



## The Alan Shawn Feinstein International Famine Center

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### **The Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Politics, Power and Perceptions**

#### ***Issue Briefs on Forthcoming Research***

##### **1. Universal Ethos, Western Apparatus? A Cross-cultural Analysis**

The first five years of the Millennium have been a period of crisis and uncertainty for the humanitarian community. Recent emergencies – Iraq and Afghanistan in the first instance, but also Chechnya, Darfur, silent emergencies such as HIV/AIDS and trends that indicate increasing levels of risk and consequent demand for humanitarian action – have challenged the very foundations of humanitarianism. Political pressure and compromises are nothing new in the humanitarian arena; yet the war on terror seems to be radically changing the landscape in which humanitarian actors operate. Many humanitarian actors are finding in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere that their claims to neutrality, impartiality, and independence ring hollow both to themselves and their interlocutors on the ground. The consequences of being perceived as taking sides are serious for the future of the humanitarian endeavor and sometimes tragic for aid workers.

Moreover, it is far from clear that a single “humanitarian movement” in which most actors would recognize themselves still exists. Even within the Northern segments of this movement, there are signs of a schism between those who proclaim their fidelity to traditional principles and those who, in the post 9/11 world, see no option but to align themselves, willingly or reluctantly, with foreign policy objectives established by Washington and its allies, relegating humanitarian principles to the status of “for reference only”.

In Kirkuk, Kandahar, or Kisangani, the credentials of the humanitarian enterprise are viewed with suspicion, if not rejected altogether by some of the actors on the ground. Whether such suspicions are justified or not, there is no escaping the fact that humanitarian action is seen as being “of the North”. The enterprise is funded, staffed, and managed prevalently from the North, acts as a conveyor belt for western values, and often functions as an extension of superpower political agendas and/or in tandem with western military intervention. It often appears as top-down, expat-heavy and supply-driven with little concern for the needs and opinions of, and accountability to, beneficiaries. Suspicions are compounded by the prevailing marginalization of the

contributions to the survival and protection of civilians of other humanitarian traditions. For example, the work of, and considerable funds raised by, Islamic charities and community-based movements in crisis countries are nowhere recorded in official ODA statistics.

Essential questions for research and policy review therefore arise:

- To what extent does the dissonance between a predominantly western humanitarian apparatus and a large Muslim caseload undercut the effectiveness of international action?
- If what is called “humanitarian action” is functional to northern or western designs and interests, what does this say about the principles that are supposed to guide it? What would a humanitarian movement in which all cultures and traditions would more fully recognize themselves look like?
- What can be done to enhance the credibility and acceptability of the humanitarian endeavor in non-western environments where western-style relief agencies are viewed with suspicion? Should the initiative for dialogue and change be taken by the humanitarian establishment, by its opposite numbers in non-western countries, or by some combination of the two?
- Are there core humanitarian values – such as, for example, impartiality and humanity – around which a global humanitarian consensus could be reconstituted, or are there irreconcilable differences between the prevalent secular modus operandi of “western” humanitarian action and other traditions where secularism is viewed with suspicion, if not rejected altogether?
- More fundamentally, perhaps, are there alternatives – practical and effective – to the humanitarian gesture, as it is currently practiced, with its humiliating and de-humanizing undertones, that could or should be pursued? Do we know enough about how the act of giving and the multifaceted enterprise that surrounds it is perceived by individuals and communities at the receiving end?

Our working hypothesis is that, though battered and bruised, humanitarianism as a global set of values and activities aimed at saving and protecting lives and assets essential for survival is an endeavor worth defending and promoting in the long term. In the short term, urgent action must be undertaken to re-burnish the credentials of an enterprise that is seen as socially dangerous, financially corrupt, morally ambiguous, if not gravely intellectually flawed, by individuals and groups not only in Islamic countries, but in large swaths of the crisis-affected world. This “perceptions gap” needs to be analyzed and understood – from both sides of the cultural chasm – before even considering if anything can be done for the redress of humanitarianism.

All cultures seem to have norms relating to the protection of civilians and fighters “hors de combat.” But this does not necessarily mean that they all fall under a single “humanitarian model”. A number of more or less complementary models are likely to coexist. As well, the thresholds that allow for the violation of such norms vary, as does the extent to which politicians and commanders abide by them. Examining commonalities as well as differences, the research will explore possible scope for

“globalizing” humanitarianism in its principles, integrity, instruments, and modus operandi. It will also look at the consequences of not doing so and at how key actors – the UN, NGOs and donors as well as affected governments, non-state actors and communities – are positioning themselves in this debate.

