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# Humanitarian Action in Urbanized, Protracted, and Fragmented Wars

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*Contemporary armed conflicts are often fought in urban areas, tend to be protracted, and are increasingly fragmented, involving multiple actors. This convergence of complex and interlinked factors results in an enormous impact on civilians while challenging humanitarian efforts. Humanitarian action needs to adapt to this new reality, going beyond short-term emergency responses to address the long-term effects of prolonged urban wars. Neutral, impartial, and independent humanitarian action remains critical in highly polarized and fragmented environments; sanctions regimes and counterterrorism legislation must not undermine that action. Above all, it is crucial to uphold international humanitarian law to minimize the consequences on civilians of constantly evolving contemporary conflicts.*

Armed conflict has significantly evolved over the past few decades. However, there is one feature that remains unchanged: the dramatic impact of war on the civilian population. Civilians continue to be killed and

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wounded. Millions are compelled to leave everything behind to seek refuge. Families are separated from their loved ones—sometimes forever. As critical civilian infrastructure is destroyed, populations are deprived of access to essential services, such as health care, education, safe water, and electricity.

From a humanitarian perspective, there is a convergence of complex factors in contemporary armed conflicts that result in an enormous impact on civilians and significant challenges for humanitarian action. First, war is often fought in densely populated urban areas in which the civilian population has nowhere to hide. Second, contemporary armed conflict tends to be protracted, with parties warring for decades on end. Third, the conflict landscape is increasingly fragmented, with non-state armed groups, private military and security companies, and criminal networks operating in the same physical battle space.

## URBANIZATION

A key characteristic of contemporary conflicts is that they are often fought in densely populated urban areas. Today, some 50 million people are affected by conflict in cities.<sup>1</sup> Urban warfare is not a new phenomenon. The Luftwaffe's bombing of Guernica and urban fighting in cities like Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War foreshadowed what was to be seen during World War II at an apocalyptic scale. In more recent times, cities like Grozni, Sarajevo, Gaza, Sana'a, Mosul, Aleppo, and, more recently, Mariupol, have joined a long list of cities devastated by warfare.<sup>2</sup>

Considering that urbanization is an unstoppable global trend, urban warfare may become increasingly prevalent. According to the United Nations World Urbanization Prospects report, urban population growth is accelerating.<sup>3</sup> Only 30 percent of the world's population lived in cities in 1950. That figure rose to 55 percent in 2015 and is projected to reach 68 percent in 2050.<sup>4</sup> Experts have long warned that future conflict will be fought in urban jungles and that armed forces should prepare for that growing trend.<sup>5</sup>

With war in cities, civilians are inevitably caught in the crossfire. People are killed, injured, displaced, and traumatized for life. Critical urban infrastructure, such as electricity grids, hospitals, schools and water and sanitation networks, are damaged or destroyed. Recent conflicts in cities have given rise to serious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), or the rules of war, including the use of chemical weapons, indiscriminate shelling and bombing, deliberate targeting of civilians, sexual violence and terror attacks. Furthermore, explosive weapons that have a wide impact area create significant challenges to IHL when used in densely

populated spaces. Their impact on civilians is often difficult to reconcile with the prohibition of indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, and the obligation to take precautions during attack. Even when rules of war are respected, fighting in densely populated areas has severe and cumulative effects for civilians. Thus, the inherent tension in IHL between military necessity and the principle of humanity is most patent in cities.<sup>6</sup>

Besides, the complexity and interconnectedness of urban systems represent a critical vulnerability during wartime. Urban services are based on hardware, people, and consumables.<sup>7</sup> Damage to electricity grids or water networks affects hospitals, schools, and wastewater systems. Displacement of civilians, including those who operate those services—such as engineers, doctors, and technicians—results in a brain-drain that further impacts the delivery of essential services. Likewise, disruptions in the supply of fuel or spare parts for maintenance can bring essential services to a halt.

Beyond these humanitarian consequences, the destruction of cities has far-reaching implications for the international community. Rebuilding cities is extremely costly. In 2016, the World Bank estimated that reconstructing Syria might cost USD 150 billion, while rebuilding Yemen would cost more than USD 15 billion.<sup>8</sup>

Urban warfare also presents significant challenges for humanitarian organizations. Providing humanitarian services in urban areas is dangerous for the same reasons that it is risky for civilians. Moreover, humanitarian actors are often not equipped to deal with the complex and long-term interventions needed to repair and maintain urban services. In addition, though sanctions regimes and counterterrorism measures may be intended to avoid any support reaching warring parties, they can also have a spill-over effect on relief and reconstruction efforts. Restrictions may be imposed on imports of certain goods and equipment, on access to financial services, and even on movements of humanitarian personnel.

