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Civil and humanitarian assistance

Alan Ryan

If I were to fault the process ... [of planning the effort in Afghanistan] ... I would say that vastly more attention was focused on every aspect of the military effort than on the broad challenge of getting the political and civilian part of the equation right. Too little attention was paid to the shortage of civilian advisers and experts: to determining how many people with the right skills were needed, to finding such people, and to addressing the imbalance between the number of US civilians in Kabul and elsewhere in the country.

– Robert Gates, US Secretary of Defense, 2014

My brief in writing this chapter is to provide an Australian Civil-Military Centre (ACMC) view on the contribution of civil society organisations (CSOs), non-government organisations (NGOs) and other government agencies (OGAs) in Iraq and Afghanistan 2001–14. I have already failed because to arrive at a holistic view that makes sense is impossible. Iraq and Afghanistan were two distinct conflicts—the cultural, political, social and economic circumstances were fundamentally different. So too were the array of different humanitarian, development, advocacy and private sector actors. Over 13 years the story changed considerably as the relationship between humanitarian actors and the military shifted. Finally, CSOs, NGOs, OGAs and, yes, humanitarian relief organisations are not the same thing at all. Even within government the tendency to sum up the full array of ‘other government agencies’ with an easily dispensable

acronym misses the point that all government departments and agencies possess their own mission and mandate. With respect to national and international civil society aid, advocacy and development organisations, it can be deeply offensive to be lumped together as an amorphous 'other'. Nonetheless, in too many historical accounts of conflict the greater weight of attention is given to war-fighting and security operations, and the rest, the odds and sods, find themselves in a single chapter.

This is not that chapter. As it is impossible in single short essay to capture the scale of the non-military enterprise in two separate wars, I propose to make a few corrective observations.

First, as long as the history of contemporary conflict in the Middle East focuses on combat operations rather than peacebuilding, it is only a discussion about treating the symptoms, not the causes of violence. The next time members of the international community mount an intervention on the scale of Afghanistan or Iraq, greater attention must be given to the critical nature of civil–military interaction in planning and executing stabilisation and reconstruction. Because if we do not, we had better resign ourselves to winning wars quickly on our own terms and then rapidly losing the peace because we missed the point of what conflict is all about.

Second, the history of conflict is only in part the story of combat operations. I have heard too many veterans of both of these conflicts rail at the insult to their professionalism at not being able to fight the insurgent war on their terms. The next generation of war-fighters must understand that there is a never-ending supply of people to kill. As one special forces operator put it, there are tactical achievements more important than 'killing farmers and two dollars-a-day Taliban conscripts'.¹ All wars end, and the military will play a constructive role only if they have established a close and constructive relationship with the peace builders. Very few of those peace builders wear a uniform, so the effective military officer had better develop an idea of who they are and learn how to work with them.

Third, these conflicts resulted in a blurring of the lines of international humanitarian action. The emergence of something termed the 'new humanitarianism' created challenges to the way that civilian

1 C. Masters, *No Front Line: Australia's Special Forces in Afghanistan*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2017, p. 425.

aid, development and advocacy groups operate in persistent warfare. Militaries and governments used aid and stabilisation packages to support their own national and political objectives in both Iraq and Afghanistan. While meeting short-term requirements, the lack of coordination between themselves and with host nation authorities too often meant that these efforts did more harm than good. Too often if the military was providing assistance to build hearts and minds, it meant that other, more expert and/or appropriate agencies were prevented from doing their jobs. As Nick Guttman and Sean Lowrie, the chair and director respectively of the Start Network (the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies), wrote: ‘Civil society delivers some 70 per cent of the last mile of international humanitarian assistance. A crisis for NGOs would mean a crisis for the entire humanitarian system.’

In this chapter, I briefly identify the types of civilian actors that were active in these conflicts, consider the challenges that these conflicts represented to the humanitarian response system, and outline some of the lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq that will continue to apply in the future.

The search for common ground in civil–military–police interaction

In an introduction to a recent book on civil–military interaction, Admiral James Stavridis, Supreme Allied Commander Europe at NATO (2009–13), wrote that we need effective civil–military interaction as there are countless operational issues ‘that the military are not necessarily willing or able to address themselves’:

[T]here may be issues of neutrality, impartiality and independence that the military find difficult to meet, as in medical support, humanitarian operations and disaster relief. Without resolving this myriad of challenges, the modern multifaceted mission will not fulfil its mandate ... It takes non-military partners, governmental and non-governmental, to achieve that.²

2 G. Lucius and S. Rietjens (eds), *Effective Civil–Military Interactions in Peace Operations: Theory and Practice*, Springer, Berlin, 2016, p. vi.

