

The ethos–practice gap: perceptions of humanitarianism in Iraq

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Abstract

This article summarizes a country study on Iraq conducted by the Humanitarian Agenda: 2015 project of the Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, between October 2006 and May 2007. Based on a sample survey of perceptions of humanitarian action among Iraqis at the community level and among humanitarian agencies in the region, the study focuses on what Iraqis and aid workers believe to be true about the way in which the humanitarian apparatus has functioned or malfunctioned in Iraq, and why. Its findings confirm both the strength of the humanitarian ethos in Iraq and the operational value of principled humanitarianism, but call attention to significant gaps at ground level between ethos and practice.*

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“During the attacks on Fallujah, poor people who had nothing went to donate their blood.” “Iraqis want to help others. They’re human. They have feelings. It’s what Islam teaches.”

Interviews in Baghdad

Fieldwork for our study¹ on perceptions of humanitarianism in Iraq began inside the country in late October 2006. It was conducted by a team of three Iraqis from

* Humanitarian Agenda 2015 (HA2015) is a policy research project aimed at equipping the humanitarian enterprise to respond more effectively to emerging challenges around four major themes: universality, terrorism and counterterrorism, coherence, and security. As with all HA2015 materials, the Feinstein International Center welcomes feedback and criticism from all quarters. Please contact the author at ghansen@islandnet.com or the HA2015 lead researcher Antonio Donini at antonio.donini@tufts.edu.

various religious communities and the author/lead researcher. The Iraqi researchers were chosen for their prior exposure to humanitarian work and connections to various communities.

Interviews were held with people chosen for different perspectives. Those interviewed included Iraqis from various social strata across the spectrum of Shia, Sunni, Kurdish and other communities, and it was evident that many were in need of assistance or protection or both. Geographic coverage within Iraq included Basrah, Amarah, Wasit, Kut, Najaf, Baghdad (including Mahmoudia, Karrada, Sadr City and Doura), Abu Ghraib, Fallujah, Baqoubah, Kirkuk, Mosul, Suleimaniya and Erbil. While a few interviews were conducted through Skype voice-chat, most were held over tea in homes and offices.

In sum, the team conducted 225 semi-structured conversations and interviews, 165 of which were held inside Iraq at the community level, most with people who would not normally be accessible to persons perceived to be affiliated with the Multi-National Forces in Iraq (MNF-I). Apart from one focus group of seventeen participants, interviews were conducted confidentially and in private settings.

In order to probe universality issues more deeply, one of our researchers with access to the al-Hausa seminaries in Najaf conducted twenty-seven interviews there with a range of clergy and students, including senior clerics. Additional standpoints were gathered through interviews with Iraqi and humanitarian staff of other nationalities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the UN Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) and UN agencies, conflict analysts, donors and regional specialists in Iraq and Jordan.

The findings

Humanitarian organizations cautioned the team that local perceptions of humanitarian action in Iraq would be conditioned by the extremely low profile of the humanitarian community in the country. Their concern was well-founded. Many interviewees reported having no direct contact with the aid apparatus. The low visibility of humanitarian efforts in Iraq should be borne in mind as perceptions are discussed below.

The humanitarian impulse

There is no wholesale rejection of the humanitarian ethos in Iraq. The research team heard no evidence of a generalized antipathy towards humanitarian ideals. On the contrary, most of those with whom we spoke expressed unequivocal

1 The complete study and its recommendations, “Taking sides or saving lives: existential choices for the humanitarian enterprise in Iraq”, is available at <http://fic.tufts.edu/downloads/HA2015IraqCountryStudy.pdf> (last visited 20 November 2007).

solidarity with the goals and ideals of humanitarian work conducted for its own sake, sympathy with the efforts of “good” humanitarian work, and often a visceral understanding of neutrality, impartiality and independence. Although humanitarian ideals are in general warmly embraced in Iraq, our team heard with consistency that humanitarian action that falls short of the ideal is recognized as such and is prone to rejection.

A senior clergyman in Najaf mentioned with evident warmth the successive visits to Najaf by Sergio Vieira de Mello, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, until his death in the bombing of the UN Baghdad headquarters. De Mello was remembered with affection in Najaf for his readiness to listen. Following audiences with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, de Mello was given the honour of being taken to the tomb of the Imam Ali, one of the most revered shrines in Shia Islam.

There is widespread understanding among Iraqis of what principled humanitarian action is and is not. We heard repeatedly that there are strong strains of Islamic teachings and Iraqi traditions in the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and the IFRC/NGO Code of Conduct.² In several conversations people spoke with evident pride about how they or someone known to them had helped to meet the assistance needs of stricken civilians, sometimes from another religious community, during attacks in 2004 by the US military on Fallujah and Najaf. Many of the Iraqis with whom we spoke equated specific humanitarian principles with Qur’anic verses about “good” charity. A senior cleric in Najaf described humanitarian principles as “beautiful, but only a small part of Islam”. The strong resonance between Islamic understandings of “good” charity (or help that is given in accordance with Islamic teachings) and principled humanitarian action underscores the importance of motives, such as providing assistance based on need alone.

