

MILITARY- HUMANITARIAN INTEGRATION

THE PROMISE AND THE PERIL

Denis Kennedy

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- Finland is currently drafting a comprehensive national crisis management strategy (CNCM). This briefing paper puts this exercise in conversation with the increase in violence directed at aid workers in crisis situations, with special reference to Afghanistan. On a policy level, Finnish decision makers should take into consideration the changing security environment and the mosaic of actors involved in crisis management.
- It is argued that increased integration and coordination has complicated aid agencies' attempts to maintain neutrality in the field. Neutrality, together with impartiality and independence, functions to create a "humanitarian space" in conflict zones. It is precisely this space that is most at risk when humanitarian actors are coupled with military and state apparatuses.
- The aim of integration and coordination is to improve the responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency of humanitarian relief and crisis response. It involves coordination and cooperation in the planning and use of military and civil defense assets in humanitarian operations.
- Despite the potential for efficiency gains, integration remains a controversial topic. In particular, it forces tough questions on aid agencies who find their ability to remain neutral, impartial, and independent severely curtailed. There is concern in the humanitarian sector that coherence and integration mean subordinating principles to politics and that this has made aid agencies targets of violence. In Afghanistan and elsewhere, rising violence testifies to an environment in which aid agencies are now perceived as taking sides in conflict.
- The increase in violence in crisis situations calls attention in drafting the CNCM to the fragility of humanitarian space and the need for open, public debate. Given Finland's experiences with neutrality during the Cold War and in light of contemporary debates over Afghanistan, there is the opportunity to bring deeper understandings to bear in the field of crisis management.

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Aid boxes in Iraq. Photo: Austin King

In the shadow of a Europe-wide debate over military involvement in Afghanistan, Finland is in the process of drafting a comprehensive national crisis management strategy (CNCM). The timeliness of this exercise was thrown into dramatic relief in January, when Israeli missiles struck and destroyed Finn Church Aid's Al Shujaia clinic in Gaza. The clinic bombing was one of several related incidences of violence against humanitarian facilities. On a policy level, both the debate over Afghanistan and the events in Gaza call attention to a post September 11 environment in which humanitarian facilities and personnel are increasingly targets of terror and military violence. Finnish policymakers should take into consideration the changing security environment and the mosaic of actors involved in crisis management.

This briefing paper looks at the shrinking of humanitarian space and the increase in violence towards aid workers in the context of military-humanitarian integration. It is argued that increased integration has complicated aid agencies' attempts to maintain neutrality in the field.

The role of Finland in these issues is consequential. First, for Finland and aid agencies alike, joint operations raise the question as to whether impartiality requires neutrality. This relates to domestic debates over NATO involvement in Afghanistan and EU operations elsewhere. Though Finland has largely discontinued use of the term "neutral," it continues to pursue the goal of

impartiality in its humanitarian operations. Second, Finland has, through two successive EU presidencies, positioned itself as a leader in crisis management and as a proponent of expanded European civil-military coordination. In the words of Erkki Tuomioja, former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Finland "view[s] comprehensive crisis management operations, combining both the military and civilian instruments, as our challenge for the future."

Decision makers must play close attention to the pros and cons of integrating and coordinating humanitarian and military components in relief and peacekeeping operations. The complexities on the ground require a more theoretical approach. This paper looks first at the definitions, goals, and benefits of integration for state and humanitarian actors. Next, it explores the darker side of integration, including the shrinking of humanitarian space and the corresponding, perhaps causal, increase in violent action against charitable actors. In concluding, the paper returns to address Finland's place in these debates.

What is integration and what are its goals?

The terms are many—integration, coherence, comprehensive crisis management, or civil-military coordination—but the principles are broadly similar, as are the arguments for and critiques against. These terms all refer to processes and mechanisms intended to increase efficiency in humanitarian

action and crisis response by coordinating military and civil society actors. This paper refers to these processes, collectively, as integration, though with the acknowledgement that there are also “softer,” more informal forms of coordination and cooperation which may always not be quite as problematic. This said, many of the comments and critiques elaborated below apply also to these softer forms of coordination.

Integration has four principal components: comprehensive mission planning, strategies to achieve outcomes, evaluation of the humanitarian impact of decisions, and joint assessment of operations as they unfold. The goal of integration and mission coordination is to improve the responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency of international humanitarian relief and crisis response. It involves coordination and cooperation in the planning and use of military and civil defense assets in humanitarian operations. On a state level, integration means not just efficiency, but also the potential for tighter control over operations. On a more abstract level, the push to integrate can help remind state actors that humanitarian crises are primarily political problems requiring a political solution, not just a humanitarian band aid.

The benefits of integration and coordination for humanitarian actors are less apparent, but they include enhanced access to certain combat areas, the potential for increased state funding, and military protection in crisis zones. Efficiency, of course, appeals to aid agencies as well, given that saving time and effort may mean better helping the final beneficiaries. Finally, as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) recognizes, national military and defense assets are now an important component of international relief and aid agencies must face this reality. The mosaic of actors on the ground must be coordinated.

Finland has long had a prominent role in discussions of integration and coordination. Together with Sweden, Finland was among the first EU member states to advocate complementing military crisis management with civilian aspects. Addressing this challenge has taken multiple forms, from hosting workshops, such as yearly UN Civil-Military Coordination (UN-CMCoord) courses in Finland, to taking an active role promoting the issue in EU

level discussions. Indeed, Finland has occupied a central position in European Crisis Management dating to its 1999 EU presidency. In its most recent (2006) presidency, the state promoted civil-military coordination as concretely as possible, especially as an integral part of European Security and Defense Policy operations.

