

HUMANITARIAN AID AND INTERVENTION:
THE CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATION

An Elusive Quest: Integration in the Response to the Afghan Crisis

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The UN humanitarian response in Afghanistan spans fifteen years during which humanitarianism has waxed and waned. A retrospective look at this period provides insights on an interesting range of approaches and respect/disrespect for basic humanitarian principles. Afghanistan shows, for example, that definitions of what was “humanitarian” have expanded and contracted to suit particular political contexts. During the Taliban period the definition of humanitarian action was extremely wide and covered rehabilitation and even development activities; post-September 11 we see a dangerous level of contraction that compromises the application of its basic principles for the sake of pursuing nation-building activities in the service of political agendas. Similarly “coherence” and “integration” have become loaded terms. Once used to describe the aspiration for a higher level of concern for humanitarian and human rights principles in the context of multidimensional peace missions, they have now become euphemisms for the subordination of principles to political objectives. My own perspective, having witnessed this evolution on the ground in Afghanistan, is that of a lapsed integrationist who has become a doubting insulationist.

HUMANITARIAN ACTION AS A COLD WAR TOOL

Humanitarian action in Afghanistan has always been subject to varying degrees of political instrumentalization. During the mid to late 1980s, humanitarian assistance was used 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 fair game.

When the UN humanitarian agencies, who 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 providing so-called humanitarian assistance to mujahedin commanders. The inept often combined with the unscrupulous: cash was liberally handed out and compromises with unsavory commanders were made from which it became very difficult to disentangle. The United Nations tried, with difficulty, to introduce a more principled approach and reduce the one-sidedness of aid. A “humanitarian consensus” was negotiated with all parties to the conflict and, in order to reduce the stranglehold of Pakistan-based agencies on the assistance market, the United Nations opened

offices and set up programs in Iran and the Soviet Union as well as in Kabul and other Afghan cities. It thus was able to operate cross-border and cross-line from government-held cities to territory controlled by the resistance according to its concept of “humanitarian encirclement.” Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) remained essentially Peshawar- (and Quetta-) based, and considered the very thought of opening offices in Kabul an anathema.¹

Donors had no qualms about imposing their political agenda on the NGOs they funded and attempted to do so with the United Nations. I recall, for example, how a major donor used strong-arm tactics to try to convince the United Nations to pre-position food aid outside government-held towns besieged by the mujahedin in order to “draw out” the civilian population so that the mujahedin could step up their offensives. These were times of no accountability and happy-go-lucky operationalism.²

When the Najibullah regime collapsed in April 1992, Afghanistan dropped off the 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. Paradoxically, it became easier for the United Nations and true humanitarian NGOs to advocate for a more principled approach. Also, some of the more shady characters left the Afghan circuit and many mainstream international agencies with proven track records, who had eschewed the Afghan context during the cross-border period, were now on the scene. Afghanistan thus confirms the rule that when superpower interests are at stake, principled humanitarianism suffers. Conversely, when the superpowers are not paying attention, principles have a better fighting chance. This is largely because in

the latter case it is the humanitarian people—not their political colleagues—who are calling the shots in the donor bureaucracies. It should be noted, also, that in those Cold War days, integration as an operational template in complex crises had not yet appeared on the horizon.

THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK PERIOD

Following the fall of the Najibullah regime in April 1992, intense factional infighting with frequently shifting alliances replaced the anti-communist struggle. Aid workers started asking themselves some hard questions and massive soul searching spread through the humanitarian community in 1992–94. What did the assistance effort add up to? Were humanitarians part of the problem or of the solution? The field-based quest for more effective and principled action was combined with UN headquarters processes aimed at improving overall UN performance in intractable crises in accordance with the unitary approach that was articulated in the UN secretary-general’s “An 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 a more overarching concern at headquarters for a more coherent, UN-

¹ During the Najibullah period there were no international NGOs in government-held territory (except for IAM, a religious health organization). Oxfam was the first international NGO to open shop in Kabul, in late 1991. ICRC had a presence throughout the war years.

² 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* (Bloomfield, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 2004), pp. 120–24.

wide response to crises. The key assumption was that by reducing the disconnects between the political, humanitarian, and human rights functions of the external interventions there was a better chance for an effective peace strategy to emerge. This was both the strength and, in the end, the indictment of the Strategic Framework.

Contrary to what some revisionist interpretations have claimed,³ the objective of the Strategic Framework was to provide a stronger voice, or at least equal billing, to the humanitarian and human rights dimensions vis-à-vis the political action. It was not intended to result in the subordination of humanitarian and human rights concerns under the political banner.⁴ Some organizations, particularly at the Dunantist end of the humanitarian spectrum, which, like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), recognize themselves in the tradition of principled and operational independence that has its roots in the blood-soaked battlefield of Solferino, 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. My view is that quite the opposite happened, at least during the period between 1999 and early 2001: thanks to the Strategic Framework and the fact that the document itself contained a clear set of principles and objectives to which all segments of the United Nations had subscribed, the humanitarian voice had a better chance of being heard. This was of course facilitated by the fact that no major powers 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 stalled and mostly reduced to “talks about talks” with no substantive discussions among the belligerents.⁵

The Taliban were a common problem and this facilitated the search for common solutions in the aid community. There was a strong articulation of the humanitarian concerns, sometimes all the way up to the Security Council when, for example, the issue of sanctions was discussed, and in negotiations on humanitarian space with the Taliban. 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 better access to the political levels.

