



The Militarization Of Aid

Definition

The militarization of aid refers to the use of humanitarian assistance to support military strategic goals¹ and can take one of the following forms:

- 1) Military actors directly delivering aid.
- 2) Military actors collaborating with civil society to deliver aid (also known as Civ-Mil operations).
- 3) Military actors providing protection to humanitarian actors delivering aid.

Militaries in this document refer to state/national military groups, as opposed to non- state armed groups.

Key insights

Militaries delivering aid

Foreign and national militaries around the world will increasingly deliver humanitarian aid. In some contexts this will not raise any questions or debate; national militaries have long been early responders to emergencies, and when foreign militaries abide by the Oslo Guidelines² they can provide much-needed resources and expertise. However, in more complex conflict settings, military campaigns to “win hearts and minds” through aid delivery are likely to continue to be highly contentious.

Drawing the battle lines

Military involvement in humanitarian work will increase and will continue to raise ethical dilemmas and security concerns for the traditional humanitarian community. The perception of the neutrality of all agencies is likely to deteriorate, which could have a deleterious effect on aid worker security.

¹ Corsini, M. A. (2011) [Politicisation and Militarization of Humanitarian Aid in Afghanistan](#), NOHA Master's Thesis, University of Groningen, Netherlands

² UNOCHA (2007) [Oslo Guidelines on the Use of Foreign Military and Civil Defence Assets In Disaster Relief](#), November 2007



Changes by 2030

➤ The rise of military involvement in aid

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, the national military of the affected state usually provides lifesaving aid, as it can launch a prompt response underpinned by significant logistical and organizational capacities. Military engagement in relief activities has grown since the early 1990s,³ including the aftermath of the cyclone in Bangladesh in 1991, Hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998, and Hurricane Katrina in the US in 2005.⁴ Many states cannot manage humanitarian crises using civilian capacity alone, and there is a growing trend in disaster-affected countries to train national militaries for such humanitarian response interventions.⁵ Regional alliances are also paying more attention to transnational military cooperation in humanitarian responses, as is exemplified by ASEAN's disaster-risk-reduction regional strategy.

The use of military assets and resources in humanitarian action is not new, but the trend to involve foreign militaries in humanitarian aid is increasing.⁶ This is evidenced in the delivery of assistance, the provision of security, and the support of logistics. For example, as a response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, 23 foreign militaries provided assistance.⁷

Since the 1950s, hegemonic powers have used “humanitarian intervention” as a justification for military action.⁸ In addition, aid delivered by foreign militaries has been used as

³ Hofmann, C.A. and Hudson, L. (2009) [Military Responses to Natural Disasters: Last Resort or Inevitable Trend?](#), British Red Cross, Humanitarian Practice Network, October 2009

⁴ Hofmann, C. A. and Hudson, L. (2009) [Military Responses to Natural Disasters: Last Resort or Inevitable Trend?](#), British Red Cross, Humanitarian Practice Network, October 2009

⁵ Bollentino, V. (2016) [Evaluating Military Engagement in Disaster Response](#), Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 29 August 2016

⁶ Bollentino, V. (2016) [Evaluating Military Engagement in Disaster Response](#), Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 29 August 2016

⁷ Bollentino, V. (2016) [Evaluating Military Engagement in Disaster Response](#), Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 29 August 2016

⁸ Metcalfe, V. et al (2012) [Trends and Challenges in Humanitarian Civil–Military Coordination: A Review of the Literature](#), HPG, ODI, London UK, pg 5



a mechanism of soft power⁹ in areas of engagement or strategic importance to win over the “hearts and minds” of civilians. The inclusion of a humanitarian dimension (either directly or through improved coordination and support of other humanitarian actors) in military action is a central part of a more comprehensive security approach that is likely to be standard in major international military interventions in the future.¹⁰

Since the 1990s, foreign military actors have been increasingly involved in humanitarian responses that are distinct from active military involvement in the context, for example Operation United Assistance, the US military’s response to the Ebola crises.¹¹ Supporting responses outside theatres of active operations offers training opportunities for military staff and a way to expand the purview of the military to justify budgets and resources.¹² The success of such ventures has been dependent on the commitment of the military to dedicate the requisite resources and leadership to move their intervention beyond an exercise to a response, coordinated with other actors.¹³ The legitimacy of the growing role of military actors in the humanitarian space will depend, in large part, on their success in mounting a coordinated response where the strengths of the military are leveraged and the efficiency of the overall response is improved. Though such action is less overtly political than military involvement in responses within an active theatre of engagement, the inclusion of foreign military operatives in any space can encourage the perception that international humanitarian aid in general is motivated by political or security concerns.

