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"Armed and Humanitarian" by Bruce Falconer*

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July Roundtable: Introduction

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July Roundtable: Introduction

Abstract

An annotation of:

"Armed and Humanitarian" by Bruce Falconer. Mother Jones. May 19, 2008.

Keywords

Human rights, War on terror, Humanitarian aid, Non-governmental organizations, Military

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"Armed and Humanitarian" by Bruce Falconer. *Mother Jones*. May 19, 2008.

An annotation

As the "war on terror" continues to drive American foreign policy, those waging this "war" have broadened their understanding of what constitutes a security threat to include failed states, and those teetering on the brink of instability. Among the new security risks are states ravaged by natural disaster. And, with the U.S. defense establishment's concern with humanitarian aid as of late, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have traditionally provided relief are placed in a compromised position. With often divergent motives, there is increasing tension between the NGO and military sectors, and caught in the middle are destitute populations. One must question the political and social implications of cooperative missions between these "strange bedfellows."

"NGO officials are grateful for the US military response to disasters. But the struggle to be seen as independent players, unaffiliated with any government, is crucial to NGOs' ability to operate."

While it is essential to realize the resources that the military can contribute in disaster zones, humanitarian organizations must contend with the political baggage that accompanies this external assistance. When NGOs depend on their legitimacy and perceived altruism for access to communities in need, their fear is that the presence of military support jeopardizes that perception. However, since humanitarian aid workers operate with limited capabilities, working alongside the military allows for a collaborative effort that serves the need of vulnerable people and enables a more effective response. Considering what is at stake in humanitarian terms, what is gained and what is lost when aid workers stand side-by-side with military personnel?

"When the military undertakes what appears to be humanitarian or development work, decisions are being based on tactical considerations of whether this area has a strategic importance with regard to broader military activities. That is not humanitarian."

If security interests continue to be weighed against human rights priorities, what are the consequences for humanitarianism? To hand over the reins to the military would run contrary to the core principles of humanitarian relief work and sacrifice the higher moral ground. As well, the benefit garnered by Western NGOs, who contribute significantly to positive relations with the developing world, might also be lost. Failed states do indeed pose security threats; but, can these states be repaired without waging the political battle for "hearts and minds"?

These issues and others are considered in this month's Roundtable.