The donors also supported the process—sometimes for very partisan reasons. By and large, donors refused to dip into their development pockets: everything had to have a humanitarian label for fear of being seen as providing capacity-building support to the Taliban. This, however, resulted in the expansion of the humanitarian agenda to encompass a range of activities that in other least developed countries would have been called development efforts.

Of course, Taliban Afghanistan was a highly unusual place. While the UN humanitarian agencies struggled to gain access to an increasingly vulnerable population suffering from the combined effects of conflict,

³ Mark Duffield, Patricia Gossman, and Nicholas Leader, “Review of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan,” Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Islamabad, 2001; available at www.areu.org.af/publications/strategic%20framework/strategic_framework.pdf.

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the Strategic Framework, see Donini, “Principles, Politics, and Pragmatism,” pp. 126–30, and the bibliographical references provided therein.

⁵ William Maley, “The UN in Afghanistan: ‘Doing Its Best’ or ‘Failure of a Mission,’” in William Maley, ed., *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan Under the Taliban* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

discrimination, and the worst drought in living memory, their relationship with the Taliban deteriorated. On the humanitarian side, more progress was made on operational issues, such as negotiating access to internally displaced and internally stuck people in need, than on matters of principle, such as the Taliban's discrimination against women and girls, and other human rights abuses. The Taliban were, and felt, increasingly ostracized by the international community and Afghanistan transitioned from failed to rogue state, dashing any hopes of a peace agreement. In the end there was little integration between the humanitarian and the human rights pillars of the Strategic Framework, on the one side, and the UN political pillar on the other. The main integration was within the assistance community, which was broadly united under the objectives of the Strategic Framework. Much effort was devoted to developing common programming both in specific functional sectors and geographical areas. The successful coordination of emergency activities—for the victims of conflict, displacement, and drought—was a good example of this. It is true that the Strategic Framework was based on the assumption that assistance activities would “advance the logic of peace.” Aid-induced pacification, however, was more virtual than real.

PRINCIPLES UNDER STRESS

After September 11, 2001, the situation changed utterly. Whatever coherence the Strategic Framework may have brought to the overall humanitarian and human rights efforts in Afghanistan was shattered by the political hurricane that followed. Principles were swept under the kilim. Humanitarian action lost its prominence and human rights concerns were wiped off the UN agenda.

First, the nature of the crisis was radically changed by the U.S.-led intervention. It resulted in a process of taking sides in the conflict by the United Nations and the assistance community, to an extent that was not immediately apparent to aid workers but was to the “spoilers” and “losers”—the remnants of the Taliban and other groups bent on weakening the newly legitimized Karzai government. Humanitarian actors 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 which a dialogue needed to be maintained. This in turn broke the social contract of acceptability that normally allows humanitarian agencies to operate in volatile environments. Second, the Bonn peace agreement was a deal among victors, supported by the international community, rather than a comprehensive settlement among all parties. It gave legitimacy to one particular group or, rather, to a disparate coalition of groups put together by the U.S.-led coalition. This one-sidedness came back to haunt. It was made worse by the warlords who returned armed and bankrolled courtesy of the United States' ill-informed largesse. They were remembered and feared for their past abuses and the hopes of the population for an end to the cycles of impunity were dashed.

Third, principles were compromised even before the Bonn peace agreement was signed: in an unprecedented step, in October 2001, all of Afghanistan's neighbors closed their borders to asylum seekers fleeing the intervention; neither the coalition

countries nor any other donor country thought it fit to protest this violation of international refugee law. Moreover, for the first time UNICEF did not call for a cease-fire during the national immunization days, presumably for fear of antagonizing the coalition; and the intervening coalition itself was responsible for blurring the lines between military and humanitarian action with its food drops, the dispersion of cluster bombs of the same color as the food packets, and, later, with the deployment of Special Forces bearing arms but dressed in civilian clothes who were involved in assistance and “hearts-and-minds” operations.

Fourth, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was established as the most integrated UN mission to date. Its operating system revolved around the twin mantras of “support the government” and “nothing must derail the peace process.” In other words, politics, in the sense of a particular agenda—in this instance to support the Karzai government—ruled.

These features of UNAMA had a number of consequences. Because of the lack of decisiveness in the UN assistance pillar, into which the previous humanitarian assistance coordination structure had been folded, and the Klondike-style rush of aid agencies attracted by the sudden availability of funds, coordination 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. At the same time, the UN humanitarian and human rights efforts that had been a driving force—and the vehicle for coordination—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 human rights concerns. 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 document them or take action.⁶ There has been little or no effort to this date to rein in the warlords (there has been some disarmament but no attempt to loosen their hold on the populations they control) and, of course, no interest in pursuing accountability for past crimes. Finally, there was a premature shift to government support mode while key issues concerning the legitimacy and remit of the Kabul government, whose authority extended little beyond the city limits of the “Kabul bubble,” were unresolved.