An Iraqi physician and NGO worker described his understanding of “genuine” humanitarian action in this way: “You have to demonstrate allegiance to and solidarity with victims. Are you going to do it genuinely, and speak about it as you are living it? Or are you going to say the right things – use instrumentalized impartiality – to gain access?”

The many clergy engaged in conversation by our research team were particularly open to discussing similarities and differences between Islamic traditions of helping, such as the practices of *zakat* and *sadaqah* (prescribed and voluntary alms giving respectively), and the humanitarian ethos that underpins much of the Western- or Northern-dominated humanitarian apparatus. Some were candid in pointing out what they felt were the limitations of Islamic institutions in administering obligatory and voluntary donations. Others lamented the need to do things more “systematically”, so that humanitarian efforts mounted by mosques and other faith-based community groups could do more effective

2 See Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, available at http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct/index.asp?navid=09_08 (last visited 20 November 2007).

work on a scale comparable with that of international NGOs. As one imam put it, “*al-Hausa* [the seat of the Shia tradition in Iraq] still doesn’t understand that we can use this big number [from the collection of *zakat*] for big projects”. Some expressed the sentiment that it was time to focus on providing assistance to the needy in another way. Mention was made of the more systematic uses of *zakat* by Islamic institutions in neighbouring Iran, where large projects were possible.

Concerning protection, the team heard several examples of local imams intervening to resolve disputes over the allocation of resources such as frequently now arise between groups of displaced persons and host communities. In one instance a cleric calmed local residents who were protesting against the provision of a school building for housing for internally displaced persons, appealing on humanitarian grounds through Islamic teachings for greater understanding. In several interviews the team heard of clerics intervening with authorities on behalf of needy people entitled to various forms of assistance from local authorities. In others, interviewees described how local imams had opened channels with local sub-offices of the Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MoDM) to ensure that current lists of displaced persons were properly filed and processed.

Several clerics noted that Iraqis had traditionally sought refuge and guidance in religion and specifically from revered religious leaders who were now losing influence to more militant clerics and “opportunists”. Since the 2003 invasion, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq’s most senior Shia cleric, has issued edicts encouraging Shia participation in elections and forbidding reprisal attacks on Sunni communities. In failing health, al-Sistani is perceived by analysts in the region as being careful not to squander his declining influence by asking for more than can be achieved. The same tendency was reported among clergy at community levels in various parts of Iraq. Increasingly, “pressures” are being exerted on mosque committees and religious offices to conform more with the wishes and demands of religiously inspired political groups and militias.

Interviews at community level yielded mixed perceptions of the role of mosques and clergy in ensuring that assistance was based on need. Many established mosques continue to maintain lists of vulnerable persons in their communities, such as widows and other groups. Some respondents felt strongly that their imam knew best who in their community was most in need and that, as the most trusted and respected member of the immediate community, he was the best possible arbiter of targeting decisions and in any case much better than NGOs, city councils or parties. As with the protection activities of mosques, the research team heard of growing pressures on mosques and clergy from parties and militias, leading to increasing bias of various kinds in allocations of assistance.

Co-operation

In Najaf many of the clergy consulted were open to the theoretical possibility of increased co-operation with the international aid apparatus. However, in many cases their enthusiasm was tainted by mistrust, evident in the examples they gave of low-quality or insensitive work by “NGOs”. Quite often, though, it was not

clear whether they were discussing local or international NGOs, commercial contractors or authorities; these distinctions were thoroughly blurred, and it was apparent that their direct contact with “outsider” agencies had been limited at best. In addition, clergy sometimes responded hotly and with injured pride to the question of whether their own assistance efforts would accept “foreign” donations, even from other Muslims.

The tempered readiness to engage with the international humanitarian apparatus was also evident in conversation with a senior imam in Erbil and resonated, too, with the accounts given by operational NGOs regarding cooperative relationships they had variously nurtured with local mosques in Kirkuk, Sadr City and Fallujah in order to facilitate local distributions of emergency relief items. In the south, near Basrah, a European NGO began in late 2003 to cultivate a “friendly, neighbourly relationship” with the imam in the mosque down the street from its office, and, when insecurity began to increase, the imam gave an explicit warning during Friday prayers that the NGO was there to help and must not be touched. In each case, forethought and time were invested in building relationships with imams through respected local contacts. Initial approaches by the NGOs were self-consciously deferential, but trust emerged with time, familiarity and good performance by the NGOs in living up to their undertakings with quality work. The NGOs that had these experiences spoke in glowing terms about the access to communities provided by mosques, but also recognized that even with trusting relationships, the possibilities for greater co-operation with Islamic structures were limited by the lack of adequate systems.

The ethos–practice gap

Apart from the resonance between Islamic teachings and the humanitarian ethos associated with the Western- or Northern-led humanitarian apparatus, strong evidence emerged that humanitarian principles are also well understood in Iraq partly because they are frequently seen as misused in ways that foster resentment. We heard many examples of aid being provided in ways that illustrated instrumentalization, politicization and militarization of humanitarian activity by international and Iraqi players. The prevailing acceptance of humanitarian ideals was frequently contrasted by Iraqis with the realities of aid in their communities and tempered by suspicions about the intentions and motives of agencies on the ground. Behaviour of individual aid workers and aid providers had left stronger negative impressions than positive impressions among those interviewed.

