Politicisation of humanitarian work?

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Aristotelian philosophy attests that an issue is politicised when it becomes an affair of state. Military action is a part of political action. Humanitarian action or support of humanitarian action in important donor countries is also an affair of state. Though it is too narrow today to consider "politics" as being purely state-centred, it is this Aristotelian definition that I use here.

Among humanitarians, the term "politicisation" has predominantly negative connotations – understandable to the extent it suggests a manipulation of humanitarian work for political ends. However, it can also be considered positively. The fact that humanitarian concerns have made it onto the political agenda of states and international organisations is no bad thing. In fact, this has long been the aim of a large number of humanitarian entities. To be "instrumentalised" may be more of a challenge for humanitarian work than to be "politicised" for "instrumentalisation" is a particularly crude form of politicisation.

Analysing politicisation

Traditionally, humanitarian work becomes politicised when it is supported for reasons other than simply to help those in need: to win hearts and minds, in pursuit of military, security and political goals or to project a benevolent image. Humanitarian work can also become politicised when states consider it their sovereign right to control all activities within their borders during and after a humanitarian crisis. This recent trend is set to continue. By doing so, states do not necessarily aim to manipulate humanitarian activities for their own ends, but there is a real risk of undermining the core humanitarian principle of impartiality: those supporting the political forces in power or those of particular relevance for the next local or national elections may have a better chance of receiving protection and aid. History has shown that this is a risk even when it is a non-state actor insisting on controlling humanitarian work. Southern Sudan is a well-known example from the 1990s.

Providing and supporting humanitarian aid is on the political agendas of many governments, with no other pretext other than to protect and help those in need. This is certainly true in the case of emergency humanitarian assistance. Support for humanitarian organisations, however, is not always motivated by humanitarian reasons alone. There may be internal political pressure to respond to a humanitarian crisis. Contributing to humanitarian work may be the only form of involvement that a government feels it can permit itself. It may be seen as an opportunity to broaden the scope of an unpopular foreign policy. The motivation may even be to gain a different perspective on a particularly long-standing or complex issue.

There is increasing interest in "result-based management" which focuses on input, output and outcome. In certain instances, politicians and donors alike seem to place as much importance on declarations of intent as on the actual work carried out. This can be an indicator that action is not the only thing that matters with humanitarian organisations. From the perspective of a crisis victim, the difference between intention and action is obviously huge. However, from a political perspective, it is not always the case. It may be enough simply to announce that something will be done and that the various political actors are part of the plan. Unfortunately, there is often a huge gap between the amount of money pledged at donor conferences and what is eventually given.

Humanitarian agencies can foster politicisation

The politicisation of humanitarian action is often represented as a process whose victims are humanitarian organisations. The extent to which humanitarian organisations make themselves vulnerable to politicisation or outright instrumentalisation is determined largely by their own attitudes and conduct. By insisting on maintaining a presence at almost any cost, humanitarian organisations can exacerbate politicisation of humanitarian action. They may do this in a number of ways: by agreeing not to make their own assessments of needs or monitor the distribution of goods, or by accepting armed escorts provided by a party to a conflict. To yield on matters of principle is, perhaps, to invite politicisation.

The growing competition between humanitarian organisations for money and visibility encourages politicisation. Concessions on principles will be made for the sake of being present. One of the more damaging political consequences of this competition is that humanitarians give away the limited weight they carry to influence host government policies. If all humanitarian organisations in a specific context were to refuse to compromise on certain basic principles they could have a chance, perhaps, of changing the attitude of an apparently intransigent government. Competition among humanitarian organisations rules this out. If a principled organisation were to leave the country or be thrown out, it will be speedily replaced by a so-called more pragmatic one. In such circumstances, humanitarian actors are in no position to make demands –for access, independent assessments or anything else.