This issue of 'partnership' is a fraught one. The then US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, talking to a group of NGO leaders in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, famously stated:

I have made it clear to my staff here and to all of our ambassadors around the world that I am serious about making sure we have the best relationship with the NGOs who are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team.³

The speech prompted outrage from the international humanitarian community. In the years that followed, his comments might even have operated to frustrate their intended effect. Secretary Powell might have meant to suggest that the military and humanitarian organisations worked in common cause to make the world a better place. But civilian organisations operating by the principles of humanity, independence, neutrality and impartiality were never going to subscribe to their enlistment into the US military 'combat team'.

Western militaries have had to overcome the notion, often inculcated in the past at remote combat training centres, that fighting would occur in a 'people-free zone'. The experience of both Afghanistan and Iraq was not only that there were large civilian populations present, but also that a large number of other national and international professionals had a stake in achieving peace, security and economic sustainability. It is one of the major lessons of these conflicts that force preparation training in Australia now involves exposure to a range of non-military actors and scenarios.

In both Afghanistan and Iraq, coalition military forces faced considerable challenges reconciling their combat mission with the desire of the international political coalition to make meaningful change in politics, the economy, the legal system, health and dealing with the grinding effects of poverty.

There is a reason for that. As the US Joint Chiefs of Staff own counter-insurgency doctrine states:

Long-term security cannot be imposed by military force alone; it requires an integrated, balanced application of effort by all participants with the goal of supporting the local populace and

3 C. Powell, 'Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations', Washington, DC, 26 October 2001, avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/powell_brief31.asp (retrieved 1 April 2020).

achieving legitimacy for the HN [host nation] government. Military forces can perform civilian tasks but often not as well as civilian agencies with people trained in those skills. Further, military forces performing civilian tasks are not performing military tasks. Diversion from those tasks should be temporary and only taken to address urgent circumstances ... Military forces should be aware that putting a military face on economics, politics, rule of law etc, may do more harm than good in certain situations.⁴

For their own part, many members of the international humanitarian community now question the degree to which they can afford to be impartial and apolitical if they are to have any chance of achieving their objectives.

The complexity of the environment that emerged from Iraq, Afghanistan and subsequently Syria was captured by Claudia McGoldrick, Special Adviser to the Presidency of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Questioning the very existence of an international humanitarian system, she wrote:

At best there may be multiple ‘systems’—working on local, national and international levels—with varying degrees of organization, different approaches and different goals. This broad humanitarian landscape and all of its features are evolving constantly, shaped by the increasing complexities of the causes and consequences of war, violence and disasters, and will inevitably assume quite a different shape in the years to come.⁵

Complexity, multinational operations and the art of the possible

You will have noticed that there is not much reference to Australian actors here. There will not be. That is not because there were not many Australians working for NGOs, UN agencies, private sector organisations, diaspora and civil society groups. There were, and there still are. However, when considering Australia’s participation in the multination coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq, we need to appreciate the subnational, multinational

4 Department of Defense, *US Army Counterinsurgency Handbook*, Skyhorse Publishing, New York, 2007, p. 2.42.

5 C. McGoldrick, ‘The state of conflicts today: Can humanitarian action adapt?’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 97, no. 900, 2015, p. 1180.

and supra-national character of the many civilian actors with which Australia interacted. The other harsh reality is to accept the fact that in the many histories of both conflicts that are emerging, Australia rarely, if ever, makes it into the index. If Australia expects to make a more significant contribution to future international interventions, it will not be because of the ADF's war-fighting prowess, no matter how good it is, or how many bitter sacrifices it accepts. It will be because Australia has figured out how to work with the non-military elements of local, regional and international elements of power. It will be because the country recognises and has adapted to the demands of complexity.