While some effort will go into problematizing traditional humanitarian principles and related policy issues, the focus of the research will be more pragmatic and action-oriented. Evidence-based research will be undertaken to test the pertinence of humanitarian norms at the grassroots level and to better document how local communities view and understand the activities of humanitarian actors. It will try to get a better grasp of the power relationships, humiliation and dependencies that accompany humanitarian action which are often compounded by the lifestyle and behavior of international humanitarian personnel. It will analyze non-western “humanitarian” action and how its contribution could be better acknowledged, and propose possible avenues for dialogue with groups (or their proxies) hostile to “western style” humanitarian action.

A number of consultations with practitioners, policy makers, and donors will be undertaken. These will not be limited to the “usual suspects” in donor capitals, multilateral agencies, and NGOs. We are committed to engaging thinkers and activists from the South in the research and consultations, particularly those who have experience with other traditions and institutions and who can contribute knowledge on how humanitarian action is perceived in the South.

## **2. Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Implications for the Future of Humanitarian Action**

Terrorism and counter-terrorism are undeniable facts of early 21<sup>st</sup> century life. They are political-military strategies with major implications both for the state of human welfare and for the work of humanitarian organizations. This is true at the global level, where terrorism has taken a heavy toll and sparked the war on terrorism led by the United States. It is also true at the regional and national level: witness the civil war in Uganda between government forces and the Lords Resistance Army or between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka.

Whether global or local, terrorism and efforts to counter it have discernible impacts on the functioning of the humanitarian enterprise. Some are short-term and immediate; others, more long-term and enduring. Some affect the conduct of humanitarian operations internationally; others impinge principally on the activities of assistance and protection activities in countries experiencing terrorist threats. Some are likely to remain as givens with which the humanitarian enterprise must learn to live; others have the potential for being finessed or minimized through creative strategies by practitioners.

The war in Iraq, coming on the heels of intervention in Afghanistan, has been the cause of much debate, division, and disarray in the humanitarian sector. Passions have run high, but so, too, have politics and posturing in a manner not seen among and within civil society organizations since perhaps the Vietnam war. As the dust begins to settle on the functions performed by humanitarian actors in the lead-up to the Iraq war and in its troubled aftermath, the time has come to test with solid research the working hypotheses on “what has changed” after Iraq and how humanitarians are adapting to such change.

This research examines a number of issues at the intersection of the global war on terror (GWOT), the management of security in the periphery, and the functioning of the global humanitarian enterprise to critical and evidence-based analysis. The starting point is the assumption, as yet unproven, that the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and, much more clearly, in Iraq represent a qualitative shift in the management of North-South relations and not simply a quantitative spike in the level of intervention. The qualitative aspect relates to what analysts have called the ‘securitization’ agenda of the North and the consequent instrumentalization of humanitarian action. The politicization of humanitarian action and the blurring of lines between political, military and humanitarian action on the ground have been well documented in several studies, including the Mapping Exercise done by the Famine Center in 2003/4.<sup>1</sup> Yet the actual depth and breadth of the impact of Iraq and Afghanistan on humanitarian agencies and the likely longer term consequences have received comparatively little rigorous, fact-based, scrutiny.

This research also examines terrorism and counterterrorism of a more regional and national sort. It will do in-country interviews to determine in several selective venues the impacts on civilians and on humanitarian operations. It will also review past examples to identify recurring patterns (the use of terror as a political-military weapon during the genocide in Cambodia is one possibility) over a more extended time period. An effort will be made to compare and contrast global and more local terrorist and counterterrorist initiatives. For example, the protection of civilians may prove to be a common challenge of global and local terrorism and counterterrorism alike. On the other hand, the fact that the leader of GWOT is also one of the world’s largest donors of humanitarian assistance may make aid activities more subject to politicization.

Several axes of analyses deserve to be explored:

- *The impact of the GWOT on the flows and allocations of humanitarian assistance.* Proportionality to need has never been high on the agenda of donors, but has there been diversion of aid from lesser priority emergencies to GWOT-related crises? Have there been opportunistic transfers of resources to high-priority crises or have additional funds been generated leaving traditional allocations unaffected? What has been the impact on funding of multilateral agencies, on the predictability of resource flows? Has the so-called “good donorship” initiative made any substantive difference?
- *The impacts of national or regional terrorism and counterterrorism on the quality of civilian life and on the work of humanitarian organizations.* Some impacts are likely to be comparable to those associated with GWOT; others, more context specific and idiosyncratic.
- *The evolution of the humanitarian marketplace.* There has been much talk of competition between traditional humanitarian agencies and new players such as the military and for-profit contractors, but it is far from clear what the actual impact on the ground has been. Does it make a difference for the beneficiaries when assistance is provided by such new players? What are the consequences in terms of principle and modus operandi of humanitarian agencies and for

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<sup>1</sup> *The Future of Humanitarian Action: Implications of Iraq and Other Recent Crises*, Report of an International Mapping Exercise, FIFC, January 2004, available at [www.famine.tufts.edu](http://www.famine.tufts.edu).

