

Yves Daccord

The director-general of the International Committee of the Red Cross tells Alan Philps of the challenges in dealing with Islamic State and predicts that aid workers may soon be given a TripAdvisor style rating

In the Middle East today there are armed groups that have no respect for the humanitarian imperative. What challenges does this present to the Red Cross?

I see two key challenges. The first one is very basic. We want to maintain a very close relationship with people affected by conflict, and access these days is more complex because we are in a very polarized environment. Look at the Iraq front – the problem is not new but it is exacerbated. The second issue is to be able to engage governments and non-state armed groups on a very pragmatic basis on issues related to people under their control. That normally works rather well. What I have found more complex these days is to engage them on issues related to international humanitarian law and the Geneva conventions.

Do you have any contact with Islamic State?

Yes we do. We have some – what shall I say? – experience with them in places such as Fallujah. Islamic State is not one group with a perfect chain of command. But we should never forget that they control territory where two million people live. They need to think about basic health issues.

I don't want to describe them as a nice group at all. This is a difficult issue but for us it is essential to be able to talk with them. Such groups are surprised most of the time that we take the risk to come and sit with them and are not hiding in some bunker. We still think that drinking tea face-to-face is one of the best ways. We don't talk with the top leaders. We talk with the people who can decide to let us go into a hospital.

What are your first priorities?

There are quite serious health issues in Fallujah. We have to be able to assess needs. It is sometimes difficult to explain to these people that they cannot just give us a list of items and we will bring them. We want to be able to assess and to discuss and to go ourselves.

Do they think you are spying?

They all do. Nobody trusts anybody anymore, and not just in wartime. But we do not come from a vacuum. We have worked with the local population in Iraq for years. We have locally hired staff who know the area. We don't go: 'Hi, we're the Red Cross. Help us.' It took us three months to get inside Fallujah. You have to be careful when you engage with armed groups and

you have to always be aware when the moment is right.

What is your reading of the Iraq situation?

Very complex. It is not one size fits all. Islamic State in Raqqa (Syria) is not the same as in Mosul or Fallujah. For the past 10 years, Iraq has been moving towards an almost ethnically cleansed country, where you have Shia in one area, Sunni in another area and Kurds in a third area. The situation today is another step, a very sad one, in that direction. That's a big worry.

People feel that there are an unprecedented number of global emergencies happening. Is this an extraordinary time?

Yes. We are living in a very complex time. There is a convergence of major trends happening at speed, with a lot of unpredictability. What is striking for us is the connections between various situations. Look at Libya. Nobody talks about Libya these days, but I can tell you it will again have a major effect on Niger and on the Sahel. And nobody knows what to do.

Is the space for impartial humanitarian action getting smaller?

If you look at natural disasters, I would say no. People understand that today you have to assess needs. People are more demanding. They have phones and they say, 'Come and help.' The dynamic is different in conflict situations, where say providing impartial humanitarian aid is challenging because the world is very polarized. Parties to conflict have always wanted to control humanitarian aid.

Today governments are much more strategic in pursuing this goal than they were a few years ago. There is no international agreement to put pressure on them. Throughout the crisis the Syrian government has been able to maintain quite an impressive control over humanitarian aid convoys. The sovereignty of states is now sacrosanct.

'We still think that drinking tea face-to-face is one of the best ways to make contact'

Are there any armed conflicts today where the parties even pay lip service to the Geneva conventions?

One example which I found interesting is that the Taliban, two and a half years ago, made a public declaration that they would not use ambulances in suicide attacks. You could say this is nothing, but they understood that the protection of healthcare was something essential. What is missing is a real sanction for abuses. The International Criminal Court is a great invention, but it takes a long time to bring the right people there.

What do you regret not being able to do in Syria?