This was clearly demonstrated with the introduction of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) by the United States government in 2002 in Afghanistan, and then in 2008 in Iraq. PRTs are civil military organizations designed to operate in fragile environments following open hostilities for reconstruction, security, and development.¹⁴ PRTs have been criticized for their

⁹ Soft power is defined by Joseph Nye, Jr, in *The Future of Power* (Public Affairs, 2011) as “the ability to affect others through the cooptive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes.”

¹⁰ Petersen, F. A. and Binnendjik, H. [From Comprehensive Approach to Comprehensive Capability](#), *NATO Review*

¹¹ Abramowitz, R., Rodriguez, O. and Arendt, G. (2014) [The Effectiveness of U.S. Military Intervention on Ebola Depends on the Government’s Will and Vision to Direct Vast Military Resources Towards a Public Health Response](#), London School of Economics

¹² Hoffman, C.A. and Hudson, L. (2009) [Military Responses to Natural Disasters: Last Resort or Inevitable Trend?](#), British Red Cross, Humanitarian Practice Network, October 2009

¹³ Wolfson, S. and Wright, N. (1995) [A UNHCR Handbook for Military and Humanitarian Operations](#), January 1995

¹⁴ Malley, W. (2007) [Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan – How They Arrived and Where They Are Going](#), NATO



uneven performance, especially because, with the mixture of humanitarian and military operations, they have politicized humanitarian assistance, underpinning the perception of local populations that aid is an instrument of foreign policy. Though it is often asserted, studies have failed to demonstrate that this politicization is correlated to increased security incidents against aid workers in the field.¹⁵ That said, the phenomenon can only serve to undermine the legitimacy of aid.

➤ **New faces in conflict**

Conflicts are increasingly protracted, more frequently intrastate, often fragmented, and involve a more diverse set of actors.¹⁶ Private involvement is reforming the sector. In conflict settings in particular, the rise of new corporate actors such as private military companies (PMCs) has been problematic. PMCs have been accused of becoming immersed in highly dubious situations and operating in a “legal vacuum”¹⁷ where there is limited oversight of their operations and tactics. With less rigorous command and control than most national militaries, PMCs can increase instability in already fragile areas. PMCs have actively made use of the increasingly complex crises and the crowding of the aid industry to carve a space for the privatization of force. Though PMCs have created a Code of Conduct¹⁸ for Private Security Services, and the sector has become more transparent through rapid self-regulation initiatives¹⁹ and intergovernmental initiatives such as the Montreux Document, which is specifically focused on the use of PMCs and humanitarian and human rights law,²⁰ the involvement of PMCs in conflicts and humanitarian interventions is likely to continue to raise ethical and legal questions.

¹⁵ Zwitter, A. (2008) [Humanitarian Action on the Battlefield of the Global War on Terror](#), *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, Tufts University

¹⁶ For example in the Eastern DRC alone, the ICRC negotiates with 40 different armed groups. Krahenbuhl, P. (2011) [The Militarization of Aid and Its Perils](#), ICRC, Geneva, Switzerland

¹⁷ Saner, E. (2016) [The Return of the Dogs of War: What's It Like to Be a Soldier for Hire?](#), *The Guardian*, 6 February 2016

¹⁸ [International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers \(2010\)](#), International Code of Conduct Association, retrieved 27 November 2019

¹⁹ Richemond-Barak, D. (2014) [Can Self-Regulation Work? Lessons from the Private Security and Military Industry](#), *Michigan Journal of International Law* 35 (4) pg 780

²⁰ ICRC (2009) [The Montreux Document](#)



➤ **A dangerous blurring**

The increased number and diversity of actors delivering humanitarian assistance has resulted in a perceived conflation of the humanitarian and military agendas. This blurring of the lines²¹ has had dangerous consequences:

- **The erosion of neutrality**

Through the established humanitarian principle of neutrality, many Western NGOs define themselves as actors who don't take sides. Their perceived neutrality is often their *only* protection in conflict settings,²² and until the last decade this status was mostly respected by warring parties around the world. However, in recent years, this immunity has been destabilized by actors delivering humanitarian assistance as part of a military and political strategy. The concept of "integrated missions" aimed at integrated political, military, and humanitarian operations in a common program is a highly contested initiative. Many humanitarian actors object to unification of humanitarian programming with political objectives, saying that it has severely compromised the fundamental principle of neutrality for aid delivery. The impacts of integrated missions on humanitarian work are uneven, as the policies and safeguards for humanitarian action are not universally applied,²³ and the effects of mission integration varies by context.²⁴ Nevertheless, in some contexts the polarization of aid has created real confusion among the communities, resulting in a mistrust or rejection of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian actors are and could be increasingly viewed with skepticism, accused of being pawns of foreign policy and Western imperialism.

