

Between a rock and a hard place: integration or independence of humanitarian action?

Antonio Donini

Antonio Donini is Senior Researcher, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University.

Abstract

This article looks at the tension between principles and politics in the response to the Afghan crisis, and more specifically at the extent to which humanitarian agencies have been able to protect themselves and their activities from overt instrumentalization by those pursuing partisan political agendas. After a short historical introduction, it focuses on the tensions around the issue of ‘coherence’ – the code word for the integration of humanitarian action into the wider political designs of the United Nations itself and of the UN-mandated military coalition that has been operating in Afghanistan since late 2001. The article ends with some more general conclusions on the humanitarian–political relationship and what Afghanistan ‘means’ for the future of humanitarian action.

⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮

The international community’s response to the Afghan crisis spans a thirty-year period that saw the end of the cold war, the ensuing disorder and reshuffling of political, military, and economic agendas in Central and South Asia, and the tentative emergence – and now the likely decline – of a hegemonic order built around globalization and securitization. Thirty years of failed interventions, civil wars, and aborted nation-building attempts have resulted in unprecedented levels of human suffering and volatility in Afghanistan, an unending crisis now spreading in the surrounding region. The high hopes of peace and stability raised by the US-led

intervention after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States have given way to widespread despondency, disillusionment, and the likely evaporation of the mirage of a *pax americana*.

Humanitarian action has been a constant in Afghanistan's troubled recent history. It has, of course, been affected by the structural changes in the nature of the conflict and by the wider developments in the international community's approaches to conflict and crisis. Humanitarian action has waxed and waned, depending on the vagaries of the local and international political contexts. There have been periods of extreme politicization and manipulation, and times when humanitarian principles were relatively easy to uphold. The political and military vicissitudes that shaped the crisis gave rise in turn to massive humanitarian needs. The manner in which the international community responded to these assistance and protection needs, as well as the fluctuations of the response over time, were heavily influenced by political agendas that were often at odds with humanitarian objectives. From the start, as in most complex emergencies, the space for humanitarian action was determined by politics. This intrusion of the political has ranged from the relatively benign to the overt manipulation of humanitarian action for partisan purposes.

As we shall see, there are two important lessons to reflect upon. They are quite obvious and commonsensical but all too often disregarded. The first is that there is a negative correlation between direct superpower involvement and the ability of the humanitarian enterprise to engage with crises in a relatively principled manner. In Afghanistan, the 'highs' in politics (cold war and post-9/11 interventions) correspond to 'lows' in principles. Conversely, superpower dis-attention to the Afghan crisis, as in the 1992–1998 period of internecine conflict, allowed more space for issues of principle and for significant innovations in how the United Nations (UN) and other external players could do business in a crisis country. The corollary to this law is that when great-power interest is high, policy and decision-making, including on humanitarian and human rights issues, are taken over by the political people in the donor and UN bureaucracies, thereby displacing the humanitarian folk who often have a better understanding of realities on the ground.

The second lesson is that the 'instrumentalization' of humanitarian assistance for political gain, besides being in itself a violation of humanitarian principles, rarely works. Subordination of humanitarian principles to so-called higher imperatives of realpolitik may allow short-term gains, but in the long term the chickens come home to roost. And, in Afghanistan, the blowback from the politics and the manipulations of humanitarian assistance in the 1980s continues to this day.

In the humanitarian response to the Afghan crisis, it is useful for analytical purposes to distinguish between four distinct phases:

1. *From the Soviet invasion to the fall of Najibullah (1979–1992) – or the cold war period and its immediate aftermath*: in humanitarian terms, there were two distinct phases to this period: the non-governmental organization (NGO)

cross-border solidarity phase, during which UN humanitarian agencies operated, by necessity, only in neighbouring countries; and the second phase, which saw the arrival of the UN agencies on the scene and was accompanied by the first attempt to set up a robust UN humanitarian co-ordination mechanism while simultaneous UN attempts to broker peace followed a formulaic cold war script.

2. *The civil war and the triumph of warlordism (1992–1996)*: the volatility of the situation in Afghanistan, which included the devastation and complete breakdown of institutions, hampered the provision of assistance and provoked great soul-searching in the assistance community (What are we doing here? Are we fuelling the war?), as well as growing disillusionment in a UN peace process that was increasingly reduced to ‘talks about talks’.
3. *The Taliban period (1996–10 September 2001)*: the rise of the Taliban regime triggered a resurgence of interest in humanitarian principles and was coupled with a second attempt at robust and coherent co-ordination among, at least in theory, the assistance, human rights, and political dimensions of the international response.
4. *Post 9/11 – from ‘nation-building lite’ to a return to chaos*: the heavy engagement of the international community that has accompanied renewed interest in Afghanistan since 2001 has, again, been characterized by politics trumping principles in a vain quest for a durable peace. This period comprises an ascending phase, in which post-conflict rhetoric ruled and the need for humanitarian action was dismissed, and a descending (into chaos?) phase, which in many ways resembles the Soviet occupation and in which principles are again struggling to regain some currency.