Suspicions and misperceptions

Residents of areas afflicted by intense military activity held aid organizations and foreign and local aid workers in far lower estimation than in less-affected areas. In the worst-hit areas, people spoke of deep suspicion of local and international aid workers, who were regarded as “spies”. In the south, it emerged in interviews that

suspicion of international aid workers had increased following the “capture” of two British soldiers travelling in an unmarked car in Arab clothing.³ Also in the south, aid workers employed by Danish organizations were singled out as the focus for additional suspicion in some of the people we interviewed, owing to the uproar over cartoons in the Danish press that were perceived to have mocked Islam. Mention was made in three interviews north and east of Baghdad of how towns or neighbourhoods had been bombed shortly after visits by perceived “aid” agencies that had distributed coffee, chocolate and neckties. Others mentioned being “insulted” by the appearance of aid agencies alongside “those who occupy us”, or of organizations motivated by a wish to “put a nice face on the occupation”. Others spoke with evident anger of rejecting outright the assistance offered by US Marines shortly after military action in Fallujah.

As strong as it is, the resonance between Islamic and Iraqi ideals of assistance and protection and the Dunantist traditions underpinning much of the international humanitarian apparatus is overlaid with a pervasive unfamiliarity with Western- or Northern-led humanitarian action. Only a small handful of international aid organizations were present and operational in Iraq prior to the 2003 invasion. Their working environment was characterized by deep ambiguities even then.

Commenting on this lack of awareness in 2004, an international staff member of the NGO Co-ordination Committee in Iraq⁴ put it this way: “We have never explained who we are – as humanitarians – to the Iraqis; we have never sought their acceptance or their invitation to operate in the country. We have never explained how we operate and why we operate differently from the Coalition forces or other players.”⁵

Interviews also revealed that the ethos–practice gap was aggravated to some extent by the behaviour and cultural insensitivity of some international aid workers when their presence in the central and southern governorates was still viable. Some, for example, were cited in interviews for dressing inappropriately, not knowing that a man should not extend a hand to a woman, failing to keep promises and distributing Christian religious tracts and colouring books. On the other hand, examples of positive behaviour also emerged in interviews: east of Baghdad, aid workers believed by interviewees to be from Qatar or the United Arab Emirates were remembered for being polite and sympathetic, as were representatives of the American Friends Service Committee.

3 See “British tanks storm Basra jail to free undercover soldiers”, *Guardian*, 20 September 2005, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,1573935,00.html (last visited 20 November 2007).

4 See <http://www.ncciraq.org/> (last visited 20 November 2007).

5 Cited in Greg Hansen, *Humanitarian Action in Iraq: Emerging Constraints and Challenges*, Humanitarianism and War Project, Feinstein International Center, April 2004, available at http://hwproject.tufts.edu/new/pdf/Hansen_report_Iraq_final.pdf (last visited 20 November 2007).

Lack of neutrality

Neutrality is not an abstract notion in Iraq. Our research indicates an acute readiness among Iraqis to distinguish between aid providers that have taken sides and those that have not: however, readiness does not necessarily equate with ability. Insecurity for Iraqis in the central and southern governorates often engenders acute suspicion of the motives and affiliations of others in a context where the “wrong” affiliations can be toxic and life-threatening. In most cases, those with whom we spoke did not ascribe impure motives to organizations or aid workers simply because of their particular national origin. Rather, the real or perceived affiliation of a person or an organization is considered more important and will be scrutinized, be it affiliation with the “occupiers”, the MNF, the government or, increasingly, with a particular sect, party or militia.

The current proclivity for scrutiny among the Iraqis we interviewed is rooted in genuine safety concerns. Real and perceived neutrality was frequently cited by recipients of assistance and by observers as an essential protection against targeted attack by armed members of various factions. It underscores that humanitarian principles are a preoccupation of many in local communities, and not an element of secondary or derivative importance valued only by humanitarian practitioners themselves. Lack of adherence to humanitarian principles – and blurred distinctions between the range of players and roles in Iraq – now have serious consequences for beneficiary communities and Iraqis involved in humanitarian efforts. Since 2004, the ability of aid workers to be *seen* to do principled work has been severely diminished by security threats and the ensuing low profiles adopted by nearly all Iraqi and international humanitarian organizations. The costs of low-profile working conditions and blurred roles are described in more detail below.

Working amid the “war on terror”

The “with us or with the terrorists” mentality that has infused the “global war on terror” has been felt in strange ways by humanitarian players in Iraq. In 2004, it was inconceivable to all but the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and a very small number of NGOs even to consider the possibility of making contact with non-Coalition armed groups in order to increase or maintain humanitarian access. That reluctance is beginning to change as Iraq becomes increasingly fragmented and as local power structures, such as militias, crystallize. In some areas these structures may constitute the only guarantor – or controller – of access. NGOs in particular now increasingly recognize the need to identify and establish contact with militia leaders, parties and insurgent groups as a first essential step toward asserting and safeguarding a space for humanitarian activity in local areas.