I am not suggesting that there is one ideal way of doing humanitarian work: there are, and there must be, different ways. Nor am I complaining about intensifying competition in the field of humanitarian action – even though some rules for regulating it would do no harm – or about the emergence of a wide range of new actors. I see positive sides to this development. What is not possible, however, is to have it all. Choices and trade-offs have to be made.

There may be circumstances in which a humanitarian organisation concludes that participation in an integrated mission is the best available choice, for reasons beyond funding and security. There may even be circumstances in which an integrated mission, pursuing political, security, development and humanitarian goals, seems the most promising or the least desperate approach. I would never criticise a humanitarian actor who chooses this path. It is even possible that, in the short run, such a mission may get better access to those in need than genuine independent humanitarian action might.

However, the consequences of this choice should not be disregarded or underestimated: the humanitarian component of such a mission will not be perceived by all parties to a conflict as being independent and neutral. An integrated mission may even become a party to a conflict. One can think of contexts in which this might be a price worth paying. It must, however, be kept in mind that, in terms of perception, these actions take place within a global context. An organisation's policy in one part of the world will become known elsewhere too.

To be part of an integrated mission, to be protected by armed escorts, to assist in the implementation of government policies may well improve access and security in one context for a limited time. However, perceptions travel rapidly and it is likely that access and security will suffer elsewhere.

Independent and neutral action is not the only way to do humanitarian work. It is, moreover, not an option available to some humanitarian organisations that do precious work, especially as far as independence is concerned. UN humanitarian agencies are part of a wider system that is also political. This does not prevent them from providing impartial humanitarian assistance. Impartiality in providing assistance and trying to protect those in need of protection is the essential principle of humanitarian action. Impartial humanitarian action that is undertaken without being independent, and without resisting the temptation to take sides politically between parties to a conflict, is a conceptual possibility. However, the scope of such action will be seriously limited owing to limited access and greater security risks.

Independence and neutrality are tools to get the best possible access to those in need of assistance and protection; they have proven their effectiveness throughout the world. "Independence" means having complete autonomy in making decisions that are based solely on humanitarian needs on the ground. "Neutrality" implies not taking political sides in an armed conflict. The character of this concept must be particularly emphasised: it serves to secure the best access possible to protect and assist.

In certain kinds of organised armed violence, independence and neutrality are not assets. Organised armed criminal groups, for instance, are impervious to the virtues of independence and neutrality, partly because they are indifferent to the plight of those in urgent need of protection and assistance. In 2009, the ICRC found in Darfur and Chad that independence and neutrality offer no particular protection from hostage taking in contexts of banditry.

But this is far from being the case in much of the world. Independent and neutral humanitarian action remains an asset in terms of access and security, an asset to the extent it is credible and therefore predictable. It implies a clear rejection of all attempts at politicisation, but it does not imply refusal to cooperate and coordinate with other actors.

Protection

Assistance and protection activities are closely linked in many contexts, with the former often serving to open the door to the latter. It is difficult to imagine getting permission for certain protection activities without a credible, well-tested reputation for independence and neutrality. For various activities – especially visits to places of detention and monitoring of international humanitarian law – neutrality probably matters even more than independence. The extent to which the two can be separated remains a matter of doubt: is it possible to remain neutral at all times without also being independent?

The issue of protection deserves attention because there are important humanitarian concerns that can be tackled only by political–military, not humanitarian, actors. The first thing is to be clear about the concept of protection: physical protection (direct or by securing the environment), rights–based protection or protection through political process. Other distinctions may be made. I shall focus on the first two concepts.

Humanitarians can provide no physical protection to people in need of such protection and should never give the impression they can. Humanitarian actors should make careful use of the idea of "protection" for the sake of their credibility and in the interest of those in need of physical protection. This recommendation seems particularly pertinent at a time when a number of humanitarian agencies are passing themselves off as protection agencies, a good selling point to attract funds at present. Humanitarian organisations can provide protection in one form: promoting respect for legal provisions aimed at protecting those affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, organised armed violence in particular. Mobilisation of states on the basis of Common Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions is one of the important means by which to try to achieve this goal. Protection from physical violence by focused specific actions or by establishing a protective environment is a task for military / security actors.