The darker side of integration

In spite of the potential for efficiency gains, integration remains a controversial topic. In particular, it forces tough, even existential, choices on humanitarian actors. Humanitarian identity has traditionally been embodied by the values of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Neutrality signifies not taking sides in a conflict; impartiality implies nondiscrimination in the provision of relief; and independence means action outside of state interests and control.

From the founding of the Red Cross, humanitarianism has existed in a world dominated by states and power politics, but it has done so by attempting to carve out as much space as possible. This is known as the humanitarian space, and its bounds are demarcated by neutrality, impartiality, and independence. These linked values function to create a protected zone for charitable action, even in the midst of open warfare, by symbolically removing humanitarians from the power political game. Aid agencies use their values to signal to opposing sides that they are trustworthy actors whose conduct will not unduly benefit one party over another.

It is clear that all three principles, and thus the humanitarian space, are deeply impacted by coordinated action with state and military actors. Integration means taking sides with a state or coalition agenda. It is hard for an agency to claim independence or neutrality when it is coordinating its actions with military and state institutions. The coherence agenda also imposes conditionality and, potentially, selectivity in the form of coordination with political priorities. Finally, there is concern in the humanitarian sector that coherence and integration have become euphemisms for the subordination of principles to political objectives.



NATO tanks and helicopters in Afghanistan. Photo: Yves Gemus

When humanitarian actions are coordinated with state actions or protected by combat troops,

- Are agencies any longer independent or neutral?
- Do they have space to act?
- Which interests dominate?

Although the UN-CMCoord course, and others like it, attempts to address these questions through teaching about humanitarian principles, objectives, and the protection of humanitarian space, these questions are unlikely to be fully resolved.

The situation becomes still murkier when we take into account the direct provision of aid by soldiers in combat zones. Relief is clearly politicized when it is, for instance, dropped from the sky and marked with American or European flags; it becomes difficult for those on the ground to differentiate between purveyors of aid and identify their goals or motives. Foreign combatants are unable and, perhaps, unwilling to distinguish among Western interveners.

Increasing violence

A concern and likely result of this has been the increase in violence. The case of Finn Church Aid, cited at the beginning, is anecdotal evidence of a systematic targeting of humanitarians, both by militaries and by terrorist groups. Elsewhere

too, violence against aid workers has escalated dramatically, such as in Afghanistan since the US-led invasion in 2001. What has changed? In Afghanistan, there was a lack of analysis of the reality of the situation on the ground; at the same time, crucially, there is increasingly the perception on the ground that the humanitarian community is taking sides in a Western war against Islam.

In Iraq, too, the situation has been similar. This is exemplified by the 2003 suicide bombing of the Red Cross headquarters in Baghdad; 34 died and hundreds more were injured. This was the first ever suicide attack against the ICRC and its novelty speaks volumes about the ways in which the rules of the game have changed. The Red Cross attack followed a similar attack on the UN that led many aid agencies to scale back their efforts. Where boundaries have been eroded between humanitarian and state-military involvement, this is where attacks on aid organizations are happening. In general, when state-building is deeply contentious, organizations cannot keep their values if they are seen as involved in the political process.

From the earliest stages, humanitarians were given space to operate on the condition of neutrality. Though reality has rarely matched this ideal, it has worked well, to a point. Integration and coordination threaten the image of humanitarian action as independent relief not tied to state power and interests. Beyond the very real specter

of violence, the shrinking of humanitarian space has also heralded a serious identity crisis among humanitarian workers and military personnel, alike. Integrating aid agencies challenges the humanitarian self-image as external actors challenging political authority. Humanitarians, in this view, hold states accountable; they are free from all parties.

- What are humanitarians, if they are not impartial and neutral?
- Can their identity survive?
- Will their interests be subordinated?

These are not easy questions, and their complexity underscores the need to have all voices at the table when formulating crisis management strategies. There have been doubts on the part of military personnel, too, as they shift from combat operations to peacekeeping and crisis management. Ultimately, humanitarian and state actors are pursuing different goals, and in these differences lies the potential for misunderstanding.

Conclusions and questions

The increase in violence against aid workers in crisis situations calls attention in drafting the CNCM to the fragility of humanitarian space. In light of recent discussions of civil-military coordination and integration, there is clearly a need for frank understandings of and reflection on what it is that makes independent humanitarian action possible and desirable. What is the value in having independent, neutral, and impartial humanitarian actors acting, in a certain sense, as a global conscience?

Let us return, in closing, to the Finnish context. There is a way in which the preoccupations with and arguments about neutrality and independence resonate well here. After independence, Finland operated, much like the humanitarians, in a strategically neutral way. Its identity and very existence were threatened in some shape or form by its much larger neighbors; neutrality and independence thus functioned to secure space for Finland to operate in a world dominated by great states. Even today, as EU accession has compelled a rethinking of neutrality, discussions of European Union military cooperation or of

NATO accession occur in this historical context and with this geostrategic content. The question, thus posed, is whether a non-neutral or non-independent actor can, by definition, pursue impartial operations.

This question is at the core of crisis management and military-humanitarian coordination. As the humanitarian case demonstrates, neutrality, impartiality, and independence are difficult to decouple because it is only through their interaction that they create a space for humanitarian action in crisis situations. What is unclear, however, is whether the humanitarian space serves the same essential role outside of situations of open conflict. In other words, it is possible that varying conditions on the ground might lend themselves to varying levels of cooperation.

Given that many questions remain unresolved and in the context of escalating humanitarian violence across the globe, the drafting of the CNCM comes at a critical juncture. Public debate is needed over neutrality, impartiality, and independence in crisis management operations. As a European leader in this field, Finland has the opportunity not just to open the discussion to a wider audience, but also to do so in a way that reflects its own unique experiences and preoccupations in Afghanistan and beyond.

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