The schisms that began to develop in the humanitarian apparatus in 2001 and grew markedly worse in 2003 are alive and well among agencies engaged in

and around Iraq in 2007. Many Dunantist-leaning organizations,⁶ whose organizational cultures stress close adherence to the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality, remain bitter over successive compromises, in their view, of principle with pragmatism in the Iraq context, and argue that the choices made and paths followed by the UN system and many NGO colleagues have had severe consequences for the entire humanitarian apparatus.⁷

Meanwhile, evidence of perceptions at ground level in Iraq suggests that many of the attempts by the humanitarian apparatus to adjust to the fallout from terror–counterterror and insurgency–counter-insurgency have ultimately proved maladaptive and self-defeating when measured against the gains and losses felt by the population. Some aid workers suggest that programme suspension or closure by some agencies helped to foster a climate of impunity for those under arms on all sides and served to confirm the perception that “Western” interests were political and military, and not humanitarian. Many describe a growing malaise and loss of motivation among the humanitarian community when much of it was displaced because of insecurity to Amman. Some aid organizations are seen by others to have become instruments in the “global war on terror” by embedding with controversial military forces, confirming for some the perception that the humanitarian community had been wholly compromised.

Pragmatist or Wilsonian organizations⁸ in Iraq, or those tending to be more preoccupied with the technical aspects of delivering aid, are known to the more Dunantist groups as “embeds”, and their compromises of principle with pragmatism have resulted in serious fault lines among assistance agencies since the beginning of the 2003 invasion. Surrender of principle to pragmatism has indeed ruled out working contact with the “other” sets of combatants in Iraq for many essential elements of the humanitarian apparatus – affiliated or embedded, or not – and has reduced the possibilities of winning over “terrorists”, insurgent groups or militias to greater adherence to their obligations under international humanitarian law.

For agencies of all kinds, going underground with humanitarian action has undermined possibilities of building up relationships and acceptance among the population. For the pragmatists, working behind blast walls or from armed and armoured convoys has, in most of the central and southern governorates, shut down genuine access to communities, and has filtered information through distorting lenses; distortions thus become the reality to key decision-makers in the humanitarian apparatus.

6 “Dunantist” humanitarianism is named after the founder of the Red Cross, Henry Dunant. “Dunantist” organizations seek to position themselves outside state interests.

7 For a helpful discussion of the typology of humanitarian organizations and how they situate themselves in relation to humanitarian principles and political contexts, see Abby Stoddard, *Humanitarian NGOs: Challenges and trends*, HPG Briefing No. 12, Humanitarian Policy Group, July 2003, available at <http://www.odi.org.uk/HPG/papers/hpgbrief12.pdf> (last visited 20 November 2007).

8 “Wilsonian” humanitarianism characterizes most US NGOs. Named after the former US President Woodrow Wilson, who hoped to project US values and influence as a force for good in the world, the Wilsonian tradition sees a basic compatibility between humanitarian aims and US foreign-policy objectives. For details see Stoddard, above note 7.

Coherence and political–military–humanitarian interactions

The research team heard strong indications that life-saving assistance and protection efforts in Iraq have been tainted by association or mis-association with a range of often flawed activities motivated by military or political objectives. Genuine humanitarian relief efforts have occurred simultaneously, and often in the same space as a range of well-resourced political, reconstruction and development activities. Many of these activities have been explicitly instrumentalized and underwritten by MNF governments and others to shore up the occupation and the structures which followed from it. The rush to consolidate the occupation and then to hand power back to an ill-equipped Iraqi state often led to an evident insensitivity to local realities and blindness to the hierarchy of needs. We heard numerous complaints of governance, democratization and similar activities that were perceived in local communities as being inappropriate, poorly timed, unresponsive to local needs or unfocused, or all of these.

As to whether the UN system has already passed the point of no return in terms of its image and acceptance among Iraqis as a humanitarian player, the evidence is mixed. Unicef, which continues to distribute through the Iraqi Red Crescent some of its standard items marked with the Unicef logo, had relatively good name recognition among several of those whom we interviewed in Iraqi communities, and appeared to be better known than most other organizations as an agency that did humanitarian work for children around the world. In a handful of our interviews specific mention was made of past Unicef work in local neighbourhoods, along with the ICRC, the Red Crescent and a few small European NGOs.

One international staffer with Unicef felt that most Iraqis readily recognized the Unicef name from the agency's long history in Iraq and was certain that Unicef was understood by Iraqis "somehow separately" from the United Nations. Another interviewee from Unicef in New York took the opposite view, suggesting that the United Nations would not be able to overcome the stigma attached to it by Iraqis because of the UN administration of the sanctions regime and the suffering associated with the Oil-for-Food Programme before the 2003 invasion.

