Improving Civil-Military Coordination and Protecting Aid Workers

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A number of important developments and trends are forcing us to rethink humanitarian response in general, and civil-military engagement in particular. These include: the increased frequency and impact of natural disasters and complex emergencies, exacerbated by the effects of climate change; rapid urbanization and population growth, and with it, urban poverty, violence and instability;[1] and the increased involvement of international militaries in responding to these crises, alongside humanitarian actors.

To this list of trends, I'd like to add several more concerning ones: First, while large-scale killing in violent conflicts is decreasing, volatility and low-intensity conflicts are increasing.[2] Second, forced displacement is at record levels, with over 60 million people currently displaced around the globe, the majority of whom, 38 million, are not refugees but rather internally displaced.[3] If the population of forcibly displaced were a country, it would reportedly be the world's 24th largest.[4] Displacement is also contributing to urbanization in two ways: first, the majority of the world's refugees and displaced persons now end up in cities and towns, not refugee camps;[5] and second, as people remain longer in displacement, some of today's largest refugee camps – such as Dadaab camp in Kenya or Zaatari camp in Jordan – are likely to become tomorrow's cities.[6]

The third trend is growing disrespect for international law and humanitarian norms, and with it, a staggering increase – nearly four-fold – in the number of violent attacks against humanitarian

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[1] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "OCHA in 2014 & 2015: Plan and Budget," accessed March 1, 2016, http://www.unocha.org/ochain/2014-15/field-activities.

[2] See Human Security Report Project, "Human Security Report 2013: The Decline in Global Violence: Evidence, Explanation, and Contestation" (Vancouver: Human Security Press, 2013), http://www.hsrgroup.org/docs/Publications/HSR2013/HSRP_Report_2013_140226_Web.pdf.

[3] "Global Overview 2015: People Internally Displaced by Conflict and Violence" (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, May 2015), http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/library/Media/201505-Global-Overview-2015/20150506-global-overview-2015-en.pdf.

[4] "Forced Displacement: A Growing Global Crisis FAQs," *World Bank*, December 16, 2015, http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/brief/forced-displacement-a-growing-global-crisis-faqs.

[5] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Urban Refugees," accessed March 1, 2016, http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4b0e4cba6.html.

[6] "Refugee Camps Are the 'Cities of Tomorrow', Says Aid Expert," *Dezeen*, November 23, 2015, http://www.dezeen.com/2015/11/23/refugee-camps-cities-of-tomorrow-killian-kleinschmidt-interview-humanitarian-aid-expert/.

aid workers over the last decade.[7] In many of the world's conflict zones – especially Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan, Central African Republic and Pakistan – the Red Cross or blue shield, once designed to distinguish and protect humanitarians from attack, is increasingly becoming a bull's-eye. The urban dynamic is also important here, since discrimination in targeting becomes even more difficult in complex emergencies in big cities, given the density of population and complexity of actors. While some of these attacks against aid workers occur as a result of indiscriminate or mistaken targeting, the majority appear to be deliberate.[8]

Moreover, we know all too well that threats and attacks on humanitarian aid workers do not only emanate from non-state armed groups. Following the US airstrike on its trauma center in Kunduz, Afghanistan on October 3rd of last year, for example, MSF facilities were hit by Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in Yemen on October 26th and December 2rd, and by airstrikes in Syria on November 21st and 28th.[9] And MSF is by no means the only organization to suffer from the recent incidents of violence against aid workers and facilities. As a result, some such aid organizations now consider conventional armed forces to pose a greater threat to the security of their staff than insurgent groups certain environments.

And while devastating in their own right, attacks against aid workers have had even more devastating consequences for the populations they serve, curtailing access and depriving vulnerable populations of life-saving assistance. The result is a critical challenge for civil-military coordination and the humanitarian sector: How to provide the best assistance possible to populations in need, marshaling all the resources at our disposal – both humanitarian and military – to respond to crises? How to create a "new model of civil-military humanitarian coordination", as many have appropriately called for, without jeopardizing the essential neutral, impartial, independent, and ultimately, humanitarian nature of emergency response, and with it, secure access for aid workers?

Many have already called for increased education and training, and these are critical. Military and humanitarian communities must get to know each other better, and participation in joint trainings and simulations is a great start. There is also a need for better means of communication and information sharing to ensure that this dialogue continues during

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[7] "Aid Worker Security Report 2015: Figures at a Glance" (Humanitarian Outcomes), accessed January 11, 2016, https://aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/HO_AidWorkerSecPreview_1015_G.PDF; for full dataset, see "The Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD)," *Humanitarian Outcomes*, accessed January 10, 2016, https://aidworkersecurity.org/.

[8] Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, and Kathleen Ryou, "Aid Worker Security Report 2014 - Unsafe Passage: Road Attacks and Their Impact on Humanitarian Operations" (Humanitarian Outcomes, August 2014), https://aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/Aid%20Worker%20Security%20Report%202014.pdf.

[9] See Julia Brooks, "Amidst Kunduz and a Year of Violence, Protecting Humanitarian Staff," *Advanced Training Program on Humanitarian Action*, December 22, 2015, http://www.atha.se/blog/amidst-kunduz-and-year-violence-protecting-humanitarian-staff.

operations, when it is needed most.[10] And more research is clearly needed to inform policy making, as much of it remains anecdotal or experiential today.

But militaries must also know when *not* to engage in humanitarian response. This also requires research, training and informed policy-making. We need to be wary of the militarization of humanitarian aid, as much as the humanitarianization of military operations. We need to recognize when the needs of vulnerable populations and affected communities are best served by civil-military cooperation, such as in certain large-scale natural disasters, and when they are best served by a clear separation between military and humanitarian action, such as in many conflicts and complex emergencies. This is important not just in terms of joint operations, where militaries engage alongside humanitarian actors. We must also question situations where militaries provide aid on their own, especially in the course of counterinsurgency or "hearts and minds" campaigns. Humanitarian agencies have frequently cited such operations as contributing to perceptions of them as legitimate targets of attack in countries like Afghanistan, now among the deadliest for aid workers.[11]

Improving civil-military coordination calls for us to work better together, and there are many circumstances in which that can make a real difference. Yet especially in conflicts and complex emergencies, protecting aid workers also calls for us to learn to work better apart. In some cases, this is because military involvement in humanitarian operations may pose an inherent risk to aid workers and beneficiary populations, especially when militaries are also belligerents in a conflict. In other cases, this is because experience demonstrates that both parties have not yet learned to work together effectively, and disregard for the implications of their actions are putting aid worker and civilian lives at risk.

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[10] David Polatty, "Overcoming Hurdles to Information Sharing and Technological Coordination in Civil-Military Engagement," *Advanced Training Program on Humanitarian Action*, April 6, 2015, http://www.atha.se/blog/overcoming-hurdles-information-sharing-and-technological-coordination-civil-military-engagement.

[11] Alex Whiting, "Attacks on Aid Workers Worldwide Hit Worst Levels on Record," *Reuters*, August 19, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-foundation-aid-attacks-idUSKBN0GJ07S20140819.