Each of these periods corresponds to a shift: from weak unitary state to fragmenting state; from fragmenting to failing state; from failing to rogue state; and from rogue state to a corrupt and fissured ‘protégé’ state.²

Humanitarian action in Afghanistan has always been subject to varying degrees of political instrumentalization. During the mid- to late 1980s, humanitarian assistance was used by the US and its allies as a tool for political and military objectives to give the Soviet Union ‘its Vietnam’. The context was the cold war, and overt manipulation was *de rigueur*. When the UN humanitarian agencies, which had been confined to assisting refugees outside the country, appeared on the Afghan scene after the 1988 Geneva Accords that resulted in the eventual withdrawal of Soviet troops, they found a very messy situation, with an array of NGOs sponsored largely by the United States and other Western governments

1 Michael Ignatieff, ‘Nation-building lite’, in *New York Times*, 28 July 2002.

2 Or perhaps even a ‘cannibalistic’ state? See Kevin Meredith, Sergio Villarreal, and Mitchel Wilkinson, ‘Afghanistan: The de-evolution of insurgency’, in *Small Wars Journal*, October 2010, available at: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/10/afghanistan-the-deevolution-of/> (last visited 8 December 2010).

providing so-called humanitarian assistance to *mujahedin* (resistance fighters) commanders.³ The inept often combined with the unscrupulous: cash was liberally handed out and compromises with unsavoury commanders were made, from which it became very difficult for the NGOs to disentangle themselves. Not all NGOs were incompetent or indifferent to principles. Some did good technical work, particularly medical NGOs. But, by and large, all had taken sides in support of the *mujahedin* cause.⁴ While there was some concern for impartiality, solidarity trumped neutrality. In the NGO community, neutrality was a dirty word.

The UN tried, with difficulty, to introduce a more principled approach and to reduce the one-sidedness of aid. The special UN Co-ordinator, Sadruddin Aga Khan, negotiated a 'humanitarian consensus' with all parties to the conflict, as well as all the neighbouring countries. In order to appear more equidistant and reduce the stranglehold of Pakistan-based agencies (and their Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) minders) on the assistance market, the United Nations opened offices in and set up assistance activities from Iran and the then Soviet Union, as well as in Kabul and other Afghan cities.⁵ It was thus able to operate cross-border and cross-line from government-held cities to territory controlled by the *mujahedin*. NGOs remained essentially Peshawar- (and Quetta-)based, and considered the very thought of opening offices in Kabul as anathema.⁶ Donors had no qualms about imposing their political agenda on the NGOs they funded, and attempted to do so with the UN. These were times of easy money, no accountability, and happy-go-lucky operationalism.⁷

3 Very little scholarly analysis of the role of NGOs in Afghanistan has been written either during or since the cold war period. An exception is Helga Baitenmann, 'NGOs and the Afghan war: the politicization of humanitarian aid', in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1, January 1990, pp. 62–85. Between 1990 and 2002, only two studies addressed the issue, albeit tangentially: Antonio Donini, *The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique, and Rwanda*, Thomas J. Watson Institute for International Studies, Providence, RI, Occasional Paper No. 22, 1996; and Nigel Nicholds with John Borton, *The Changing Role of NGOs in the Provision of Relief and Rehabilitation Assistance: Case Study 1 – Afghanistan/Pakistan*, Overseas Development Institute, London, Working Paper 74, 1994. Fiona Terry's *Condemned to Repeat: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2002, contains a chapter on manipulations around the Afghan refugees issue and its implications for humanitarianism; it includes a brief analysis of the cross-border 'solidarity' days.

4 Even *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), today one of the paragons of principled humanitarianism, had no qualms about taking sides: see F. Terry, above note 3, p. 73.

5 A. Donini, above note 3, p. 35.

6 During the Najibullah period there were no international NGOs in government-held territory (except for the International Assistance Mission, a faith-based medical organization). Oxfam was the first international NGO to open shop in Kabul, in late 1991. The International Committee of the Red Cross had a presence throughout the war years, except for a hiatus at the beginning of the Soviet occupation.

7 See Antonio Donini, 'Principles, politics, and pragmatism in the international response to the Afghan crisis', in Antonio Donini, Norah Niland, and Karin Wermester (eds), *Nation-building Unraveled? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan*, Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, CN, 2004, pp. 120–124.

Feeding chickens . . . that come home to roost

A personal recollection of strong-arm tactics: In the fall of 1989, forces led by Jalaluddin Haqqani had laid siege to the city of Khost in eastern Afghanistan. The US embassy in Islamabad requested UNOCA (the then UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan) to pre-position food outside the city so that the civilian population could be 'drawn out' and the mujahedin could step up their offensive. According to the ambassador, IDPs (internally displaced persons) were fleeing towards the border with Pakistan and required assistance. The UN was reluctant but agreed to do an assessment. With a WFP (UN World Food Programme) colleague (and an ISI escort) we drove to the border, where we were met by Haqqani and his mujahedin, and then to his base in the hills above Khost, from which he was rocketing the town. We asked to interview some IDP families, but there were none at hand. We interviewed some kuchis (nomads) who were smuggling timber into Pakistan and they had seen none. Haqqani showed us the caves where he was planning to store the food and produced freshly thumb-printed lists of prospective beneficiaries. On that occasion we declined to help, but subsequently the UN agreed to send a few truckloads of wheat to the Haqqani base. As a UN colleague explained, 'This is a ticket we have to pay to keep the US and the ISI happy. If we don't, they will block our cross-border access to Afghanistan'. Twenty years later, Haqqani is still around and allegedly still benefiting from ISI largesse: with his sons he runs the 'Haqqani Network', known for its ruthlessness and responsible for much of the insurgent activity in eastern Afghanistan and in and around Kabul.