It was evident from some of the comments heard in Iraqi communities that many were familiar with the humanitarian work of the United Nations in other countries through media exposure. But, as one woman asked, "Where are they now?" The withdrawal of the United Nations after the Canal Hotel bombing is well known in Iraq, as is its role in managing the sanctions regime. It would be a stretch to expect Iraqis to appreciate the inherent tensions that prevailed inside the UN system during the sanctions period, and it is doubtful that many would remember two successive UN Humanitarian Co-ordinators and the head of the World Food Programme in Iraq quitting in protest over the human suffering caused by the sanctions.

Problematic perceptions or misperceptions cut both ways in the rocky relationship between the United Nations and Iraq, at all levels. One junior

Jordanian employee of UNAMI was shockingly blunt when speaking about her Iraqi colleagues in a conversation about security issues: “They can’t be trusted. They love blood too much.” In similar unguarded fashion, and again in a conversation about how to clear the UN security logjam in Iraq, a mid-level Western staffer of the UN Department of Safety and Security in New York felt that the problem lay with “the Arab mentality, their culture”. Another UN employee who had been based in Iraq before and after the Canal Hotel bombing summed up the UN relationship with Iraq this way: “It’s like a jinx.” The perceptions gap was acknowledged in 2004 by the incoming Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq, Ashraf Qazi, who commented, “There is every reason for the Iraqi people to see the UN mission in Iraq as a mission in their service and for them, and it will be my job to strengthen that impression there.” An experienced UNHCR official questioned whether there had since been any change for the better in the way in which the United Nations was viewed by Iraqis, given the ongoing close affiliation with the MNF: “It’s eroded the moral soap-box we used to be able to stand on.”

Donor failure

The extent of politicization of donor behaviour is a recurring complaint of operational humanitarian agencies. Donor responsiveness to life-saving assistance and protection work in Iraq has gone through several phases since 2003. In the months prior to the US-led invasion, donors committed generous funding to a preparedness appeal for US\$193 million launched by the United Nations in anticipation of a massive displacement and refugee crisis that did not then materialize. Following the invasion, funding for major humanitarian programmes, including a UN Flash Appeal for \$2.2 billion in April 2003, continued into early 2005 with some operational agencies being actively encouraged by donors to expand dramatically their presence in the country.

However, important sources of “neutral” funding fell off sharply in mid-2005. The European Community Humanitarian Aid Department (ECHO) closed its Baghdad office in May 2004, ceased funding new humanitarian activity in Iraq in April 2005 and closed its Iraq office in Amman the following July. ECHO’s stated reasons for the closures were the inflow of large-scale reconstruction funding, coupled with what it perceived to be the impossibility of effectively conducting humanitarian operations in the central and southern governorates.

Funding problems compelled some operational NGOs to withdraw from Iraq completely as from late 2005 and even up to 2007, when it was clear that a renewed humanitarian response was necessary. Our interviews with a range of humanitarian organizations still operational inside Iraq indicate that since the escalation of intercommunal violence sparked by the Samarah Mosque bombing in February 2006, bilateral donors and ECHO had generally been unresponsive and resistant to operational innovations on the ground. Thus, at a time when

operational personnel have needed the greatest understanding and support, this was not forthcoming.

“You are all corrupt”

In general, donors have not calibrated funding for humanitarian programmes to needs and have often been careless with funding for reconstruction. Donors have often accepted far less rigorous standards for needs assessment, monitoring and evaluation of reconstruction programmes in Iraq than for life-saving humanitarian programmes. Widespread perceptions of corruption and waste undoubtedly account for part of the credibility gap facing operational humanitarian agencies among Iraqis. The hastily expressed need of much of the international community to consolidate the occupation of Iraq led to creation of a rich donor pool and a climate of impunity for its use and misuse.

Careless use of resources by a variety of players has conditioned the way in which Iraqis understand assistance efforts. In our research in Iraqi communities we heard a remarkably consistent perception that all assistance efforts – international and national – are corrupt. At ground level, the wealth of riches showered on reconstruction and nation-building efforts since 2003, and the dissonance of that with the more immediate hardships of daily lives, has left many Iraqis feeling disillusioned and angry. Some with whom we spoke mentioned hearing through the media about the billions of dollars that had poured into Iraq, then voiced a litany of complaints about corrupt officials and contractors, abandoned, half-finished construction projects, an inadequate and unreliable electricity supply, skyrocketing costs for cooking fuel, shoddy school reconstruction and a wide variety of (to them) esoteric projects that left nothing tangible in their wake.

The need for neutral donor funding

There is a need for perceptibly neutral donor funding for humanitarian programmes in Iraq. The readiness of Iraqis to scrutinize aid organizations underscores a need for donor funding for humanitarian action that can be perceived as neutral, impartial and independent. Such funding is also vitally important to many of the most capable international and Iraqi humanitarian organizations that continue to implement programmes.

Our research in Iraqi communities indicates that many Iraqis in the central and southern governorates are reluctant to be associated with assistance they perceive to be “tainted” by association with an out-of-favour combatant or political interest, less for political than for security reasons. This is especially true in areas most affected by military action. In responding to an offer of funding from a US-based NGO affiliated with the MNF, one Iraqi NGO pointed out, “We don’t want to pollute our organization with your money.”

