

Genocides, unlike hurricanes, are predictable, says world expert. And Iran is following the pattern

Gregory Stanton, founder of Genocide Watch, says Iran has taken six of the eight steps on path to genocide. But it's not late to follow Canada's preventative lead

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By MITCH GINSBURG



Genocide is neither linear nor “inexorable.” It is, rather, predictable and preventable, so long as you recognize the universal signs. And Iran, in its language and action, has taken six of the eight steps on the path to genocide, according to Dr. Gregory Stanton, the world’s foremost expert on the matter. Stanton, the founder and director of Genocide Watch, the world’s first organization to deal exclusively with this issue, and the author of an historic two-page paper on the nature of genocide, spoke at the Hebrew University medical school last week. He called for an international campaign to abolish the recurring crime of genocide and for the world to take action, as Canada has, to ostracize Iran and curb its genocidal intent.

Talk of genocide, Stanton said — of removing a cancer or crushing a cockroach — is never just talk. “One of the best predictors of genocide is incitement to genocide,” he said, “and I believe that is exactly what Iran is doing today.

Incitement to commit genocide is a crime. The UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide was signed in 1948 and fathered by Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish Polish lawyer who studied the genocide of the Armenians and invented the term in 1943 – “genos” meaning race or people and “cide” to kill. The Convention states that direct and public incitement “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” is illegal.

Late last week, on precisely those grounds, Canada severed its ties with Iran. John Baird, the minister of foreign affairs, announced that the Iranian regime “engages in racist anti-Semitic rhetoric and incitement to genocide.”

He gave Iranian diplomats five days to leave the country.

Stanton and Dr. Elihu Richter, a professor emeritus at the Hebrew University’s medical school and the founder of the Jerusalem Center for Genocide Prevention, both hailed the decision.

Richter called it “mighty” and said that the Canadian declaration “sets a powerful precedent for intervening to prevent genocide and genocidal terror by going at the early predictive causes and catalysts, rather than waiting for the body count.”

The two are seeking to drag Iran before the International Court of Justice in The Hague, where state actors can prosecute one another. Neither the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs nor the Prime Minister’s Office could confirm whether Israel had encouraged Canada to file charges against Iran for incitement to genocide.

The predictable pattern

Recognizing the early signs, spotlighting them and prosecuting those encouraging the killings are some of the ways to prevent a genocide. Ignoring them, dismissing them as diabolical rhetoric or as a tactic meant to advance a different goal, is to enable the perpetrators, Stanton said.

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Genocide Watch founder and director Greg Stanton delivering a lecture at the Hebrew University's medical school (Photo credit: Mitch Ginsburg/ Times of Israel)



Raphael Lemkin, top row on the right, with some of the first state representatives to sign the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide (Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons CC-BY-SA)

Often, genocide goes unrecognized. In the opening slide of Stanton's lecture shows three perplexed diplomats, clutching attaché cases that label them as representing the EU, the US and the UN, looking

around at a patch of desert labeled Darfur, that is littered with the bodies of the dead. “Well?” says one; “Genocide, genocide...” says another; “Difficult question...” says the third.

Over the years Stanton realized that all genocides follow eight stages. They are, in this order: classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, extermination and denial.

Iran, he said, had classified and symbolized Israel through exclusionary ideology and hate speech; dehumanized it – “overcoming the normal human revulsion against murder” — by portraying the potential victims as a “cancer” in need of eradication; organized fanatical militias (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps); polarized the society by repressing dissent and arresting moderates; prepared for the killing by denying a past genocide and by constructing weapons of mass destruction; and, through global terrorism, even begun the seventh of his eight stages: extermination.



Churches, like this one in Rwanda, could have been safe havens for the Tutsi people who sought shelter, but in the weeks leading up to the genocide, in which 800,000 people were killed, the international peacekeepers were withdrawn (Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons/ CC-BY)

In the past century alone there have been 55 genocides, leaving 70 million people dead, Stanton said. The Armenians, the Jews and the Tutsi of Rwanda were the rare examples of one group’s campaign to destroy another group in its entirety, he said; more often, the case is that one group seeks to partially eradicate another— perhaps the educated classes or those living in a certain geographic region. For instance, in 1971, Pakistani forces killed somewhere between 300,000 and three million Bangladeshis. They did not seek to annihilate all Hindus in what was then known as East Pakistan, but the crime, Stanton said, must be considered a genocide.

The call to service

Stanton, a small-town Illinois native and the son of a Presbyterian pastor, realized he had to devote his life to the prevention of genocide in 1981, while sitting in the office of a Yale psychiatrist.

A graduate of the Harvard Divinity School with a PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of Chicago, he was in his second year at Yale Law School, recently back from a year in Cambodia, where he had worked for the Church World Service, bringing relief to the victims of the Khmer Rouge. He and his wife had adopted a daughter there and he should have been happy, he said, but instead he had slipped into a deep depression. His wife insisted he see a psychiatrist, who asked what was bothering him. He told of the mass graves and the survivor testimonies and the little corpse in the tattered Mickey Mouse t-shirt.

The doctor told him that if he *weren't* depressed there would be something wrong with him. The doctor added that he, like many others who have studied depression, feel it is a form of repressed anger. "Then he looked at me and said: 'What are you angry about?'" Stanton recalled.

Stanton's response: the fact that the Khmer Rouge had organized and perpetrated the killing of 1.7 million Cambodians and still remained in power.

From that moment on the prevention of genocide became his life's work. He founded the Cambodia Genocide Project and spent decades pushing for the indictment of those responsible. He helped establish the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and was awarded the American Foreign Service Association's W. Averell Harriman Award for "intellectual courage and creative accomplishment."

Nonetheless, in the late nineties, he was fired from the State Department. His supervisor, frustrated with his efforts to document what he called "the appalling cowardice" of the Department in April 1994 — when it voted to withdraw all UNAMIR peacekeepers in Rwanda in the face of a mounting genocide — wrote the type of evaluation that she knew would eventually terminate his career. "Greg apparently does not understand that the State Department is a hierarchal organization," he quoted, with obvious pleasure, during the lecture.

Before leaving the State Department, he wrote the two-page paper that is at the heart of his presentation and work.

Since then, Stanton, a descendant of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Henry Brewster Stanton — a founder of the woman's liberation movement and an abolitionist — has founded the International Campaign to End Genocide. It rests on two fundamental principles: that genocide is "unlike a hurricane" and therefore predictable, and that the phenomenon has become wretchedly common.

"It's like slavery," he said, "a giant elephant in the room that everyone is ignoring."

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