When the Najibullah regime collapsed in April 1992, Afghanistan dropped off the radar screen. There were no longer any ideological stakes to fight for. Afghanistan became an orphan of the cold war and the political patrons of the cross-border NGO cottage industry suddenly lost interest. Commanders lost their aura and became 'warlords'. Also, some of the more shady characters, such as those who were adept at mixing assistance and intelligence gathering, left the Afghan circuit. Paradoxically, it became easier for the United Nations and humanitarian NGOs to advocate a more principled approach. Mainstream international agencies with proven track records, which had eschewed the Afghan context during the cross-border period, were now on the scene. As mentioned above, Afghanistan thus confirms the rule that, when superpower interests are at stake, principled humanitarianism suffers. Conversely, when the superpower is not paying attention, principles have a better chance. It should also be noted that, in those cold war days, 'integration' as an operational template in complex crises had not yet appeared on the horizon.

First attempts at integration

As intense factional fighting with frequently shifting alliances replaced the anti-communist struggle, aid agencies started asking themselves some hard questions.

Massive soul-searching spread through the humanitarian community in 1992–1994. What did the assistance effort add up to? Had it prolonged the war? Were aid agencies part of the problem or of the solution? The field-based quest for more effective and principled action was helped by emerging processes at UN headquarters aimed at improving overall UN performance in intractable crises, in accordance with the ‘unitary approach’ that was articulated in the UN Secretary-General’s *Agenda for Peace*. As a result, in 1998 the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan was born of the frustrations of agencies in the field with a seemingly unending war in which the impact of humanitarian action was questioned, and of an overarching concern at headquarters for a more coherent, system-wide UN response to complex crises. The key assumption was that, by reducing the disconnects between the political, assistance, and human rights pillars of UN action, there was a better chance for an effective peace strategy. This was both the strength and, in the end, the indictment of the Strategic Framework.

The objective of the Strategic Framework was to provide a stronger voice, or at least equal billing, to humanitarian and human rights concerns vis-à-vis the UN’s political initiatives. Principles and modalities for common programming were agreed across the assistance community, including the vast majority of NGOs – and functioned much in the same way as the ‘cluster system’ does today. Co-ordination on the ground was boosted, as was the ability of the aid system to present a relatively united front in its difficult negotiations with the Taliban for access and acceptance. The main integration/coherence was thus within the assistance community. It was facilitated by the fact that donors were limiting their involvement in Afghanistan to humanitarian assistance: capacity-building of Taliban institutions was proscribed for fear of legitimizing the regime. In effect, the humanitarian system created its own parallel structures to respond to a deepening crisis for which resources were scarce and international support was weak. Development policy discussions were not a priority for the Taliban, who were intent on winning the war and international recognition.

The Strategic Framework was criticized by some for the alleged subordination of humanitarian and human rights concerns to the UN’s political agenda. Some organizations, particularly at the ‘Dunantist’ end of the humanitarian spectrum (i.e. those who strive to respect more closely the founding principles of the Red Cross Movement), such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), claimed that humanitarian action was being compromised by the Strategic Framework because it provided a single umbrella for the three components of UN action in Afghanistan – political, humanitarian, and human rights. In fact, quite the opposite happened, at least during the period between 1999 and mid-2001: because the Strategic Framework contained a clear set of principles and objectives to which all segments of the United Nations and the vast majority of the NGOs had subscribed, the humanitarian voice had a better chance of being heard. This was, of course, facilitated by the fact that no major power had strategic political stakes in Afghanistan; that humanitarian action was the main form of UN engagement on the ground; and that the peace process was mostly reduced to ‘talks about talks’, with no substantive discussions among the belligerents.

The Strategic Framework facilitated the search for common approaches in the aid community on how to deal with restrictive Taliban policies and on issues such as negotiations for access to vulnerable groups, particularly to ‘internally stuck people’ (ISPs). In the case of Afghanistan, it can be argued that issues of principles and rights got a hearing because of the relatively strong degree of unity in the humanitarian assistance community and because the Strategic Framework allowed the humanitarian voice to be heard at the political UN and donor levels.⁸ In the end, there was little integration between the assistance pillar and the political pillar of the Strategic Framework. While it is true that the Strategic Framework was based on the assumption that assistance activities should ‘advance the logic of peace’, because the Taliban were ostracized and the peace process was going nowhere, aid-induced pacification was more virtual than real.

Principles under the *kilim*

All this changed utterly after 9/11. Whatever coherence the Strategic Framework might have brought to overall assistance and protection efforts in Afghanistan was shattered by the political and military hurricane that followed. Humanitarian and human rights concerns were pushed aside. They were swept under the *kilim* (carpet).

