

Obama should remember Rwanda as he weighs action in Syria
By Anne-Marie Slaughter, New York Times
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Anne-Marie Slaughter is a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University. She was director of policy planning at the State Department from 2009 to 2011.

The Rwanda genocide began in April 1994; within a few weeks, nongovernmental organizations there were estimating that 100,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus had been massacred. Yet two months later, Reuters correspondent Alan Elsner and State Department spokeswoman Christine Shelly had an infamous exchange:

Elsner: "How would you describe the events taking place in Rwanda?"

Shelly: "Based on the evidence we have seen from observations on the ground, we have every reason to believe that acts of genocide have occurred in Rwanda."

Elsner: "What's the difference between 'acts of genocide' and 'genocide'?"

Shelly: "Well, I think the — as you know, there's a legal definition of this. . . . Clearly not all of the killings that have taken place in Rwanda are killings to which you might apply that label. . . . But as to the distinctions between the words, we're trying to call what we have so far as best as we can; and based, again, on the evidence, we have every reason to believe that acts of genocide have occurred."

Elsner: "How many acts of genocide does it take to make genocide?"

Shelly: "Alan, that's just not a question that I'm in a position to answer."

As President Obama and his advisers look for "more conclusive evidence" that Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad has used chemical weapons against his people, he would do well to remember this shameful moment. The evidence Obama is reviewing first surfaced in December, when the U.S. consul in Istanbul sent a cable detailing interviews with victims and observers of an attack in Homs just before Christmas and concluding that it was likely that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons.

The reported evidence was of paralysis, muscle spasms, seizures, blindness, hallucinations and disorientation. Victims reportedly responded well to atropine, a drug used to treat people exposed to the nerve gas sarin. This was very inconvenient for an administration determined not to get more involved in Syria, however, so U.S. officials said in early January that the Syrian government had used a "riot control agent." Similar evidence has been squelched again and again, until finally our allies — the British, the French and even the Israelis — forced our hand.

The Clinton administration did not want to acknowledge that genocide was taking place in Rwanda because the United States would have been legally bound by the Genocide Convention of 1948 to intervene to stop the killing. The reason the Obama administration does not want to recognize that chemical weapons are being used in Syria is because Obama warned the Syrian regime clearly and sharply in August against using such weapons. "There would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical-weapons front or the use of chemical weapons," he said. "That would change my calculations significantly."

Unfortunately, changing the game is hard. Moreover, even against the reported recommendations of his advisers, Obama has shown little interest in intervention in Syria beyond nonlethal assistance to some opposition forces, diplomatic efforts with Russia and the United Nations, and political maneuvering to try to unify the opposition.

But the White House must recognize that the game has already changed. U.S. credibility is on the line. For all the temptation to hide behind the decision to invade Iraq based on faulty intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, Obama must realize the tremendous damage he will do to the United States and to his legacy if he fails to act. He should understand the deep and lasting damage done when the gap between words and deeds becomes too great to ignore, when those who wield power are exposed as not saying what they mean or meaning what they say.

The distrust, cynicism and hatred with which the United States is regarded in much of the world, particularly among Muslims across the Middle East and North Africa, is already a cancer. Standing by while Assad gasses his people will guarantee that, whatever else Obama may achieve, he will be remembered as a president who proclaimed a new beginning with the Muslim world but presided over a deadly chapter in the same old story.

The world does not see the complex calculations inside the White House — the difficulty of achieving any positive outcomes in Syria even with intervention, the possible harm to Obama's domestic agenda if he plunges into the morass of another conflict in the Middle East. The world would see Syrian civilians rolling on the ground, foaming at the mouth, dying by the thousands while the United States stands by.

Mr. President, how many uses of chemical weapons does it take to cross a red line against the use of chemical weapons? That is a question you must be in a position to answer.

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