

Iraqis defend humanitarianism

by Greg Hansen

I have worked with Iraqi colleagues to interview beneficiaries and providers of assistance from all of Iraq's many religious-ethnic communities. We find firm evidence of commitment to the humanitarian ethos in Iraq but grave concerns over the modus operandi of many 'humanitarian' operators. There are few systematic efforts to bridge the ethos-practice gap.

Most of the Iraqis with whom we spoke expressed unequivocal solidarity with the goals and ideals of humanitarian work, sympathy with the efforts of 'good' humanitarian work and strong understanding of humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. There is widespread understanding of what principled humanitarian action is – and what it is not. We heard repeatedly that there are strong strains of Islamic teachings and Iraqi traditions in the Fundamental Principles and the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief.¹ Many of the Iraqis with whom we spoke equated specific humanitarian principles with Qu'ranic verses about 'good' charity.

Another reason why humanitarian principles are well understood in Iraq is because they are frequently seen in the breach and in ways that engender resentment. We heard a litany of examples of aid being provided in ways that illustrated instrumentalisation,

politicisation and militarisation of humanitarian activity by both local and international actors. It is now often virtually impossible for Iraqis (and sometimes for humanitarian professionals) to distinguish between the roles and activities of local and international actors, including military forces, political actors and other authorities, for-profit contractors, international NGOs, local NGOs and UN agencies. In some of our conversations it was clear that commercial contractors affiliated with the MNF had been mistaken for humanitarian NGOs. In many other interviews it was completely unclear what kind of agency or agencies were being discussed.

The prevailing acceptance of humanitarian ideals is frequently contrasted with the realities of aid and tempered by suspicions about the intentions and motives of agencies. Residents of areas afflicted by intense military activity spoke of being "insulted" by the appearance of aid agencies alongside "those who occupy us",

or of organisations motivated by a wish to "put a nice face on the occupation". Others reported how they had rejected any offers of assistance offered by armed forces in the aftermath of military action.

Assistance provided by local religious charities and mosques was often readily distinguished from assistance provided by other actors and, in many of our interviews, was described as vital. In contrast with nearly all other actors, mosques and religious offices are sometimes – but not always – able to provide assistance in relatively more open and visible ways. Local Islamic charities and mosques were identified in many of our conversations as the preferred option of first resort for those needing assistance or protection. However, we heard several examples of 'pressures' being exerted on local religious charities to conform more to the wishes and priorities of parties and militias.

Neutrality is not an abstract notion in Iraq. Iraqis are acutely ready to distinguish between aid providers that have taken sides and those that have not. Neutrality is regarded by many Iraqis and aid workers as an essential protection against targeted attack from combatants of all stripes. In most cases, those with whom we spoke did not ascribe impure motives to organisations or aid workers

simply because of their particular national origin. Rather, the affiliation of a person with the 'occupiers', the MNF, the government or, increasingly, with a particular sect, party or militia is intensely scrutinised.

Lack of adherence to humanitarian principles, and blurred distinctions between the range of actors and roles in Iraq, now have serious consequences for beneficiary communities and Iraqis involved in humanitarian efforts. Since 2004, the ability of aid workers to be seen to do principled work has been severely diminished by security threats and ensuing low profiles adopted by nearly all Iraqi and international humanitarian organisations.

Bunkerisation and embeddedness

The Green Zone and all other MNF and government facilities are increasingly inaccessible to all but a chosen few Iraqis, assuming their willingness to risk the dangers involved in being seen to enter. While some Iraqi staff of international organisations opt to take these risks on a daily basis, their ability to continue to do so is increasingly tenuous as the security situation deteriorates. For the international staff of donors, UN agencies and other organisations ensconced within these facilities, there are almost no possibilities for moving beyond their blast walls without heavy MNF or private security escort. As a result,

there are almost no opportunities for key decision makers in the mainline humanitarian apparatus to inform their decisions with first-hand knowledge of conditions in Iraq, and few opportunities to speak with Iraqis who reject entry into such facilities.

There are doubtful benefits to populations in need in Iraq when humanitarian organisations opt for a 'bunkerised' approach to security, or embed themselves with MNF forces. Some organisations that originally accepted protection from the MNF, or appear to have done so by visibly hardening their compounds or using private security contractors, have withdrawn from Iraq on the stated grounds of insecurity of personnel, or insufficient humanitarian impact weighed against high security costs.