First, the nature of the crisis was radically changed by the US-led intervention. The Bonn Agreement, and the UN Security Council resolutions that endorsed it, resulted in a process of taking sides by the United Nations and the assistance community. This was not immediately apparent to aid agencies that were benefiting from the sudden windfall of donor largesse, but it was to the ‘spoilers’ and ‘losers’ – the remnants of the Taliban and other groups who had temporarily gone underground but were already planning their comeback. Humanitarian players who had been part of the Afghan landscape for many years, and who had been broadly accepted by all parties to the conflict, were now being viewed with suspicion by the losers, if not as legitimate targets in their war effort. This was because the humanitarian agencies in the post-Bonn peace agreement euphoria accepted the conventional wisdom that their erstwhile interlocutors, the Taliban, were no longer a player with whom a dialogue needed to be maintained. The Karzai government had been legitimized by its Western backers and donors urged the UN and NGOs to work with the government. To be fair, few needed prodding. This in turn broke the social contract of acceptance that normally allows

8 For a detailed analysis of the Strategic Framework, see A. Donini, above note 7, pp. 126–130, and the bibliographical references provided therein. See also, Mark Duffield, Patricia Gossman, and Nicholas Leader, *Review of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan*, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Islamabad, 2001, available at: http://www.areu.org.af/index.php?searchword=Strategic+Framework&option=com_search&Itemid=112 (last visited 24 November 2010). On negotiations with the Taliban, see Antonio Donini, ‘Negotiating with the Taliban’, in Larry Minear and Hazel Smith (eds), *Humanitarian Diplomacy: Practitioners and their Craft*, United Nations University Press, Tokyo, 2007.

humanitarian agencies to operate in volatile environments. To aggravate matters, the situation was defined and accepted by all except a handful of analysts as ‘post-conflict’ and therefore no longer requiring a humanitarian response.⁹ Of course, humanitarian needs did not disappear; the designation simply warped the analysis. As a consequence, the strong UN humanitarian capacity that existed in the country up to 9/11 was summarily disbanded.

Second, the locus of integration shifted from the humanitarian to the political arena – and the former was increasingly subordinated to the latter. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was established as the most integrated UN mission until then.¹⁰ All UN political, assistance, and human rights functions were brought under the stewardship of a single official. The mission’s operating system revolved around the twin mantras of ‘support the government’ and ‘nothing must derail the peace process’. In other words, politics – in this instance, to support the Karzai government – ruled. These features of UNAMA had a number of consequences for humanitarian action. Because of the lack of decisiveness in the UN assistance pillar, into which the previous humanitarian assistance co-ordination structure had been folded, and the Klondike-style rush of aid agencies attracted by the sudden availability of funds, co-ordination essentially collapsed. Donors set up shop in Kabul and privileged their own bilateral channels and implementing agencies. This undermined multilateralism and defeated any attempt at coherence in the assistance realm. NGOs distanced themselves from the UN, either because they distrusted the politicization of UNAMA or because they were now flush with funds. The myriad new reputable or fly-by-night players who appeared on the scene simply ignored it.

At the same time, the UN humanitarian efforts that had been a driving force – and the vehicle for co-ordination – in Taliban times came to be seen as antagonistic to the peace-building agenda by the political side of UNAMA, largely because they were trying to hold on to their principled approach and were resisting the politicization of humanitarian action. It thus became much more difficult to raise protection concerns within and outside the mission. In the winter and spring of 2002 there were massive abuses in the north of the country – including reprisals against communities thought to be pro-Taliban, forced displacement, and recruitment, as well as the killings and rape of aid workers – but there was little interest or traction on the UN and Coalition sides either to acknowledge or to take action to curb these violations.¹¹

As a result, and as has now become painfully obvious, what remained of the humanitarian community, and the wider assistance community, came to be

9 In early 2002, an Afghan analyst remarked: ‘The Taliban are like broken glass. You don’t see it, but when you walk on it, it hurts’ (personal communication).

10 A fact facilitated by the appointment of Lakhdar Brahimi, who had given his name to the ‘Brahimi Report’ – the UN’s rulebook for integrated missions – as Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG). See *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*, UN Report A/55/305 – S/2000/809 of 21 August 2000.

11 See Norah Niland, ‘Justice postponed: the marginalization of human rights in Afghanistan’, in A. Donini *et al.*, above note 7, pp. 61–83.

perceived by the Taliban and other insurgent groups as having taken sides in a 'Western conspiracy' and as providing a prop for the corrupt Kabul administration, whose legitimacy was increasingly questioned and whose writ outside the capital remained weak. In sum, the integration agenda implemented by the UN (a) marginalized humanitarian action and subordinated it to a partisan political agenda, (b) made it more difficult for aid agencies to access vulnerable groups, and (c) put the lives of aid workers at risk. The charitable explanation is perhaps to say that the post-9/11 enthusiasm clouded the vision of the main players in the UN leadership, Western donors, and aid agencies. Peace seemed within grasp. Nonetheless, there were, and still are, good reasons to be sceptical of the integration/coherence agenda whether writ narrow – limited to the UN – or writ large across the joined-up approaches of the NATO military Coalition and its civilian appendages.

Kicking the anthill

If we fast forward to 2010, we find humanitarianism in Afghanistan in a parlous state. The optimism of 2002 has been replaced both within and outside the aid community by growing despondency, if not foreboding. Many, in Western establishments saw Afghanistan as a testing ground for new approaches to conflict resolution, if not world ordering. Some, on the heels of Kosovo and later of Iraq, even waxed lyrical about a new and benign imperialism.¹² For the past nine years, Afghanistan has been a testing ground for 'joined up', 'comprehensive', or coherent approaches to conflict resolution. We will look briefly both at the UN and Coalition current versions of 'coherence' and at how they impact on humanitarian action.

While the UN had an integrated mission from early 2002, the integration of Coalition efforts – whereby political, military, and civilian activities fit into a single strategy – came later. Both Afghanistan and Iraq (and now Kenya and Somalia) are laboratories where different types of military/political/assistance hybrids have been tested by the US and its partners.¹³ These can be grouped under the moniker of 'stabilization' operations and cover a number of approaches, ranging from the relatively indirect – where civilian assistance activities are delivered from more or less militarized Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) – to the direct involvement of the military in assistance activities.¹⁴ Examples of the latter would

12 Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-building in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan*, Vintage, London, 2004.