Better protecting civilians in cities and preserving urban infrastructure and systems is thus critical. Ensuring better compliance with IHL would go a long way in doing so. The elementary principles for the conduct of hostilities that underpin the rules of war—distinction, proportionality and precaution—are an effective guidance to minimizing the impact on civilians and critical infrastructure and avoiding expensive post-conflict reconstruction. At the same time, humanitarian organizations must adapt their action to urban environments: not only responding to immediate needs, but also preserving and strengthening the resilience of urban systems. Finally, sanction regimes must include effective carve-outs to enable this wider scope of humanitarian action.

## PROTRACTED CRISIS

Contemporary wars are also longer, more intractable, and less likely to be resolved politically. Since the mid-1990s, a greater share of armed conflicts has been recurrent rather than new onset conflicts.<sup>9</sup> This trend is associated with several factors: the increased frequency of non-international armed conflicts, the internationalization of these conflicts, and the influence of organized crime.

According to the ICRC's legal classification, the number of non-international armed conflicts more than doubled between 2001 and 2016, from fewer than thirty to more than seventy.<sup>10</sup> Internal wars with many non-state groups last longer. Wars with three non-state armed groups are four times more likely to last fourteen years or more, compared to those with only one group.<sup>11</sup> In the early 2000s, the probability that a non-international armed conflict relapsed in five years was 60 percent, a three-fold increase compared to the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> There are several reasons for this. With more parties involved, it is even more difficult to find agreements acceptable to all. Actors find it harder to assess the probability of victory, which is necessary for bargaining and reaching agreements. Moreover, each individual actor has an incentive to hold out to the last moment in order to secure concessions.<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, over recent years, internal conflicts have become increasingly internationalized. Local armed groups receive support from powerful external actors, enabling them to continue fighting for longer periods of time. Since the end of the Cold War, illicit activities have also become an important source of financial revenue for actors in conflict areas, reducing incentives to find political solutions, thus contributing to prolonging war.<sup>14</sup>

It is illustrative that in 2019, the ICRC reported that the average length of time of its presence in its ten largest operations was forty-two years, challenging the assumption that war is a one-off event.<sup>15</sup> The populations of countries like Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Myanmar have seen nearly continuous war for decades; most of their citizens do not know what peace looks like. Forms of violence may evolve over time, with peaks in fighting alternating with periods of relative calm. Parties to the conflict may change, with new actors emerging and others disappearing. However, as underlying causes of conflict and violence remain unaddressed, war reemerges in one way or another and becomes the norm.

Protracted conflicts also have less visible long-term effects on people's lives, essential services and systems. These include the impact on infrastructure, continuous disruption of and increased barriers to accessing essential services, and prolonged displacement.<sup>16</sup> Protracted war also impacts

the economy, rolls back years of development gains, and renders recovery efforts difficult and costly.

The reality of protracted war has compelled the international community to rethink its approaches to conflict response. There has been a progressive evolution from a linear conception of conflict that requires sequential emergency-rehabilitation-development interventions, toward a more flexible combination of emergency assistance, medium, and long-term programs. This combination is referred to as a so-called “humanitarian-development” nexus (and more recently, a “humanitarian-development-peace” nexus) in which humanitarian, development, and other actors act in a concerted and coordinated manner. At the same time, some humanitarian organizations have pointed at an important paradox: risk intolerance or political dynamics may limit the direct engagement of development actors in conflict-affected areas. In some of the worst war scenarios, including those in urban areas, neutral and independent humanitarian organizations are the few actors present on the ground to support affected communities. Hence, humanitarian agencies are pushed to develop responses that go beyond their traditional models of emergency assistance, and that support the resilience of individuals, communities, infrastructure, and services, with a view toward achieving a more sustainable humanitarian impact. These efforts need to be supported, both with adapted funding models and much-needed expertise, until development and other actors can directly engage in these settings.