- communities recovering from crisis or disaster settings and their resilience to future shocks.
- *The impact of GWOT on humanitarian institutions.* Included here are (a) the UN and how its humanitarian wing copes with both politicization and security challenges; (b) northern NGOs, who are also caught between instrumentalization, irrelevance, and declining budgets; and (c) the realignments on issues of principle that are occurring (or are likely to occur).
  - *Challenges faced by indigenous institutions in the Islamic world and international Islamic charities.* On the one hand the contributions of Islamic charities to overall humanitarian response remain unrecorded, if not suspicious. On the other, Islamic charities face the conundrum of conforming to northern security dictates and scrutiny in order to qualify for possible funding which in turn creates problems in the eyes of their local base for being too close to what is perceived as an imperial agenda.
  - *The impact of GWOT on the acceptability of humanitarianism as a principle-based movement.* If it is true that the social contract that made humanitarian action acceptable in crisis situations has been broken in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, parts of the DRC and elsewhere, analysis and reflection are required before attempting to fix it. It is important to understand – based on the tapping of local knowledge and perspective – why this has happened and what the views of militant groups antagonistic to humanitarian action are.

The research will undertake a number of coordinated initiatives to clarify the above themes. These will take the form of ground-truthing through case studies, academic papers and consultations with a range of non-northern analysts. Funding permitting, an international seminar will be convened. FIFC is keen to collaborate on the proposed research with governments, humanitarian agencies, NGOs, and other research groups from North and South. This research will be pursued in tandem with other research examining the social and cultural underpinnings of humanitarian action.

### **3. Strange Bedfellows: Integrating Humanitarian Action into Political Strategies**

In recent years, an item of perennial debate has been the costs and benefits of the integration of humanitarian work within political and peace-building aspects of multidimensional peace missions. The question for humanitarian actors is whether it makes sense for humanitarian action to be an integral part of such larger endeavors. What are the risks, safeguards, and likely consequences of positioning humanitarian activities within such frameworks? That issue has been most recently framed by a report commissioned by the Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (ECHA) and discussed at a conference in Oslo in late May, “Report on Integrated Missions: Practical Perspectives and Recommendations.”

Until 9/11 the debate about the instrumentalization of humanitarian action was largely theoretical. Apart for Afghanistan under the Strategic Framework, there had been little solid social science research and evaluation of actual experience with integration. Since 9/11, however, the debate has become more urgent and positions more polarized. At the present moment, there is more heat than light in the integration debate.

Strong theoretical arguments exist in favor of the integrated model. Unity of purpose, and even of command, between the international political, humanitarian, human rights and development players in conflict or post-conflict situation is a truth that many believe to be self-evident. Who would oppose a more managerial approach to coordination in which all the actors would function within an agreed strategy, synergies as well as economies of scale would be maximized, and waste and duplication avoided?

Recent experience from Afghanistan to Liberia, however, has shown that things are not so simple. In many situations humanitarian and human rights concerns have been marginalized, with integration taking place on the terms of those calling the political shots. Pressure from government donors has also highlighted the limits of independent humanitarian action when critical foreign policy objectives are at stake, adding to the pressure for the short-leash approach to humanitarian programming.

Integration is orthodox thinking in the UN: the new report speaks of the general assumption that “integration is the way of the future.” (p. 3). Yet the popularity of the integrated approach has waned in NGO circles, where the UN has lost its honest broker status. The aftermath of 9/11 has reinforced the perception that the UN is above all a political organization: humanitarian concerns are important but cannot be allowed to retard or burden political processes. The perceived political steamroller approach of the integrated UN mission in Liberia, for example, has been the source of considerable disappointment in the NGO community. More generally, many humanitarians feel that their values are being usurped and that this jeopardizes the future of humanitarian action.

The issue is not simply a conceptual one of how the international community organizes itself in crisis countries. Rather, the very essence of humanitarian action is at stake. Current trends could produce different developments:

- If the push for integration of humanitarian players within UN political missions continues, the credibility of such missions and of associated humanitarian activities may be further eroded. NGOs, particularly the larger oligopolies, may be tempted to distance themselves from the UN and set up their own parallel needs assessment and coordination structures;
- The humanitarian community might split between “purists” who will want to keep the politicized UN at arms length and “pragmatists” who will make their peace with donor political pressure (or will simply follow the money);
- Further blurring of lines and perceptions might occur, including between agencies who would qualify for working in tandem with political missions and those prevalently from the South or from Islamic quarters who would be precluded from doing so, or who on their own initiative would opt out; and
- Institutional reform at the UN, though unlikely at present, might be undertaken aimed at enhancing the credentials of the UN’s humanitarian establishment through some degree of separation or insulation from the Security Council’s political agenda.