13 The incorporation of relief and other forms of assistance into military operations is nothing new. US NGOs were willing participants in such approaches during the Vietnam War. Most US NGOs – and most of the NGOs involved in Vietnam were American – positioned themselves, by default if not by design, as virtual extensions of US policy in the region, working in close partnership with the US government. A review of the experience of four major NGOs – Vietnam Christian Service, CARE, International Voluntary Services, and Catholic Relief Services – is instructive regarding the infiltration of humanitarian activities by political agendas. See George C. Herring, 'Introduction to special issue: non-governmental organizations and the Vietnam War', in *Peace & Change*, Vol. 27, No. 2, April 2002, pp. 162–164.

14 There is no single model for PRTs. Some are more civilianized or, like the Dutch PRT in Oruzgan, under civilian command. In theory this means that assistance activities maintain some separation from military

include the direct delivery of ‘humanitarian assistance’, by the military as described in the box below.

Giving ‘humanitarian’ a bad name

A NATO/ISAF press release reads: ‘Humanitarian operations are helping both the people of Afghanistan and coalition forces fight the global war on terror. Under a strategy known as “information operations”, coalition mentors assigned to Afghan Regional Security Integration Command – North are developing humanitarian projects for even the most remote villages in the Hindu Kush Mountains. During a recent mission in both Faryab and Badghis Provinces, the Afghan National Army and their coalition mentors ... provided relief to the Afghan people ... In return for their generosity, the ANA asked the elders to provide them with assistance in tracking down anti-government forces’.¹⁵

‘Stability operations are humanitarian relief missions that the military conducts outside the U.S. in pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict countries, disaster areas or underdeveloped nations, and in coordination with other federal agencies, allied governments and international organizations. Such missions can include re-establishing a safe environment and essential services, delivering aid, transporting personnel, providing direct health care to the population, mentoring host country military medical personnel and helping nations rebuild their health infrastructure. Improving local medical capacity can in turn help stabilize governments and produce healthier populations. The new policy elevates the importance of such military health support in stability operations, called Medical Stability Operations (MSOs), to a DoD [US Department of Defense] priority that is comparable with combat operations’.¹⁶

In the language of the military, the objective of stabilization is to ‘shape, clear, hold, and build’.¹⁷ Essentially, these activities involve a concerted set of actions in ‘swing’ or ‘critical’ districts that are recaptured from or might otherwise

objectives. Others are more militarized and more integrated. On balance there has been a progressive militarization of PRTs, with civilians increasingly excluded from decision-making. See Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, Mirwais Wardak, Idrees Zaman, and Annabel Taylor, *Afghan Hearts, Afghan Minds: Exploring Afghan Perceptions of Civil–Military Relations*, British Agencies Afghanistan Group and European Network of NGOs in Afghanistan, London, 2008. For a critique of the British approach, see Stuart Gordon, ‘The United Kingdom’s stabilisation model and Afghanistan: the impact on humanitarian actors’, in *Disasters*, Vol. 34, (Supplement S3), 2010, pp. S368–S387.

- 15 ‘ARSIC-N and ANA travel outside boundaries to deliver aid’, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Press Release, 23 December 2007, available at <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/PANA-7A7FC7?OpenDocument&RSS20=18-P> (last visited 25 November 2010).
- 16 ‘New DoD policy outlines military health support in global stability missions’, Press Release, 24 May 2010, available at: http://www.health.mil/News_And_Multimedia/Releases/detail/10-05-24/New_DoD_Policy_Outlines_Military_Health_Support_in_Global_Stability_Missions.aspx (last visited 24 November 2010).
- 17 Anthony H. Cordesman, *Shape, Clear, Hold, and Build: The Uncertain Lessons of the Afghan & Iraq Wars*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, September 2009, available at: <http://csis.org/publication/shape-clear-hold-and-build-uncertain-lessons-afghan-iraq-wars> (last visited 24 November 2010).

fall to the Taliban. Once the district is secured, the theory goes, the UN and its agencies, the government, and the NGOs come in, first with quick impact projects (QIPs) and then with more durable initiatives, to transform physical security into more durable human security. This is based on the postulate that ‘hearts and minds’ and other assistance activities can actually ‘deliver’ durable security, an assumption that has also been increasingly questioned.¹⁸

An example of this is the ‘government in a box’ approach that was tried out, and largely failed, after the Coalition offensive in Marjah (Helmand Province) in March 2010. Understandably, agencies and NGOs, particularly those with long histories of work in Afghanistan, have been reluctant to jump onto the stabilization bandwagon despite strong donor pressure to do so. Assistance newcomers – private contractors or for-profit ‘quasi NGOs’ such as DAI¹⁹ – have been much more ready, willing, and able to take the plunge.