## FRAGMENTATION

As has been alluded, the protracted nature of contemporary armed conflicts, particularly non-international ones, is directly linked with another important and complex factor: the fragmentation of the battlespace. Contemporary wars have seen a proliferation of non-state armed groups, private military and security companies, as well as opportunistic criminal networks. Only one-third of conflicts today are between two belligerent parties: 44 percent have between three and nine opposing forces, and 22 percent have more than ten.<sup>17</sup> More non-state armed groups were created in the first six years of the 2010s than in the previous six decades.<sup>18</sup> By 2014, the Carter Center had identified the formation of over 5,500 armed groups in Syria.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, 236 armed groups were registered in the Libyan city of Misrata alone in 2011.<sup>20</sup> Myanmar is also confirming this trend, with the emergence of dozens of armed groups since the military intervention in 2021. These new non-state armed groups are often characterized by an

organization in loose networks, ever-shifting alliances, unclear chains of command, and mixed political and economic motives.

The proliferation of actors often results in a blurring of lines between civilians and combatants and is associated with increasing levels of violence towards the civilian population. More factions within a conflict increases the chances of violence being used in competition for political relevance and resources, including civilian support.<sup>21</sup> Smaller and weaker armed groups, like those found in extremely fragmented conflicts, are more likely to target civilians because they cannot promote popular support through the provision of social benefits, as stronger groups can.<sup>22</sup> The external support characteristic of internationalized conflicts is also associated with increased violence against civilians.<sup>23</sup> Finally, it is also important to remember that many armed groups not only fight, but hold sway over territory and people. Between 60 to 80 million people live today under the direct state-like governance of armed groups. When armed groups “govern,” populations are subjected to their understanding and methods of taxation, criminal justice, and healthcare, among other issues.<sup>24</sup>

In this fragmented landscape, accessing affected populations and responding to their needs presents enormous operational and other challenges. Humanitarian action is generally organized based on consent by parties to a conflict. Humanitarian organizations negotiate their presence and activities with both state and non-state actors, obtaining from them necessary security guarantees. The presence of many armed groups inevitably renders humanitarian action harder, and often riskier. For instance, organizing a humanitarian convoy to cross a neighborhood in the Syrian city of Aleppo during the war could involve painstaking negotiations with dozens of actors. The more actors involved, the more likely that an operation does not unfold according to plan.

Moreover, in fragmented conflicts, state and non-state actors are sometimes subject to sanctions or counterterrorism measures. These measures may criminalize the provision of much-needed assistance to, or even mere engagement with, individuals or groups designated as terrorists. In the absence of adequate humanitarian exemptions, those sanctions and measures may undermine the ability of principled humanitarian organizations to reach affected populations and limit the kind of support they can provide.

## CONCLUSION

Humanitarian action needs to continue evolving in the face of the immense challenges of urbanized, protracted, and fragmented wars.

Protracted conflicts and urban warfare require that humanitarian action is not limited to short-term emergency relief, but also is planned as a strategic investment to save lives, strengthen resilience, and minimize development reversals. Until development actors can engage in certain conflict-affected areas, the humanitarian and development communities will do well to further explore ways to combine resources and expertise. Likewise, humanitarian funding needs to evolve accordingly to enable operators to plan for the medium and long term. Although many institutional donors have increased their quality funding—funding that is flexible, predictable, and multi-year—quality funding is one commitment of the 2016 humanitarian Grand Bargain agreement in which progress has been particularly slow, due to both political and technical reasons.<sup>25</sup> Increasing quality funding will require additional efforts from donors and a continuous commitment from humanitarian organizations to enhance accountability and transparency. This was rightly set as a priority in the second iteration of the Grand Bargain in 2021.

Neutral, independent, and impartial humanitarian action continues to be critical in supporting conflict-affected communities in highly polarized and fragmented environments. Humanitarian funding needs to be designed in ways that reach those facing the greatest need. Notably, sanction regimes and counterterrorism legislation need to include the necessary humanitarian exemptions that minimize their impact on civilian populations and support the action of principled humanitarian organizations. The UN Security Council Resolution 2615, adopted unanimously in December 2021, enables the provision of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, and is an example of an effective and pragmatic solution.

Above all, prevention will always remain the best option to mitigate the consequences of war. In this sense, it is crucial to assert the importance of upholding IHL and other rules that aim to safeguard humanity during armed conflict. IHL, with the four universally ratified Geneva Conventions, and as the only body of international law binding for both state and non-state actors, is a battle-tested set of rules that can limit immediate and long-term impact of war on civilians. Warring parties must factor in humanitarian law in conducting their operations, particularly in densely populated urban areas with interconnected infrastructure and services. External actors supporting those parties also have a responsibility towards improving compliance with IHL. They must take greater consideration of the risks of their support for victims of armed conflict and harness the opportunity to better protect. *f*



## ENDNOTES

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