that's my uncle," and telling me his story. And it was such a, you know, as someone who had worked with her for many years, from an

advocacy perspective, it was such a different way of hearing her experience. And so I think that these are really important, especially, you know, to not just tokenize people from communities who we work with, on advocacy, on research that, you know, they really do have an important story to share. And that, you know, they need to be part of the process from beginning to end in memorializing and achieving justice.

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Naomi Kikoler 26:40

No, completely agree. And, you know, the one benefit because we are an independent U.S. government institution is, you know, we do have a closer relationship with the government, it's one that transcends administrations, you know, our role and goal is to be consistent. And it was really a unique opportunity, both with the Rohingya exhibit and an exhibit prior on Syria, to do exactly what you said, you know, bring in policymakers bring in people who work on these issues on a day-to-day basis, to create a more immersive environment for reflection, and for conversation about what can and should be done. And we actually in the exhibit that we had on Syria, which focused on both the kind of Commission of Torture, but also did kind of talk as well about other means that were being used to, you know, really just destroy the social fabric of a society and devastate families and communities. We had an exhibit that was up for a number of years, and former UN ambassador, Nikki Haley, actually brought the entire UN Security Council to the museum for a tour of the Syria exhibit. And I have to say, it was really one of those moments where, you know, you've got the Russian Ambassador there, the U.S. Ambassador, and of course, like, from a Holocaust history perspective, there was a moment in time where they were on the same side, liberating the camps. You know, I have one grandparent that was liberated by American forces and one liberated by Russian forces. And, you know, to have them go through and then actually have, I had just come back from the border with Syria, you know, a really frank conversation is a truly kind of unique and surreal experience. But to have it grounded, just in the voices and the experiences of the community, it makes it a lot harder for people to, you know, evade difficult questions, and to deny or minimize the impact of what's happening. So, you know, I think that those are our unique opportunities afforded from being kind of an odd institution that encompasses so many different things, including a Center, you know, focused on on kind of preventing genocide today.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 29:18

Since we are speaking today in honor of the 75th anniversary of the Genocide Convention, I want to talk a little about the significance of this document. 75 years on, you know, we know, as a product of the existence of both of our Centers, among other things, that we have not achieved the promise of never again. But the convention, nevertheless, remains an important document for the international community. In your view, as someone who knows very intimately, not just the horrors of the Holocaust, you know, as you referenced your grandparents are survivors, but you've also worked with victims and survivors of the more recent genocides in Iraq and Myanmar, as well as atrocities elsewhere. What is the enduring value and significance of the commitments within this convention?

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Naomi Kikoler 30:05

You know, I think we live, unfortunately, in a world where we would not be able to get the same

kind of unity of purpose that existed at the time in which the Convention was signed. So in and of itself, its significance is unbelievably high. It articulates an aspiration, and as you said, it's an aspiration that has yet to be met. It is also in many ways, as an aspirational document, somewhat flawed. And part of our roles is to help address and try to unpack some of the deficits. So you know, for a long time, you know, an area that I've been quite focused on is the fact that when you look at the convention, the component of the convention that's clearly articulated is the responsibilities around punishment. But when we invoke the Genocide Convention, we invoke it because of the prevention component. And the prevention component is pretty much undefined. And there have been efforts, I was involved in a project a long time ago now, you know, close to 15 years ago, if not more, for the UN's Office of Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide to try to help define and use soft law to unpack what a prevention obligation could look like. What could the convention mean? What are the types of steps and measures that a government can take to uphold the convention, and of course, we've got, you know, a little bit of case law with the ICJ case on Serbia, but there wasn't a lot. And so we really tried to look at the components, and crystallize them into a set of principles that states could take forward. And in doing so, you know, be held accountable in terms of are they upholding the convention or not. And, you know, that's something where I think there still has to be continued investment engagement. There's opportunities, there's been opportunities insofar as the case, that before the ICJ now, in the context of Myanmar and the Commission of Genocide, to again, try to define what the prevention obligations are, within the Genocide Convention. We had a series that we released that looked at what that could mean in the context of Burma in a very real sense. And I think that there is still an immense amount of work that can and needs to be done within the legal community and within human rights advocacy community, on that particular set of issues, which may include, you know, future test cases, it will include, you know, I think, more legal academic inquiry, to try to help us have a more fully developed understanding of that prevention component. And ideally, you know, have something that we can turn to not just kind of in soft law, but something's a little bit more enforceable. But again, I don't think we're going to be seeing it in our lifetimes, another moment in which you have the collective will to create a new treaty, like the Genocide Convention. With that in mind, I am hopeful every single day that we'll see a Crime Against Humanity Treaty. I really think that that would be one of the greatest contributions that could be made to the prevention and punishment of a crime that is actually the most common when we think about mass atrocity crimes perpetrated. You know, more often than not people think about crimes against humanity. We use the title, I don't say "we" as kind of advocates, because we at the Center are extremely careful with how we use the language of genocide, but when the language of genocide is invoked, more often than not, they're talking about crimes against humanity. So when we talk about kind of deficits of the Convention, the deficit is that there wasn't a parallel set of legal frameworks to deal with crimes against humanity at that particular time. So I am hopeful there is a, you know, wonderful initiative taking this forward and people doggedly working towards it. And again, that would be an incredibly significant, alongside, hopefully, that are kind of flushed out understanding of what prevention means under the Genocide Convention. But, you know, we still have a lot of work to do. And I think one of the things that many of us have to grapple with too, is, as we recognize that all of these conventions are essentially, at the end of the day, kind of political agreements about legal frameworks. Sometimes their application can be quite difficult, And, you know, we live in a world where we're seeing different types of actors, including non-state actors commit genocide or crimes that appear to perhaps rise to the level of genocide. We're seeing an evolution... and it may not be so much that it's not that these crimes didn't occur in the past, but we just have greater awareness of them today, by which states are taking efforts to, you know, destroy communities, not through, you know, physical killing, through kind of mass destruction in that regard, but through other means to kind of biologically, change the, you know, reproductive

capacities of communities. We're seeing, you know, different means used to try to advance certain goals that look like there might be the intent to destroy. And so our understanding of genocide when we think about it, you know, there are these emblematic cases of which the Holocaust and Rwanda stand out. And what we, we know, though, from practice is that genocide can take many, many different forms. And we're increasingly seeing that. So, you know, there remains the kind of great level of priority that needs to be placed on really trying to kind of understand these other forms of genocide, and do the hard work of trying to determine, you know, is it genocide, what are the crimes, how are they committed? And critically important, how do you actually stop or prevent those crimes? When, you know, some of our policy tools that are available are geared much more towards trying to end mass killing, and not something that may take a different form. So I think there's a lot of really challenging questions that are going to have to be grappled with in the years and decades to come.



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 37:09

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