In Afghanistan, all major assistance donors – with the exception of Switzerland and India – are belligerents. This is unprecedented. Unsurprisingly, the militarization of aid and its incorporation into political agendas has reached unheard-of levels. One of the consequences of such ‘coherence’ is that, because ‘post-conflictiness’ was declared by the international community in 2002, bilateral donors’ interest in and funding for humanitarian activities has been and remains very small. Until recently, there was much denial as to whether the deepening crisis had generated humanitarian needs. Apart from the Humanitarian Aid department of the European Commission (ECHO) and the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), the relatively principled branches of the European Commission and USAID, there were no officials with humanitarian portfolios in donor embassies in Kabul in early 2010.²⁰

The UN and humanitarian action: a failed mandate

While donors’ support for coherent agendas and disregard for humanitarian principles is somewhat understandable, given the reality of being active belligerents, the posture of the UN is not. Afghanistan is the only complex emergency where the UN is politically fully aligned with one set of belligerents and does not

18 This is the subject of an ongoing research project co-ordinated by Andrew Wilder at Feinstein International Center (FIC): see Andrew Wilder, ‘A “weapons system” based on wishful thinking’, Opinion editorial, in *The Boston Globe*, 16 September 2009, available at: http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2009/09/16/a_weapons_system_based_on_wishful_thinking/ (last visited 24 November 2010). See also ‘Conference report: winning “hearts and minds” in Afghanistan: assessing the effectiveness of development aid in COIN operations’, available at: <https://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=34085650> (last visited 26 November 2010) for a description of the Tufts/FIC study on hearts and minds.

19 ‘Development Alternatives, Inc’ – now known simply as DAI – is a for-profit company that implements many USAID projects: see <http://www.dai.com/about/index.php> (last visited 24 November 2010). Because it works in ways similar to NGOs, but usually with armed escorts, this blurs the line between non-governmental and militarized assistance.

20 Personal observation.

act as an honest broker in ‘talking peace’ to the other side. It is also the only complex emergency where the UN’s humanitarian wing – the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) – and the broader humanitarian community are not vigorously negotiating with the other side for access²¹ or openly calling on all parties to the conflict to respect humanitarian principles. This represents a failure of mandate²² and a failure of leadership.²³ The UN Humanitarian Coordinator also acts as Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG) in charge of assistance and as UN Resident Coordinator. This conflation underscores the consequences of integration from a humanitarian perspective: it is difficult, if not impossible, for the same person to be an advocate for humanitarian principles and impartial humanitarian action and at the same time act as the main interlocutor on reconstruction and development issues with the government and the Coalition forces. The government – as well as major donors and the Coalition forces themselves – have not been keen to acknowledge the depth of the conflict-related humanitarian crisis, as this would undermine the rhetoric of post-conflict nation-building. Nor have they encouraged the UN to step out of the relative comfort of government-held cities to assess the humanitarian situation on the ground. Until early 2010, OCHA and the DSRSG had done little to engage with the other side. Conversely the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), unlike the UN, has nurtured its relationship with all the belligerents. It is the only humanitarian agency that has been able to develop a modicum of trust with the other side – to the extent that the World Health Organization, for example, needs to rely on the ICRC’s contacts for its immunization drives. Since its return to Afghanistan in 2009, MSF has followed the same approach.²⁴

The one-sidedness of the UN stems from the various UN Security Council resolutions establishing UNAMA and supporting the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). These resolutions repeatedly refer to ‘synergies’ and strengthening co-operation and coherence between the UN’s Special Representative, the foreign military forces, and the Karzai government.²⁵ The frequent references to links between the US civilian and military

21 To be fair, some preliminary contacts have been made but as yet with no visible results.

22 UN General Assembly resolution 46/182 of 19 December 1991, which established the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) – now OCHA – specifically gives OCHA the responsibility of ‘[a]ctively facilitating, including through negotiation if needed, the access by the operational organizations to emergency areas for the rapid provision of emergency assistance by obtaining the consent of all parties concerned, through modalities such as the establishment of temporary relief corridors where needed, days and zones of tranquility and other forms’ (Annex, para. 35(d)).

23 For more detail on humanitarian leadership (or lack thereof), see Antonio Donini, *NGOs and Humanitarian Reform: Mapping Study Afghanistan Report*, NGO Humanitarian Reform Consortium, 2009, available at: <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/SNAA-7WC45P?OpenDocument> (last visited 24 November 2010).

24 Michiel Hofman and Sophie Delaunay, *Afghanistan: A Return to Humanitarian Action*, MSF, Geneva, Switzerland, March 2010, available at: http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/reports/2010/MSF-Return-to-Humanitarian-Action_4311.pdf (last visited 24 November 2010).

25 See, e.g., UN Security Council resolution 1868 of 23 March 2009, S/RES/1868 (2009), para. 4(b), extending UNAMA; Resolution 1917 of 22 March 2010, S/RES/1917 (2010), para. 5(b), extending UNAMA; Resolution 1890 of 8 October 2009, S/RES/1890 (2009), para. 5, extending ISAF.

surge and UNAMA's activities also reinforce the impression that the UN is joined at the hip with the international military intervention and the Karzai government. Moreover, the public messages of the UN bureaucracy from its top level down have singularly lacked equidistance. Examples of this abound. Both the UN Secretary-General and his Special Representative (SRSG) have publicly and repeatedly welcomed the military surge and the prosecution of the war.²⁶ The SRSG is often seen in public with ISAF commanders, visiting ministers of the belligerent powers and assorted dignitaries. Many aid workers, UN and NGO alike, felt that the UN Secretary-General's remarks to the press expressing 'admiration' for ISAF, after the October 2009 attack on the Bakhtar guest house in which five UN staff were killed, were particularly insensitive.²⁷ Such statements allow the armed opposition to underscore the lack of impartiality of the UN as a whole for not acting 'as per its responsibilities and caliber as a universal body' and for calling 'for more brutality under the leadership of USA'.²⁸ More generally, the level of trust of ordinary Afghans in the UN is deeply fractured.²⁹

It is true that, in the last couple of years, the UN has become more vocal on issues of civilian protection and humanitarian principles, and in documenting the impact of the war on civilians. It has also started to recognize more openly the need for negotiated humanitarian access, which implies talking to the insurgents. 'Reconciliation', the code word for peace talks, is now on the agenda. But its posture – an integrated mission in support of the government, aligned with the Coalition, ensconced in government-held towns – and its credibility remain weak. Now that talks about talks, or even peace negotiations, are on the agenda, it will be difficult for the UN to shake off the legacy of its lack of neutrality and of equidistance from the warring parties.