The text box illustrates the lengths to which one Iraqi NGO has gone to protect itself from potentially dangerous associations. However, important international humanitarian responders feel likewise: in 2005 a large European

NGO suspended a major programme when a funding agency inadvertently revealed a contentious source of its donation. Since 2003, the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq has rejected funding from governments that were contributing troops to the MNF, although ECHO funding – one perceived step removed from EU members of the US-led Coalition – proved acceptable. Going one step further, a Médecins sans Frontières worker pointed out that his organization would “refuse on principle any funding from institutions related to violence”. A number of small organizations – including American, European, Asian and Middle-Eastern NGOs – have taken similar stances and struggle to adapt to changing conditions amid a shrinking pool of acceptable donor funding.

An Iraqi NGO’s “Rules for Donors”

During a discussion about their work and how it was supported, the head of a relatively large Iraqi women’s assistance NGO active in several of the worst conflict-affected areas spoke of how her organization had asserted its security through establishing a set of “rules for donors”. The rules were motivated by concern over staff and beneficiary safety connected to the real and perceived neutrality, impartiality and independence on which the organization depended.

The rules help to guide the organization’s decisions about accepting funds from various sources, sometimes leading to rejection of sizeable offers of support from those considered “tainted”. The NGO uses several creative means to be as self-reliant as possible, including gaining funds generated through women’s employment initiatives to defray some of the costs of emergency relief projects.

The head of the organization recently asked, “Why do we have to act according to the habits of Northern countries in our work? People feel an obligation to try to behave like Westerners.”

In order to be acceptable, donations:

- must not be from countries which occupy Iraq and directly or indirectly destroyed its infrastructure;
- must not be from organizations which have illicit aims of changing the values and traditions of Iraqi communities;
- should be from independent, neutral and non-political organizations, national or international;
- must not be conditional on changing our organization’s way of doing things;
- must not aim to change the morals and values which come from the religious structures and ethics of Iraqi communities;
- must not aim to promote acceptance of the occupation forces;
- must not require us to enter the “Green Zone” in Baghdad; and
- must be evaluated for their effectiveness by Iraqi women in a way that is respectful to the women we help. For safety reasons, no faces should be shown in photos taken of our projects by donors or others.

Militarized humanitarianism?

The perceived neutrality, impartiality and independence of genuine humanitarian action is threatened in Iraq by blurred distinctions between military, political, commercial and humanitarian roles. Our fieldwork in different regions of Iraq confirms that it is now often virtually impossible for Iraqis (and sometimes for humanitarian professionals) to distinguish between the roles and activities of local and international players, including military forces, political and other authorities, for-profit contractors, international NGOs, local NGOs and UN agencies. In some of our conversations it was clear that commercial contractors affiliated with the MNF had been mistaken for humanitarian NGOs. In many other interviews it was completely unclear what kind of agency or agencies were being discussed.

Conversely, assistance provided by local religious charities and mosques was often readily distinguished from assistance provided by other entities and, in many of our interviews, was described as vital. In contrast with nearly all other entities, religious offices and mosques are sometimes – but not always – able to provide assistance in relatively more open and visible ways. Local Islamic charities and mosques were identified in many of our conversations as the preferred option of first resort for those needing assistance or protection.⁹ However, we heard several examples of “pressures” being exerted on local religious charities to conform more to the wishes and priorities of parties and militias.

Security

Virtually all organizations interviewed for the study reported ever greater reductions in humanitarian access in late 2006 throughout the central and southern governorates and related declines in access to reliable information. Insecurity and uncertainty have engendered a culture of secrecy among many members of the humanitarian community. This has impaired effective co-ordination, stifled discussion of common strategies and inhibited the ethos of transparency associated with humanitarian work.

For some agencies, adaptation to an insecure environment has meant “bunkerization” or barricading themselves in, withdrawal, closure or becoming embedded with the MNF forces. Murders, kidnappings and other incidents have afflicted aid workers from a broad range of international and Iraqi humanitarian organizations, reflecting an equally broad spectrum of security strategies, programming methods and conditions, and adherence to humanitarian principles.

9 Our findings are consistent with a “lesson learned”, identified in a review of humanitarian responses to Fallujah, according to which “Religious actors are most likely to have access to the population, even during heavy fighting”. Cedric Turlan Kasra Mofarah, *Military Action in an Urban Area: The Humanitarian Consequences of Operation Phantom Fury in Fallujah, Iraq*, ODI–Humanitarian Practice Network, 8 December 2006.

The differential impacts on the security of indigenous and international agencies and personnel are discussed below.

Many agencies also reported increasing security-related stresses and inter-communal tensions within their own staff, with a resulting decline in effectiveness. Iraqi staff and their families continue to bear astonishing risks, and a handful of experienced, flexible and adaptable international organizations continue to cope within reduced capacities. Remote management and flexible partnership arrangements with Iraqi organizations keep some aid flowing, although donor funding for humanitarian action has generally been unresponsive to creative and contextually nuanced programming adaptation. Staff morale is being undermined at a crucial time in some agencies by uncertainties about donor funding and programme continuation.