- **The reduction of access**

The blurring of lines has impeded the ability of many humanitarian agencies to access the most vulnerable populations.²⁵ Examples of this can be seen in many parts of Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia, where those in the most hard-to-reach areas are often

²¹ Bernard, V. (2015) [Humanitarian Principles Amid the Militarisation of Aid: An Interview with Vincent Bernard](#), ICRC, Geneva, Switzerland

²² Bernard, V. (2015) [Humanitarian Principles Amid the Militarisation of Aid: An Interview with Vincent Bernard](#), ICRC, Geneva, Switzerland

²³ Oxfam (2014) [UN Integrated Missions and Humanitarian Action](#), Oxfam International Humanitarian Policy Paper

²⁴ Combaz, E. (2013) [The Impact of Integrated Missions on Humanitarian Operations](#), GSDRC

²⁵ Ferreiro, M. (2012) Blurring of Lines in Complex Emergencies: Consequences for the Humanitarian community, *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*



those in most need of assistance.²⁶ When aid is not equitably distributed it reinforces the perception that humanitarians favor some victims over others – beneficiaries on the “right side” of the conflict now have access to aid, while the others are not entitled to it.²⁷ It is increasingly difficult for agencies to deliver principled humanitarian assistance.

Tomorrow is already here

Examples from Iraq and Afghanistan

In Iraq and Afghanistan there was evidence of all three aspects of our definition: the military has delivered aid directly, partnered with NGOs to deliver aid, and been used as escorts to humanitarian organizations seeking protection. Military actors (foreign and local) have delivered development and humanitarian assistance programs covering issues as diverse as agriculture, gender-based violence, and reconciliation.²⁸ In foreign interventions these “non-kinetic” activities have been part of the “Whole-Of-Government-Approach,²⁹” which included stabilization, peace-building and reconstruction programs, in addition to traditional offensive military operations.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams are an example of this conflation of agendas. The goals of PRTs are threefold: improve security, aid reconstruction in selected provinces, and extend control of the Afghan government. Twenty-seven operate in Afghanistan, each consisting of 50 to 500 military personnel.³⁰

Natural disasters

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami saw the beginning of a sharp increase in the involvement of foreign militaries in natural disasters. Such initiatives can improve access to

²⁶ Penrose, M. (2014) [Iraqi Kurdistan: ‘Stop Stealing Our Name’](#), Action Against Hunger Blog, London, UK

²⁷ Shore, J. (2010) [NGOs Work to Keep Aid Independent of Military in Afghanistan](#), Human Rights Brief

²⁸ Martinez, G. (2013) [Rebalancing the Civil-Military Dialogue Toward the Humanitarian Side](#), PHAP opinion article, Geneva, Switzerland

²⁹ Metcalfe, V. et al, (2012) [Trends and Challenges in Humanitarian Civil–Military Coordination: A Review of the Literature](#), HPG, ODI, London, UK, pg 5

³⁰ Beckwith, S. (2012) [The Militarisation of Aid in Afghanistan: Implications for Humanitarian Actors And the Way Ahead](#), Social Science Research Network (SSRN)



hard-to-reach areas quickly and efficiently and have occasionally been requested by NGOs.³¹ The intervention of military actors in natural disasters and non-conflict settings for the purpose of logistical support is likely to continue in years to come.

Controversy and debates

Is militarization to blame for greater aid worker insecurity?

The blurred separation between armed groups and humanitarian actors has occurred concurrently with a three-fold increase³² in the number of violent targeted attacks on humanitarian workers worldwide in the last decade.³³ Though these trends are often associated, the link of causation between militarization and increased aid-worker insecurity is open to debate given the multitude of other variables involved.

³¹ Tritten, T.J. (2013) When Disaster Strikes, US Military Assets Often Key to Relief Efforts, *Stars and Stripes*

³² Stoddard, A. et al (2009) [Providing Aid in Insecure Environments](#): 2009 Update, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI, UK

³³ Krahenbuhl, P. (2011) [The Militarization of Aid and Its Perils](#), ICRC, Geneva, Switzerland