From a humanitarian perspective, the consequences of the early declaration of 'post-conflict' and downgrading of the UN's humanitarian capacity in early 2002 are now in stark relief. While a separate humanitarian co-ordination presence was re-established – with one foot out of the integrated mission – in early 2009, OCHA's capacity remains uncertain and its ability to negotiate humanitarian access and acceptance untested. This is compounded by the absence of reliable data

26 See, e.g., Xion Tong (ed.), 'UN Afghanistan envoy backs call for more NATO troops', in *Xinhua*, 23 October 2009, available at: news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-10/23/content_12309531.htm (last visited 24 November 2010).

27 'I express my admiration for all the dedication of the women and men of the United Nations, voluntary humanitarian workers, NGOs and other members of the international community, including ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) for their dedication and commitment'. Press conference, Kabul, 2 November 2009, available at: <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1761&ctl=Details&mid=1892&ItemID=6374> (last visited 24 November 2010).

28 Statement of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 5 November 2009, available at: <http://www.alqimmah.net/showthread.php?t=11606> (last visited 25 November 2010). The statement goes on to lament that 'We have not seen any resolution by the Security Council, which speaks of grace, tolerance and altruism'. Similar criticism of the UN's 'partial standing' was expressed on 22 March: see <http://www.alqimmah.net/archive/index.php/t-15269.html> (last visited 25 November 2010).

29 This was a recurring theme in interviews with Afghan analysts and NGO and UN staff in Kabul in January 2010.

and analysis on the depth and breadth of the humanitarian caseload, a task that would normally be undertaken by OCHA. The failure to put together a credible picture of how the war is affecting the delivery of health and other essential services in the wide swathes of the country where the government has no hold is particularly serious, as it feeds donor reluctance to acknowledge that a robust humanitarian response is necessary.³⁰ More broadly, the aid community suffers from the confusion faced by ordinary Afghans, not to mention the armed opposition, in distinguishing humanitarians from other aid and political players. The perception that the aid enterprise has taken sides is of course reinforced by the fact that aid agencies are only present in government-held towns.

Thus, there is no humanitarian consensus that would define the basic operational requirements of humanitarian agencies in a conflict setting, no clarity on humanitarian needs, and an extremely politicized environment where aid agencies are pressured into supporting the Coalition and the government's political and military agendas. As a result, there is little understanding of, and respect for, humanitarian principles by the Taliban and other insurgents who tar the UN and NGOs with the occupiers' brush. Moreover, there is at best limited interest or support for principled humanitarian action by Coalition forces, major donors, and the political UN, whose emphasis is on the co-optation and militarization of aid or, failing that, on its displacement via for-profit entities.

In the fraught urban geography of Kabul and other major cities, there is little to distinguish UN compounds from those of the Coalition or of private security companies; this accentuates the perception that the UN and the foreign militaries are parts of a joint enterprise. Bunkerized behind blast walls of seemingly ever-increasing height,³¹ the beleaguered aid community is cutting itself off from the Afghan population whom it is meant to assist. This is particularly true of the UN, whose international staff can only move around, with crippling restrictions, in armoured vehicles (save for a few more stable areas in the centre and the north of the country); but for the NGOs as well the sphere of operation is rapidly shrinking: long-standing relationships with communities are fraying because of the impossibility of senior staff to visit project activities. Remote management and difficulties

30 Several factors conspire to create this information vacuum: the bunkerization of aid agencies, growing risk-averseness, lack of monitoring of projects in insecure areas, remote-control management, etc. Attacks against aid workers have had a chilling effect. These factors are compounded by the reluctance, with few exceptions, to engage in contact and relationship with the armed opposition(s). Recent information seems to show that the Taliban are not necessarily hostile to NGO activities, particularly in the health sector, though they may be hostile to the presence of foreigners; see Leonard S. Rubinstein, *Humanitarian Space Shrinking for Health Program Delivery in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, PeaceBrief No. 59, US Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, October 2010, available at: <http://www.usip.org/resources/humanitarian-space-shrinking-health-program-delivery-in-afghanistan-and-pakistan> (last visited 24 November 2010).

31 This trend, which does not only apply to Afghanistan, is analysed by Mark Duffield, who describes the international 'gated communities' in urban areas, the fortified aid compounds, and the exclusive means of transport that mesh these secure sites into an 'archipelago' of international aid. Mark Duffield, 'The fortified aid compound: architecture and security in post-interventionary society', in *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (forthcoming, 2010).

in monitoring are affecting programme quality. Responsibility and risk are being transferred to local staff, and the risk of being associated with the government or the Coalition is one that, understandably, many are not prepared to take. In short, the one-sidedness of aid agencies, real or perceived, is affecting both the reach and the quality of their work. Undoubtedly, acute vulnerabilities requiring urgent attention are not being addressed. With the exception of the ICRC and a few others, mainstream international agencies (UN and NGO alike) who claim to have a humanitarian mandate are becoming more risk-averse and loath to rethink their *modus operandi*. As a result, they are allowing their sphere of responsibility to be defined by political and security considerations rather than by the acuteness of need and the humanitarian imperative to save and protect lives.