Understanding humanitarian space

Is there a space that is exclusively "humanitarian", neither political nor politicised? It may be difficult to make a convincing case that such a thing exists. Even so, it is imperative to ensure that humanitarian action based exclusively on humanitarian principles remains possible. The responsibility for this rests primarily with humanitarian actors and with those involved in armed conflict. From the perspective of victims, actions are important, not actors.

This obvious comment seems especially important at a time when distinguishing between declarations of intent and actions in the field is becoming increasingly difficult. Discussions about "humanitarian space" tend to take the wrong direction. Curiously, one simple truth is often disregarded: "humanitarian space" must be earned not least by delivering on promises. At present, the most popular argument is that confusion between humanitarian action by the military and humanitarian action by humanitarians poses the most significant threat to "humanitarian space". This confusion – promoted by integrated missions with their various components or by the sight of humanitarian actors receiving protection from armed escorts – can indeed endanger "humanitarian space" by spreading doubts about the independence and neutrality of humanitarian actors. It makes no sense to have humanitarian actions undertaken by actors guided by a political security agenda when there are humanitarian actors ready and able to meet the humanitarian challenges.

This confusion is particularly dangerous in armed conflicts. It is far less of a problem in situations of natural disasters even if, as Haiti has shown, military presence once the most urgent phase is over can be perceived with some scepticism. The evident conclusion from all this is: if humanitarians can do the job, let them do the job without adding to the risks they already have to overcome.

It may well be the case that states no longer agree that emergency humanitarian assistance should be provided unconditionally in all situations. Increasingly, humanitarian assistance (not necessarily emergency action) is regarded by states as part of a wider security agenda, and future decisions about supporting humanitarian actors may hinge on the contribution that humanitarian action is thought to be making to security. But I find it difficult to imagine this becoming a widely prevalent consideration in relation to emergency humanitarian action.

Drivers of military engagement in humanitarian action

It is no longer strange to remind ourselves that military forces are created to pursue military/security goals and humanitarian organisations to pursue humanitarian goals. One must be forgiven for sometimes getting the impression the military and their masters would prefer to have humanitarian tasks as their main goal. This would, in many cases, facilitate political acceptance for sending troops abroad. This may also be the reason why some even have difficulty accepting that the military only have a humanitarian role to play as a "last resort".

This underlying wish may be one of the reasons why the so-called civilian–military debate attracts a degree of attention difficult to justify by the situation on the ground. The ICRC, as a consequence of its primary involvement in armed conflicts, has had a long-standing and intense dialogue and cooperation with the military. Our experience is that the military perfectly understand and accept the different roles. Confusion rather tends to be created by political rhetoric or ambiguous mandates for missions with a military component, or crisis managers' lack of knowledge of the basic requirements for effective and efficient humanitarian action t. Political rhetoric, guided by the wish to leave national or organisational humanitarian footprints, can complicate the humanitarian debate. Dogmatic attitudes on the side of humanitarian organisations, not recognising the obvious, can have a similar effect. There are large-scale natural disasters where there is no alternative to military intervention and there are even contexts of armed conflicts where humanitarians have no access, and it is far better that the military intervenes instead of people dying. This latter situation is however rare.

Humanitarian action by the foreign military has been an issue for years. What sometimes gets lost is the sense of proportion. Humanitarian action by foreign military remains modest compared to the humanitarian activities of humanitarian organisations. Let us take the case of the 2010 floods in Pakistan: the Pakistani army has been by far the most important actor. The military of third countries or regional military organisations have played no significant role. The delivery of some logistical means to the Pakistani army on a bilateral level seems to have been the main contribution.