So far, however, the positions in this debate are largely the result of rhetoric and political posturing. There is precious little in terms of social science research data on the basis

of which the pros and cons of integration could be dispassionately assessed. Are integrated approaches more effective in saving lives? Does integration facilitate or hinder humanitarian access? Does it enhance or undermine accountability? What is the impact of integration on the perceptions of affected communities, local authorities, or groups hostile to western-style humanitarian action? And above all, does integration matter to the claimants and beneficiaries of humanitarian action? Questions abound, for which the answers are simply not yet available.

The discussions at Oslo were useful in moving the debate along and in pointing the way toward needed new research. Emerging from the two days of dialogue among the one hundred participants was a broad consensus that “integrated missions” represent the way of the future for addressing conflict and post-conflict challenges and should be strengthened and professionalized. However, there was substantial disagreement on the extent to which humanitarian activities should be incorporated within such missions.

DPKO made significant concessions to those expressing concerns about the subsidarization of humanitarian principles to political-military concerns by speaking of “partial integration,” by conceding that in hot-war situations humanitarian activities should remain outside such frameworks, and that Force Commanders and Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs) should not prevent humanitarian actors from carrying out life-saving work in contested areas. However, significant questions remained about how UN officials could safeguard the independence of UN and associated humanitarian work within their own stated reporting arrangements and whether the issue of independence applied only to Red Cross movement and NGO activity or also to the work of UN system organizations. While the Deputy SRSGs and Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators present made a strong case for having a system integrated in all of its various parts, questions were raised about whether less exemplary and creative officials could be equally protective of humanitarian interests.

Picking up on the discussions of the Oslo conference, the proposed research would explore these remaining issues through country-level experience data collection and analysis. While the ECHA study involved visits to six field missions, all in Africa, field realities and dilemmas did not suffuse the report. Our interviews with practitioners, local authorities and beneficiaries would use the methodology and build on work already carried out by the Humanitarianism and War Project. We are open to collaborating on the proposed research with governments, humanitarian agencies, NGOs, and other research groups from North and South. Communication will be maintained with related research being carried out elsewhere. The results might be shared through workshops or conferences with practitioners.

### **3. Under the gun: the challenge of operating in increasingly insecure environments**

The Famine Center has just completed a major study, *Mapping the Security Environment: Understanding the perceptions of local communities, peace support operations, and assistance agencies*. The study has been the subject of discussions in London, New York, Geneva (where it was presented to an informal meeting of the HLWG) and Washington DC. The full report is available at: [www.famine.tufts.edu](http://www.famine.tufts.edu)

The data is rich and suggestive, and the implications are wide-ranging, if somewhat inconclusive given the narrowness of the case studies (Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Sierra

Leone), of the persons interviewed (350), and of the experience reflected (all currently experiencing or recently emerging from war situations). The study identifies widely differing views of security between and within three actor sets: local communities, military forces in peace support operations, and aid agency personnel. While local people think of their own need for security as encompassing, broadly, economic security beyond physical security, military and assistance personnel are to one degree or another preoccupied with their own safety and only secondarily with that of beneficiary populations. Hence, one theme of the report is, "Whose security?"

Among the follow-on research that has been suggested is the following:

- using the existing methodology, which involved extensive interviews and focus group meetings with a range of local communities, expand the number of country settings, the number of persons interviewed, and/or the range of situations along the hot-war to peace spectrum examined;
- given the varying approaches taken by international actors to security (some seeking to blend in with local communities, others to maintain their international otherness), is there any correlation in the effectiveness of one approach or the other in ensuring the success of local communities? of international personnel?
- starting from the fact that the data do not indicate great ability among local people to discriminate among the various international actors they encounter, to what extent is the nature and approach of an outside institution (be it civilian or military) relevant?
- taking the perceptions identified in the study as a starting point, seek to establish the extent to which those perceptions are based on reality; and
- develop practical tools for peace support operations and aid agencies to better assess, analyze and understand local perceptions of security and related issues.

Progress reports and research papers on the above research themes will be posted on the FIFC website ([www.famine.tufts.edu](http://www.famine.tufts.edu)) The Center is also open to joining other initiatives and to collaborate with new partners in North and South in the interest of promoting an interagency and interdisciplinary approach to these concerns.

July 2005