Conclusions

The temptation to use humanitarian action to achieve political or military objectives or, more broadly, to incorporate humanitarian action in grand political designs is a recurrent theme in Afghanistan's recent troubled history. Views differ greatly on the pertinence of such integrated or coherent approaches, which seem to have become the orthodoxy both in the UN and in most Western governments. The effectiveness and long-term impact of such approaches is, of course, another matter.

From a humanitarian perspective, there are two questions here: Should humanitarian action be linked to, or included in, integrated or coherent approaches to conflict resolution? Even if it is not included, what is the impact of such approaches on principled humanitarian action? The answer to the first question is straightforward: humanitarians should not take sides. They should not make any pronouncement on whether a war is just or unjust, as this would undermine their ability to access vulnerable groups and address needs. Obviously, then, they should not engage in controversies of a political nature and even less join up in action with belligerents. Neutrality is not an end in itself; it is a means of fulfilling the humanitarian imperative. The use of the term 'humanitarian' for stabilization activities that are not based on need but on a political–military agenda further muddies the waters. And the perception of being associated with a belligerent carries potentially deadly consequences for humanitarian aid workers. In practice, only the ICRC and a handful of NGOs at the 'Dunantist' end of the spectrum (MSF, Emergency, Solidarités) can qualify as principled humanitarians in Afghanistan today. Most NGOs are multi-mandate agencies that perform a variety of relief and/or development functions, in most cases receive funds from belligerent nations, and/or work as government implementing partners, if not for military/assistance hybrids such as the PRTs. As for the UN agencies, they are perceived as having lost all semblance of independence and impartiality, let alone neutrality.

The answer to the second question is more complicated. It has to do with the political economy of the relationships between the range of military, political,

and assistance entities on the ground. The UN is, and is seen as being, aligned with the US-led Coalition intervention. It has provided uncritical support to the Karzai government and has shown no equidistance vis-à-vis the belligerents. The UN's humanitarian capacity is therefore weak and is further diminished by its association with the integrated mission. As mentioned above, the majority of NGOs work as implementing partners for government programmes, or in any case are seen as part of the international enterprise that supports the government. Unlike other conflict situations, there are few NGOs with a humanitarian track record in Afghanistan. As for bilateral donors, they see 'their' NGOs as force multipliers for their political and military objectives. Indirectly, therefore, stabilization operations affect humanitarianism because that is where the money is and NGOs are forced to balance principle with institutional survival. There is a 'rice bowl' issue here: if the NGOs refuse to do the bidding of the stabilization donors, the private contractors or the military itself will do the job.

Thus, even if humanitarian agencies are not involved in stabilization activities, these can have potentially dangerous consequences for the perceived neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian personnel. They are likely to make the negotiation of humanitarian space, which requires a minimum of acceptance and trust from all belligerents, that much more difficult. So far, only the ICRC has been able to develop a steady dialogue on access and acceptance with the Taliban. Now that there is a separate OCHA office outside the UN integrated mission – whose traditional function would be to negotiate access with all belligerents on behalf of the wider humanitarian community – there is some potential for a more active and principled UN humanitarian role. Re-establishing the bona fides of the humanitarian UN will be difficult, however, as tensions will inevitably arise with the Coalition and the political UN if these continue to claim that the humanitarians 'are in the same boat' of supporting the government and its political outreach.

In sum, there are good practical reasons for separating or insulating principled humanitarian action from integrated missions or stabilization activities. An even stronger theoretical argument points to the flaws of incorporating humanitarian action in the 'coherence' agenda. Humanitarian action derives its legitimacy from universal principles enshrined in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and international humanitarian law. Such principles often do not sit well with Security Council political compromises; politics, the 'art of the possible', is not necessarily informed by principle. Incorporating a function that draws legitimacy from the UN Charter (or the Universal Declaration) within a management structure born of political compromise in the Security Council is questionable and, in the case of Afghanistan, has proved to be counter-productive.

The issue of better insulation of principled humanitarian action, if not complete separation, from politics and stabilization approaches is likely to remain an unresolved item on the humanitarian agenda for some time to come. The ICRC and other Dunantist humanitarian organizations remain wary of, if not hostile to, integration. Some (for example, MSF) have now officially seceded from UN

and NGO humanitarian co-ordination bodies precisely because of the perceived conflation of principled humanitarian action and politics. On balance, the integration/coherence agenda has not served humanitarianism well: it has blurred the lines, compromised acceptance, made access to vulnerable groups more difficult, and put aid workers in harm's way.³²

32 The Feinstein International Center's Humanitarian Agenda 2015 research on local perceptions of the work of aid agencies has documented 'coherence' issues in thirteen countries. All the studies are available at fic.tufts.edu. The final report, A. Donini *et al.*, *The State of the Humanitarian Enterprise*, 2008, is available at: <https://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/display/FIC/Humanitarian+Agenda+2015+-+The+State+of+the+Humanitarian+Enterprise> (last visited 8 December 2010).