It is useful to make a distinction between the humanitarian dimension of military action and humanitarian action by the military. Military action with the aim of creating a space of security to make it possible for humanitarian organisations to develop their activities can have an important humanitarian dimension without too much of a risk of confusion between the two actors. The EUFOR Chad/CAR mission, completed in March 2009, comes to mind as an example. Direct humanitarian action by the military and contribution of military assets to humanitarian agencies or to the authorities affected by a humanitarian disaster are usefully distinguished from security projection as mentioned before.

The most delicate and extreme cases of politicisation of humanitarian work are the cases where humanitarian assistance operations are explicitly presented as serving the pursuit of military and security goals. Statements in this sense have been made in the past in particular related to Afghanistan. They do not however constitute a more general trend. There are even reasons to believe that those who wanted to provide humanitarian assistance in exchange for intelligence have learned that this was not the path to follow.

As far as military involvement in humanitarian assistance in general is concerned, the Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan are the most quoted case, even if most of them have very little or no time for humanitarian action and mandate does not even cover humanitarian activities explicitly:"Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) will assist the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to extend its authority, in order to facilitate the development of a stable and secure environment in the identified area of operation, and enable Security Sector Reform and reconstruction efforts" (ISAF PRT Handbook edition 4)[1]. The fact that the PRTs are quoted again and again may be an indicator that this concept of joint civil military units is not widespread.

The cases where both foreign troops and humanitarian organisations are involved in humanitarian activities as a consequence of man-made disasters with the risks of confusion are indeed the exception rather than the rule. The reason is simple: it is only in extreme cases that a state would want foreign military units to enter its territory in order to carry out humanitarian activities.

Why is it then that the issue attracts so much attention in the so-called humanitarian debate? It cannot be only because of the rather rare problems created on the ground. The reason probably has to do both with governments which, for internal political reasons, increasingly like to present military operations as humanitarian and with humanitarian organisations interested in keeping this issue high on the agenda.

The politicisation of humanitarian action can take other forms with less potential for harmful confusion with independent and neutral humanitarian action. It can find expression in earmarking policies largely determined by political considerations, as part of an overall security policy. It can also find expression in the way funds for humanitarian assistance are attributed to different ministries or in the way expenditures are qualified as humanitarian assistance. A sudden increase in humanitarian expenditure by a defence ministry or a spending decline by a development ministry would most certainly be a sign of politicisation. ICRC's experience in recent years has not followed such a pattern: the share of un-earmarked and loosely earmarked funds is in fact rising and the support by donors with a heavy political and security agenda remains generous.

Conclusion

The politicisation of humanitarian action is an issue of concern. But it is not a new issue and should not be dramatised; humanitarian organisations are not condemned to suffer its consequences. Before making judgements on the impact of the politicisation of humanitarian action, distinctions should be drawn between the various forms of politicisation and the environments in which they take place. A "humanitarian space" is not necessarily pure and a political space is not necessarily defiled.

The risk of politicisation of humanitarian work is increasing and taking forms. There is pressure in some states to ensure all activities reflect security policies. There are states tempted to leave a national humanitarian footprint. States hit by humanitarian disasters are increasingly determined to keep all humanitarian actors under control – a salutary reminder that politicisation is not simply a risk posed by the policies of donor states

There is some evidence that the extent to which politicisation or, worse, instrumentalisation of humanitarian action takes place also depends on the behaviour of humanitarian organisations. The less they stick to basic humanitarian principles, the easier their instrumentalisation becomes. Seen from the perspective of those in need of protection and urgent assistance, there is a bigger risk than the different shades of politicisation: the risk of confusion between declarations of intent and concrete action in the field. It is very much the humanitarians' responsibility to eliminate this risk by walking their talk or keeping silent in case they are, for whatever reason, prevented from walking. Instrumentalization for political purposes is a risk but it must not obscure other equally serious or bigger risks.

NB: This article was written in a personal capacity and views expressed here should not be interpreted as necessarily reflecting the policy of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

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[1] Available from: https://www.cimicweb.org/Documents/PRT%20CONFERENCE%202010/PRT%20Handbook%20Edition%204.pdf [Accessed 17 October 2010]