Organizations that remain operational inside the central and southern governorates of Iraq have almost universally adopted a low-profile presence and various remote management arrangements in their efforts to maintain programming. Though far from ideal and fraught with difficulties, these arrangements have become increasingly necessary for continuing operations over time as the security threats facing “outsiders” have intensified in the places where humanitarian action is most needed. International aid organizations were the first to adopt the new measures, but, as inter-communal fragmentation continues, the growing tendency to regard many Iraqis from different communities as “outsiders” is impelling some larger Iraqi organizations to follow suit. There is a general hope and expectation among agencies that remote management will be a bridging measure until higher-profile activity and more conventional programming become possible on a localized basis.

Security stances

In 2004 the author posed this question to staff of some thirty international NGOs in Iraq: “If your office received a credible report of an imminent threat, would you approach the nearest Coalition compound, or the nearest mosque?” Answers were evenly divided. The question, while loaded, was used to begin a conversation with staff about how their organizations approached security.

Insecurity has led to a dramatic downsizing of the humanitarian presence and programming in Iraq. Although many humanitarian organizations have withdrawn – fewer than half of those organizations canvassed in 2004 remain truly operational in Iraq – there is no discernible pattern among them in their approaches to security. Some withdrew in response to devastating targeted attacks or explicit threats; others were not attacked but judged continuing operations to be untenable, not worth the risks in relation to the humanitarian impact, or not cost-effective. Conversely, other organizations have continued to implement humanitarian programmes, even after suffering devastating attacks, by adapting to changing conditions. Still others have experienced no incidents and have also stayed.

Organizational culture and, ultimately, the value placed by the organization on the fundamental principle of humanity, appear to account for

outcomes of the *adapt/withdraw* dilemma more than any other single factor. Although the evidence is not clear-cut, organizations of Dunantist or faith-based leanings generally have demonstrated a greater willingness to adapt than pragmatist or Wilsonian organizations.¹⁰ The variables are many and would merit much more in-depth study, but an attempt is made in the following section to probe the adapt/withdraw decision somewhat further.

There are doubtful benefits to populations in need in Iraq when humanitarian organizations opt for a bunkerized approach to security or “embed” themselves with MNF forces. Some agencies that have withdrawn have relied relatively more heavily on protective and deterrent strategies than on acceptance strategies. There is no evidence that bunkerizing or aggressive security stances have been either a guarantor of programme survival or a useful tool to gain access to people in need. In one instance, a local councillor complained to our research team of never having an honest conversation with a visiting aid agency, whose representatives repeatedly arrived in his office under escort by well-armed personnel of Western security contractors. Others with whom we spoke rejected as “dangerous” the possibility of approaching bunkerized or escorted humanitarian organizations for fear of being perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be sympathetic with the MNF. Some organizations that originally accepted protection from the MNF, or appear to have done so by visibly strengthening their compounds or using private security contractors, have since withdrawn from Iraq on the stated grounds of insecurity of personnel or insufficient humanitarian impact weighed against high security costs.

In most of Iraq – less so in the three northern governorates – co-location with MNF forces, or accepting MNF or other visible armed escorts, means that many Iraqis for whom the neutrality (or affiliations) of aid is important are rendered at least partly inaccessible. Wholesale reliance for security on the MNF or private Western contractors implies – or corroborates – a commonality of purpose between some aid agencies and military forces.

Many Iraqis at the community level find such coherence unacceptable and, in the words of one beneficiary, “un-humanitarian”. Likewise, there is little doubt among Iraqis as to the political allegiances and purposes of social welfare offices operated by, or under the armed protection of, various militias and parties. However, in many areas such offices are becoming welcome providers of life-saving assistance.

Presence and acceptance

Acceptance strategies¹¹ do not render humanitarian workers immune from targeted attack in Iraq, but do contribute to greater adaptability and longevity of

10 For definitions see Stoddard, above note 7.

11 Acceptance strategies entail convincing others that there is no need to harm you, and good reason to safeguard you. Protective strategies involve the defence of people and premises, or becoming a

humanitarian programmes. Some Iraqi and international NGOs that have taken an independent course in their approach to security, relying relatively more heavily on relationships with and acceptance of their work by communities, have also decided to cease operations. However, others have stayed to continue vital programmes. Flexible agencies that have invested considerable time and resources into understanding local (in addition to national) contexts and trends, building up relationships and supportive networks, and nurturing staff professionalism appear to have a comparative advantage in Iraq over less well-rooted agencies.

There is no substitute for presence. The low visibility of assistance and protection efforts in Iraq reinforces misperceptions about humanitarian work and the lack of acceptance of humanitarian organizations. Humanitarian action in Iraq has gone steadily more underground since the bombing of the United Nations' Baghdad headquarters in August 2003 and, soon after, the bombing of the ICRC office there. Insecurity for aid operations and personnel grew steadily worse throughout 2004 and 2005, leading to the evacuation to safer locales of virtually all international staff in the central and southern governorates and the widespread adoption of a low-profile presence and remotely controlled, managed or supported operations. Attacks targeted Iraqi staff with much greater frequency in 2005 and 2006 due to the near-absence of foreign aid workers and the far greater exposure of national staff.