That said, operations in Afghanistan and Iraq represented a steep learning curve for all Australian government agencies that found themselves in these theatres of operations. While operations in the Middle East have realised the predictions that it would be a long war, it is easy to forget how novel these commitments were in the first years of the 21st century. Both Afghanistan and Iraq saw an initial military-only, war-fighting phase. The ADF's involvement in Afghanistan was drawn down in December 2002 to only two officers until the second phase of Operation SLIPPER commenced in August 2005. Combat forces committed to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 for Operation FALCONER were withdrawn at the end of the invasion, and it was not until April 2005 that troops redeployed for Operation CATALYST to Al Muthanna Province. In both countries, the initial focus was on participating in the Global War on Terror and ensuring the disarmament of Iraq. In November 2001, Foreign Minister Downer made it clear in a media interview that 'nation-building' was no part of Australia's mission in Afghanistan:

We don't want to get ... bogged down in Afghanistan. We don't want Australian troops to be part of managing and running Afghanistan for the next five or six years ... we want to help with the war on terrorism, to destroy al-Qaeda and its network and so on. But we don't really have a great desire ... to get into the long-term management of Afghanistan.⁶

6 A. Downer, interview transcript, 'Meet the Press', 18 November 2001.

Announcing the conclusion of combat operations in Iraq in May 2003, Australia's Prime Minister John Howard stated:

Our military deployment will be limited given current commitments in our own region. Many other nations have indicated a willingness to provide peacekeeping assistance in Iraq. The government has made clear all along that Australia would not be in a position to provide peacekeeping forces in Iraq. Our coalition partners clearly understood and accepted our position ... Australia takes its rehabilitation responsibilities very seriously. Our contribution—as in the conflict phase—will focus our limited resources in niche areas where we have expertise and where a concentrated effort can make a difference. We have committed some \$100 million in aid. We have provided highly skilled personnel to contribute to key humanitarian planning and reconstruction efforts.⁷

The emphasis in both cases was to make a clean break with military operations but not to become embroiled in the 'messy' business of civil–military interaction in what Australia hoped were post-conflict societies. Of course, the reality that emerged was very different, particularly when Australia re-engaged in both countries with provincial reconstruction efforts.

From 2005 onwards, it became increasingly obvious that Australian government agencies—not just the ADF but also DFAT, AusAID, the AFP and subject matter experts drawn from a variety of other agencies and departments—needed to develop expertise in dealing with the civil society sector in all areas of operations. This should not have been such a surprise. The principle was well accepted at the time in the operations that Australia led in East Timor and Solomon Islands. Even as a junior partner in a large and diverse international coalition, we needed to understand the governance and humanitarian context. This understanding cannot be achieved by departments and agencies planning in stove-pipes. Nor are inter-agency committee meetings sufficient to develop the level of environmental expertise necessary for effective integrated national policy. It is difficult to criticise voluntary civilian agencies for not getting aid and assistance right when state actors were incapable of it too.

7 J. Howard, Ministerial statement to Parliament on Iraq, 14 May 2003.

The APMC report *Afghanistan: Lessons from Australia's Whole-of-Government Mission*⁸ found that the evolutionary and changing nature of operations in Afghanistan meant that both the international community's and Australia's approach to aid delivery at national and provincial level was uncoordinated. The report concluded that a lesson for the future was that 'whenever a whole-of-government mission is considered, all departments and agencies involved should participate in an inter-agency planning team to plan the mission'.⁹ The importance of a deliberate approach to the delivery of aid and development assistance and the coordination of national contributions with host nation and civil society efforts was underscored by twin recommendations. Where aid delivery is funded or delivered by government agencies and is a requirement of the mission,

- I. Aid objectives should be defined clearly from the outset and advice provided to government on whether the aid is most appropriately delivered by DFAT or the ADF, or a combination of both, and in the case of DFAT aid, which agencies (including the AFP) would be best placed to deliver it.
- II. Whichever agencies are responsible for delivering the aid program, it should be regarded as a whole-of-government program from its outset and be planned and coordinated by an inter-agency group, supported where possible by a parallel group in the field, which includes representation from the resident diplomatic mission.¹⁰

Providing humanitarian and development assistance in a political minefield

Drawing on the experience of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as knowledge derived from regional operations in Timor and Solomon Islands, the APMC describes the civil society environment in these terms:

In addition to national authorities, international military, police and the aid community are likely to encounter a range of other important and influential stakeholders in the host country. Stakeholders include local civil society and NGOs, tribal and factional leaders, religious organisations and the private sector.