Over the past three years we've been on the ground in Damascus, and a little bit in Aleppo and in Tartous. This is very frustrating for an organization that wants to be where the action is. Some of the rebel groups didn't want us and would not provide security – we still have three colleagues who have been taken hostage. On the other side, the government was not interested in impartial humanitarian aid. We have been able to do a lot with water and sanitation engineering, but when it comes to medical aid, that is different. There is a trend here – the targeting of healthcare. These days it is mainstream and it is done from day one in a conflict. That's one of my big worries.

Can you do anything to protect doctors and hospitals?

That's a major disappointment for us. I was hoping to mobilize countries on both sides – supporting the rebels and the government in Syria – to agree to use technology to make hospitals neutral, so that all Syrians could get decent medical treatment. If we want to change behaviour, we need to have a much more systemic approach, both political and legal. If we continue to let it go and everybody thinks it is OK to bomb a hospital or target and arrest doctors and to have legislation that if you treat an enemy you are a traitor as they have in Syria, then we will have a real problem. In South Sudan, by the way, clinics were systematically attacked – and in Mali, too.

Since 2006, some 40,000 doctors have left Iraq. They left because they could, and because they were targeted. A country does not recover from that kind of loss. In Aleppo only a tenth of the medical personnel have remained. I find this very sad.

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How long do you see war continuing in Syria?

It will last, and longer than people expect, and the world is not prepared. With the exception of Palestine and Israel, conflict in the Middle East has been on and off. It is in Africa that conflicts have lasted decades – Congo, for example, which is continuing today. But imagine if you have the Syria conflict continuing as long as that.

We do not believe that in the next five years there will be any international coming together on dealing with conflict. We might see one convergence, which is to fight extreme groups like Islamic State. That might be the only example in years to come.

Sometimes the International Committee of the Red Cross is suspected of serving the interests of western expansion.

Have you managed to combat that?

There are, from time to time, extreme people who are uneasy with the idea of the Red Cross. I have not seen any campaign against us but we decided to take action anyway. We've taken more risks to be operationally present where it counts. We understand that people are watching us and comparing. We know what we do in Yemen is monitored by people in Pakistan, for example.

This doesn't mean people will like us, but they will certainly see what we do. We live in a world where we are not seen as impartial just because we are the Red Cross, or biased for the same reason.

It is a world where people look at us and think: 'Prove it!' So we have to prove every day, in every place, that we are doing the right thing. People have long memories. Perceptions could change quickly and we would be under pressure if we did things wrong.

Finally, we have learnt over the past 10 years to engage and to understand some of these groups in terms of their background and to explore the connection between

Sharia and international humanitarian law and see if there are any bridges between them.

Have you found any bridges?

Sharia is interesting in terms of respecting prisoners. What helps us is that the ICRC does not have a change agenda. We are not there to change a society. That is an important difference between us and development organizations.

We would never say to the Taliban, for example, 'You have to have another policy regarding disabled people or women.' But in hospitals, we would fight to make sure that women have access when they need to be treated.

Is it right to refuse to talk to groups such as Hamas because they are terrorists?

I understand the security constraints, but I think when a part of the world decides to label a group as terrorist and it's not possible to talk to them, it doesn't lead to anything positive.

As an organization, we fought hard to be able to maintain relationships with the Taliban. For 10 years the UN didn't have the right to speak to the Taliban and we did. Maintaining a relationship is important. But we are also in a world where it is important sometimes to make things public. We are not there to blame and shame, but to clarify some of the standards to which we hold ourselves accountable, and also the people we are speaking to.

How will humanitarian aid change in future?

I believe in the next five years you will see platforms which, just as TripAdvisor has changed the hotel and restaurant business, will dramatically change the way humanitarians are perceived. People will rate humanitarians – and it won't be about perception anymore, it will be about performance and service. In Somalia people will not care if you are from an international Islamic charity or the Red Cross or the Red Crescent or Médecins Sans Frontières or the UN – they will look at services. Are you close to me? Are you providing something interesting? If you do: five stars. You don't: zero stars.

So far the humanitarian community has had the luxury of talking among themselves without really being challenged. Tomorrow they will be challenged by the very people they are trying to serve. That may happen quicker than we think.