More fundamentally, two key issues of principle deserve to be highlighted in their own right and also because they put the viability of the peace process into question. First, there was a lack of analysis of the reality of the situation on the ground. The situation was defined by the Karzai government and the United Nations as

⁶ Paradoxically, members of Karzai’s interim administration were more open to addressing human rights issues but felt they could not do much without the support of the international community. On the human rights situation after the Bonn agreement, see Norah Niland, “Justice Postponed: The Marginalization of Human Rights in Afghanistan,” in Donini, Niland, and Wermester, eds., *Nation-Building Unraveled?*, pp. 61–83.

postconflict to justify putting the government in the driver's seat. But it was far from clear that the conflict was over. Shifting gears to a development mode diverted attention away from the continuing dire humanitarian situation of millions of Afghans still affected by drought, displacement, and grinding poverty, while it was far from clear that the government, justifiably concerned with showing that it was in charge of the reconstruction process, was willing or able to devote an adequate priority to addressing humanitarian needs. Moreover, it wasn't clear that if the government was in charge it would allow humanitarian agencies to work according to established humanitarian principles. Now, large swathes of the country are off-limits because of the security risks to aid workers and programs, and in those areas the humanitarian needs are likely to increase because of the inability of the assistance community to address them.

Second, as is now painfully obvious, as in Iraq, the humanitarian community in Afghanistan is perceived by groups of insurgents and their supporters as having taken sides in the "western conspiracy" against Islam in general. In particular, it is seen as providing a prop for the Kabul administration, whose legitimacy is questioned and whose writ outside the capital city remains weak. The very real dangers faced by humanitarian workers are reinforced by the essentially Northern nature—in terms of funding, nationality of staff, values, and behavior—of the humanitarian enterprise. In both countries, the acceptability of humanitarian assistance, which is the basis of its protection, is now in doubt. Humanitarian organizations' emblems no longer protect and humanitarians are no longer able to be in touch with and talk to those who deny them their space.

THE FUTURE OF HUMANITARIANISM?

All of the above is not necessarily the fault of the United Nations. Much more powerful forces are at play. Afghanistan is a crucial field in the global "war on terror"; it has become a political laboratory for processes that are now happening on a larger scale in Iraq. Nevertheless, the question needs to be raised: If it is true that humanitarian action in Afghanistan was subsumed under a political agenda, did the process of integration of the humanitarian and assistance activities of the United Nations within UNAMA result in the compromising of humanitarianism and in the shrinking of humanitarian space? Was an alternative possible? Having transferred the humanitarian baton to the government, if the situation deteriorates further and humanitarian needs suddenly grow, how well placed is the aid community to perform its traditional functions in such a fraught environment?

The intervention in Afghanistan provides the first post-September 11 example of "world ordering." Coming after the intervention in Kosovo and before the war in Iraq, it provided for the initially optimistic experimentation with some of the recommendations of the 2000 Brahimi report. Politically, the jury is still out on whether this was an effective approach. From a humanitarian and human rights perspective, however, the consequences of some of the trade-offs made are starting to come into focus. Short-term gain at the cost of not addressing the issues of warlordism and human rights abuses may well lead to long-term pain—a resurgent Taliban, continuing insecurity, and a very uncertain future for the people of Afghanistan and the capacity of humanitarian organizations to respond in case of a new crisis.

Afghanistan, as Iraq, raises wider issues. Since the end of the Second World War the humanitarian enterprise has grown in fits and starts—by molecular accretion rather than as part of an overarching, rational design. This process of patching up may have reached its structural limits: the ongoing movement of tectonic plates triggered by the events of September 11 and the “war on terror” may well increasingly force humanitarianism into functions for which it was not intended. The substantive subordination of humanitarian action to political strategies linked to the global “war on terror” and the use of aid as a tool for the foreign policy objectives of the remaining superpower and its allies does not bode well for principled humanitarianism. Nor do the linkages between humanitarian action and the wider processes of economic, social, and cultural globalization. If humanitarian action is evermore “of the global North” and seen as such not only by violent and militant groups but by wide sectors of public opinion in the “Third World,” its claim to universality—one of the cardinal principles of the human-

itarian tradition—will become increasingly tenuous.

Humanitarians have cause to be concerned. A recent mapping of the implications of Iraq and other crises for the future of humanitarian action has shown how deep is the malaise in the aid community.⁷ Will humanitarianism ultimately go the way of subordination and integration into political designs or will it be able to rebound, perhaps with a more focused agenda centered around fundamental principles? The question remains open for now, but change is likely in the air. Humanitarian agencies can form a powerful constituency able to influence the public, the media, parliaments, and even the powers that be. If there is to be a redress of humanitarianism, perhaps it is time for this collective voice to be heard.

⁷ “The Future of Humanitarian Action: Implications of Iraq and Other Recent Crises,” Report of an International Mapping Exercise, Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, January 2004; available at famine.tufts.edu/pdf/Humanitarian.mapping.final.report.jan14.pdf.