8 Australian Civil-Military Centre, *Afghanistan: Lessons from Australia's Whole-of-Government Mission*, APMC, Queanbeyan, 2016.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

These entities range from credible, professional organisations with strong popular support to ineffective organisations or groups with criminal ties. It is important to remember that not only is the affected population always the first responder, but that, when possible, local capacities should be an option of first resort in facilitating a comprehensive response.¹¹

Among themselves, the realities of providing humanitarian assistance in both Iraq and Afghanistan drove a deep rift through the many organisations providing assistance. Two issues predominated: (1) protection, and (2) the source and influence of donor funding for reconstruction and development projects.

As the security system in both countries deteriorated, humanitarian relief organisations were often faced with a stark choice: whether to work within the security umbrella provided by the coalition or to remain neutral and independent. Accepting a degree of coalition protection did not necessarily increase security—it risked being identified as being aligned to one or more parties in the conflict. But even that was rendered irrelevant as terrorist groups actively targeted humanitarian groups as a means of enhancing their own profile.

In particular, the politicisation of aid delivery in Afghanistan posed enormous challenges to the United Nations, to the major humanitarian relief organisations, and to international organisations such as the ICRC. NGOs were receiving large sums from state donors, but this money rarely came without strings attached. In the aftermath of the overthrow of the Taliban, Paul O’Brien, now Vice President for Policy and Advocacy at Oxfam America, wrote while still an adviser on aid coordination, development planning and policy reform to the Afghan Government:

The global importance of what was going on in Afghanistan was hard to miss. The new rules for international engagement were being written here, and they posed interesting challenges for NGOs. In other post-conflict reconstruction contexts, NGOs had been strengthening governments for years. But this was different. An internationally orchestrated regime change had taken place, and state-building was clearly part of a larger plan to promote one type of regime over another. By accepting donor funds to

11 Australian Civil-Military Centre, *Same Space—Different Mandates: A Civil–Military–Police Guide to Stakeholders in International Disaster and Conflict Response*, ACMC, Queanbeyan, 2015, p. 12.

strengthen the new government, NGOs would implicitly support this strategy and would jettison their pretensions at political independence from explicit donor agendas.¹²

The tendency of more naive military and political actors from many countries to describe all non-military actors as ‘NGOs’ exacerbated these problems in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Across Afghanistan, at the provincial level, local military commanders and government aid officials focused on the need to complete projects that would demonstrate results during their deployment and in their area of operations. In both countries the division of security responsibility among different coalition members resulted in inconsistent approaches being applied at a national level. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) came to be seen as the best way for states to reconcile their security and stabilisation objectives, but the composition of these teams was very much a national preference. By 2008, there were 26 PRTs in Afghanistan, led by 13 different nations.

In an excellent analysis of the use of PRTs in Afghanistan, completed for the British Humanitarian Policy Group, Ashley Jackson and Simone Haysom argued:

Many aid actors strongly objected to the presence of PRTs on the grounds that they, and the broader stabilisation approaches of which they were a part, militarised and politicised assistance. They often lacked the skills and tools required to ensure that their work was appropriate, effective and sustainable, and that it supported (rather than undermined) Afghan institutions. There were also significant problems with coordination, both among PRTs and in their interactions with aid agencies. While ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) assumed command of all the PRTs in Afghanistan in 2006, in practice they were controlled by lead nations with seemingly little uniformity or coordination with ISAF HQ or the Afghan Government. The structure and activities of individual PRTs varied widely, as did the financial resources each PRT lead nation spent.¹³

Coalition members’ desire to demonstrate progress often resulted in questionable alliances with local warlords and investment of both military and aid resources in unsustainable or unnecessary projects. Countries were

12 Letters to author.

13 A. Jackson and S. Haysom, *The Search for Common Ground: Civil–Military Relations in Afghanistan, 2002–13*, Humanitarian Policy Group, London, 2013, p. 3.

also often confused by the fact that different humanitarian actors behaved very differently, and this led to a perception that some, or all, civil society actors were unreliable. For example, there was a clear division between larger international humanitarian agencies who were able to sustain principled neutrality and local NGOs who were more likely to pursue pragmatic accommodation with government representatives. The Dutch scholar Georg Frerks wrote:

This does not support the conclusion, however, that international agencies represented the moral high ground, while local NGOs are unprincipled and money-driven. Firstly, the INGO [international non-governmental organisation] position is not just a principled one, but also a material one: they can afford to keep their distance from the military and function in relative autonomy. Secondly, many local agencies are not unprincipled, but differently principled as they feel that humanitarianism is primarily about helping people as much as you can.¹⁴