Transparency – the practice of being open to scrutiny – is usually understood by humanitarian organizations as a necessary foundation for building the community relationships that are essential for effectiveness, accountability, and differentiation from providers of instrumentalized assistance. The “Western” or ‘Northern’ humanitarian presence in Iraq has diminished in scale, but it has also become “hidden” to the extent that it is virtually invisible to populations in the central and southern regions. Local humanitarian organizations do only somewhat better, and are not immune to serious difficulties.

Aid workers in Iraq and Amman use the terms “covert”, “surreptitious” and “furtive” to describe the extremes to which low-profile humanitarian operations have been taken by international and Iraqi organizations in response to threats and attacks. As an Iraqi NGO worker put it, “Low profile puts us in the shadow.” The low-profile approach provides a greater measure of safety for humanitarian workers, and has arguably bought agencies more time and more access. However, the benefits have come at an immense cost to acceptance. Our research among Iraqis indicates that perceptions of the humanitarian enterprise are far more positive among those who report direct contact with local or international assistance or protection work than among those whose impressions are formed second-hand through rumour and media.

“hardened target.” Deterrence strategies use counter-threats of retaliation through diplomacy, armed guards or military force. See Koenraad van Brabant, *Operational Security Management in Violent Environments*, Good Practice Review No. 8, Humanitarian Practice Network, Overseas Development Institute, June 2000.

Those who have received assistance from local or international humanitarian organizations or have seen them at work generally feel more positively disposed toward the humanitarian community than those who have only heard about it. We also found that those who had been exposed to assistance activities before humanitarian organizations adopted low profiles tended to remember the names of the organizations well.

Low-profile working methods and conditions increasingly hinder relations between staff and between agencies. Inter/intra-communal tensions are increasingly reflected within humanitarian organizations, even among staff of different backgrounds who have worked well together for years. Working relationships are under mounting strain as low-profile approaches dictate that staff work from their homes, with less frequent face-to-face contact within and between organizations. The trend has deepened for many agencies whose staffs are increasingly confined to their own neighbourhoods or communities. Lack of trust between Iraqi staff, and also between Iraqi staff and international staff in remote offices, was identified as a challenge by a number of organizations in late 2004 but now afflicts Amman-based organizations as well as those inside Iraq.

Perceptions of communal bias in decisions on resource allocation and personnel management are also becoming a pressing problem. Some organizations are in the early stages of addressing the issue but have been isolated in their efforts, owing to community-wide reticence in talking more openly about the problem and how it might be addressed. For the moment, then, agency staffs reflect the make-up and tensions of the wider community, intentions to the contrary notwithstanding.

Some Iraqi staff of local and international humanitarian NGOs lament the “lack of courage” of the international humanitarian apparatus, arguing that international organizations have not done enough to remain operational on a scale commensurate with needs. Under current conditions, however, they also frequently discourage visits by international aid workers; such visits can entail acute risks for Iraqi facilitators. Some international NGO staff in Amman with several years of experience inside Iraq recognize the potential risks of a foreigner’s presence to Iraqis and to the programmes they implement. However, they also observe with hindsight that humanitarian agencies could have been more creative and assertive in “pushing their way through” the spate of attacks against aid workers in 2003 and 2004, and insist on the need for close monitoring of the rapidly changing situation in order to exploit new opportunities for increased access and activity.

The opposite view of the involvement of international aid workers in Iraq is also frequently held, particularly among international staff with limited experience in conflict areas or among those with little or no direct exposure to Iraq outside fortified facilities. Since 2004 there has been a much stronger tendency among international humanitarian staff (as well as among donors and policy-makers) to treat insecurity in Iraq as a nebulous, generalized, persistent and insurmountable challenge, rather than as a series of serious incidents, each of which can be analysed, placed in (an often localized) context and used as a spur to

adaptation. Inadequately nuanced understanding of the dynamics of insecurity has possibly become a rationalization in some organizations for reduced assertiveness, creativity and engagement. There has been a sharp decline since early 2004 in the number of international humanitarian workers in Amman with any depth of experience in the country; only a handful remain. As an Iraqi aid worker observed, “In 2003 aid agencies tended to send their best people to Iraq because of the high profile of the emergency. But those people didn’t fit the situation after the invasion. Now the best people are needed because the needs are more basic and acute.”

Physical and psychological distance from the action also extracts a high cost in terms of the motivation and emergency mindset of some international staff. This was evident as early as 2004, as agencies began to withdraw their international staff from the country. Isolation from communities in need was even then taking a toll on the sense of solidarity with affected populations that, for many aid workers, is an inducement to creative problem solving and the willingness to take risks. Of late, however, the problem has grown considerably, and now even affects some Iraqis working with humanitarian organizations in Amman. Movement constraints inside Iraq may now mean that more Iraqi aid workers are cut off from the communities they have been working to help.