



Concept

Protecting civilians in conflict: working with partner militaries

Autumn 2017

Wiston House, West Sussex

Context

Over the past decade some militaries have strengthened their commitments to protect civilians in conflict zones and to avoid civilian casualties from their own operations. This has stemmed from their practical experience and the recognition that harm done to civilians in conflict may not only constitute potential violations of international humanitarian law but can also undermine the realisation of strategic objectives. The example of Afghanistan strongly illustrates how the achievement of strategic aims depends on measures to mitigate civilian harm, and that these measures can be implemented without otherwise hampering operational effectiveness. Western militaries have taken away significant lessons from operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, while agreement on a NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians at the Warsaw Summit in July 2016 represents an important step forward in efforts to embed these lessons in professional military education, doctrine, and training.

Steps have been taken to alter operational practice by strengthening rules of engagement and improving training and awareness. However, significant barriers to effective civilian protection still exist, both in terms of Western military practice and particularly in working with partner country militaries on safeguarding civilians from unintended harm as well as from the predatory activities of other armed actors. As operations increasingly depend on the efforts of partner forces, the risk of civilian harm by those forces can also threaten the achievement of their own and shared political goals. The extensive training and capacity building activities undertaken by NATO, EU and their member states with partner militaries present an opportunity to work together in support of more effective approaches to training partners in civilian protection.

This event will bring together military professionals, civilian defence and diplomatic officials, and NGOs from NATO, EU and member states along with counterparts in partner countries to discuss effective policy and operational approaches for the protection of civilians in conflict.

Key policy questions

Understanding civilian harm:

- What does a coherent integrated approach to the protection of civilians look like? What policy, doctrine, practical expertise is necessary to achieve this?
- How important is the role of political leadership in establishing this coherent, integrated approach to the protection of civilians? What methods are most effective for raising the profile of this issue with political leaders?
- What is our understanding of the threats and vulnerabilities facing civilian populations? How can Western and partner militaries better understand the threat

- to civilians posed by other armed actors within complex conflict environments?
- What are the common challenges facing NATO/EU/Member State as well as partner forces in designing and implementing initiatives to limit harm to civilians?
 - Which issues deserve particular attention? Do policies that focus on gender and vulnerable populations need to be prioritised?
 - How deeply has protection of civilians been institutionalised in the doctrine of countries that engage in security assistance activities? How well do most military personnel know and understand the technical aspects and the lessons learned about civilian harm mitigation from past operations?

Integration of civilian protection into training, advisory and capacity building missions:

- How should states who undertake military assistance programs assess institutional capacity and risk related to civilian protection?
- What are the key principles and guidelines underpinning effective integration of civilian protection in military assistance missions and wider security sector capacity building programmes? What are the success stories?
- How can experiences and best practice be shared with partner forces? How readily can lessons that Western forces have learned in diverse theatres of operations be transferred to militaries with less advanced capabilities?
- What are the most pressing gaps that need to be filled in existing programs?
- How can training and capacity building be tailored to best address the needs of individual partner countries?
- What structures and behaviours need to be in place to progress efforts to strengthen civilian protection before, during and after conflicts?
- How can Western militaries most effectively work with host country counterparts to ensure that measures are embedded in the long term through published doctrine, regulations and other measures?
- What needs to be done to establish effective coordination between different donor militaries and other interested parties?
- How does implementation differ between missions involving embedded advisors going out on operations with partner militaries and those limited to training?
- How can civilian protection be enhanced in advance of or in the course of military sales programs?

Goal and objectives

By bringing NATO, EU and member states together with partner militaries, policy officials and NGOs this two day/ night event seeks to:

- Come to a common understanding of the elements of doctrine and practice for the protection of civilians;
- Review case studies and share lessons learnt in recent operations on strategies for civilian protection;
- Examine the common challenges posed to limiting civilian harm in conflict affected states, and at various stages of conflict;
- Look at the role that training and capacity building programmes can and should play in improving measures to protect civilians;
- Identify the steps towards effective civil-military partnership to protect civilians; and

- Establish the modalities of how NATO and EU members can work effectively with partner forces on the protection of civilians.

Intended outcomes

- Strategic recommendations, and practical approaches, to the prevention of civilian harm, in particular through the provision of security assistance. Generate a report summarising key takeaways and conclusions to be widely shared beyond the participants.
- Secure commitments to action points from all participants and build a strong network to enhance future collaboration. This network could include a specific, sustained follow up structure to the conference such as a study group or taskforce.

Format and participation

Wilton Park will host a conference over 48 hours/two nights for approximately 50 participants to debate and share perspectives on the issues outlined above in a neutral setting. The meeting will bring together high-level military and defence policy officials from NATO, EU and partner countries from South Asia (Pakistan, Afghanistan), the Middle East/North Africa (MENA), and sub-Saharan Africa. Experts from outside government and non-governmental/civil society organisations who work on protection of civilians will also be invited to take part.

The meeting will consist of a mix of plenary and breakout group sessions. The role of the breakout groups is to provide a smaller and more focused forum to consider practical approaches and formulate concrete policy options on the conference's core issues. They are thus designed to produce the key part of the overall output from the conference. The structure of the conference programme is meant to use the plenary sessions to generate additional information and insights for the work of the breakout groups.

Enquiries about the programme and general enquiries to:

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