Conclusions and recommendations

There remains a perception in some areas and some countries that the national interest of donor countries should take priority over mission results. This perspective is extremely short-sighted. States may achieve short-term operational gains in terms of government ‘announceables’, local security or tactical battlefield success, but if the overall strategic objective of reconstruction and stabilisation at the national level is not achieved, all the effort is for nought. The unstructured approach to the delivery of reconstruction assistance in both Iraq and Afghanistan resulted in enormous duplication of effort and the waste of scarce resources. The former Chief of Army, now Professor, Peter Leahy summed it up succinctly when he suggested that aiming for a Western-style liberal democracy was unrealistic, ‘But, gee whiz, with the amount of effort going in there and the number of troops, I’d be looking for black-and-white cows and people yodelling.’¹⁵

14 G. Frerks, ‘Who are they?—Encountering international and local civilians in civil-military interaction’, in *Effective Civil–Military Interaction in Peace Operations*, ed. Lucius and Rietjens, p. 41.

15 Middleton, *An Unwinnable War*, p. 316.

Civilian, military and police participants on conflict, stabilisation, reconstruction and peacebuilding need to be pragmatic. Sometimes it is impossible to reconcile all their efforts or to achieve more than partial cross-sectoral understanding. Nonetheless, being aware of the limitations on civil–military engagement does not mean that we should not make best efforts to promote coordination in a complex emergency. We can draw a number of recommendations from our experience in Iraq and Afghanistan.

First, network analysis of all major humanitarian, host nation and civil society actors needs to be incorporated in a structured way from the very beginning of operational planning. It needs to be continually revisited and updated. It needs to take into account the fact that different organisations need to be dealt with differently and that at the same time the humanitarian landscape is constantly changing. To fail to invest in a rigorous assessment of who is doing what is to accept the likelihood of duplication of effort and waste.

Second, within government a strong policy basis requires structured engagement with policy experts resident outside government; in universities, civil society groups, international organisations, the private sector, diaspora movements and host nation institutions. Nothing will replace this engagement. If it is not resourced appropriately, sustained and integrated at the strategic, operational and tactical levels, then missions are operating blind.

Third, partnerships between military and civilian organisations need to be founded on formal understandings wherever possible. These understandings should spell out the terms on which they will engage, including the terms on which parties do not want to engage. In both Iraq and Afghanistan there were many examples of excellent temporary or personal understandings that did not survive posting cycles and personality changes. Leaders need greater visibility of counter-part relationships, and those organisational relationships need to be given some degree of protection from the depredations of the ‘new broom’.

Fourth, we need to stop believing our own propaganda. All organisations inevitably report that their activities are successful. We all like to believe that our inter-agency and counterpart relationships are as good as can be achieved. Investment in real-time and concurrent operational evaluations

generally produce more mixed messages, but equally provide civilian and military leaders and policy-makers with the information that is essential to enable them to adjust their approach.

Fifth, humanitarian assistance and reconstruction efforts should be devolved to the local level wherever possible.

Sixth, consistency matters. When an intervention is managed by a coalition, every effort needs to be made to ensure that post-conflict operations are conducted with the integration of national effects in mind. The uncoordinated delivery of support at the provincial level by multinational teams with different budgets, operating procedures and policies is a recipe for disaster. Rather than seek out operational autonomy for provincially based teams, countries contributing to a coalition should seek to be better integrated in the joint, inter-agency and multinational effort.

Finally, preparedness is essential. To achieve the necessary level of preparedness for complex operations comprising rapidly assembled civilian, police and military elements, contributing nations need to have invested in building common military doctrine and training, and established a firm appreciation of the principles of civil–military engagement between national elements, NGOs and international organisations. They need to have conducted exercises to hone all participants’ awareness of the need for the application of the integrated approach.

All of these recommendations are likely to be dismissed as requiring too high an overhead in terms of more assessment, and leading to more civilians sticking their noses into the business of the military. But building peace in post-conflict societies is not blitzkrieg—it is a long, slow, careful process, and it needs to be based on evidence, not a sense that an enhanced body-count will somehow ‘break’ the enemy. The people who will determine the conditions of the post-conflict settlement are rarely the people we are fighting. The next time Australia considers a commitment to an offshore intervention, better that we overinvest in achieving a sustainable solution than underinvest. All wars end, and it is the investment that we make in peacebuilding that will be the most decisive in the long run.

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