There is no evidence that bunkerising or aggressive security postures have been either a guarantor of programme survival or a useful tool to gain access to people in need.

Wholesale reliance for security on the MNF or private western contractors implies or corroborates a commonality of purpose between some aid agencies and military forces. Many Iraqis find such coherence unacceptable. Likewise, there is little doubt among Iraqis as to the political allegiances and purposes of social welfare offices operated by, or under the armed protection of, various militias and parties. However, in many areas such offices are becoming welcome providers of life-saving assistance.

'Acceptance strategies' do not render humanitarian workers immune from targeted attack in Iraq but do contribute to greater adaptability and longevity of humanitarian programmes. Some Iraqi and international NGOs that have taken an independent course in their approach to security, relying relatively more heavily on relationships and acceptance of their work by communities, have also decided to cease operations. However, others have stayed to continue vital programmes. Flexible agencies that have invested considerable time and resources into understanding local (in addition to national) contexts and trends, building relationships and supportive networks, and nurturing

In Baghdad's Saddam City Hospital, a woman comforts her nephew who had to have both arms amputated following a bomb attack.



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staff professionalism, appear to have a comparative advantage in Iraq over less rooted agencies.

No substitute for presence

Aid workers in Iraq and Amman use the terms 'covert', 'surreptitious' and 'furtive' to describe the extremes to which low-profile humanitarian operations have been taken by international and Iraqi organisations in response to threats and attacks. The low-profile approach provides a greater measure of safety for humanitarian workers, and has arguably bought agencies more time and more access. However, the benefits have come at an immense cost to acceptance. Our research among Iraqis indicates that perceptions of the humanitarian enterprise are far more positive among those who report direct contact with local or international assistance or protection work than among those whose impressions are formed second-hand through

rumour and the media. Advocacy and media campaigns will not be sufficient to convince Iraqis of the humanitarian bona fides of aid agencies: they are looking for tangible results. Iraqis who have received assistance from local or international humanitarian organisations or have seen them at work generally feel more positively disposed toward the humanitarian community than those who have only heard about it.

Low-profile modalities increasingly hinder relations between staff and between agencies. Inter/intra-communal tensions are increasingly reflected within humanitarian organisations, even among staff of different backgrounds who have worked well together for years. Working relationships are under increasing strain as low-profile approaches dictate that staff work from their homes, with less frequent contact with colleagues.

There is an increasing tendency among international humanitarian

staff (as well as among donors and policy makers) to treat insecurity in Iraq as a nebulous, generalised, persistent and insurmountable challenge, rather than as a series of serious incidents, each of which can be analysed, placed into (often localised) context, and used as a spur to adaptation. For some agencies, inadequately nuanced understanding of the dynamics of insecurity has possibly become a rationalisation for reduced assertiveness, creativity and engagement. There has been a sharp decline since early 2004 in the number of international humanitarian workers in Amman with any depth of experience in the country: only a handful remains.

During US military offensives in Fallujah and Najaf in 2004, many Iraqis responded spontaneously to help people in need by gathering truck and carloads of food and other essential goods in their neighbourhoods for distribution through mosques in the stricken cities. Many Shi'a helped out in Fallujah, and many Sunni did the same in Najaf. During this period, international humanitarian NGOs held regular meetings in Baghdad to coordinate their responses and to trade information on needs, stocks and access. The meetings were well-attended, almost exclusively by international staff. One such meeting was attended by a well-educated and traditionally-clothed local Imam with a proven history of defusing tensions between communities and helping international agencies to access conflict-stricken areas. A Shi'a, he offered to facilitate access to Fallujah using contacts among local Sunni clergy, and had been invited to attend the meeting by an experienced international NGO he had worked with. Three international aid workers objected to his presence and he was asked to leave the meeting. Asked after the meeting why they objected, one of the aid workers said: "These are the terrorists that are attacking us."

Ruweished refugee camp in neutral territory between Iraq and Jordan.



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We heard a remarkably consistent perception that all assistance efforts – international and national – are corrupt. The wealth of riches showered on reconstruction and nation-building efforts since 2003

and the contrast with the immediate hardships of daily lives have left many Iraqis feeling disillusioned and angry. Some with whom we spoke mentioned hearing through the media about the billions of dollars that had poured into Iraq, then raised a litany of complaints about corrupt officials and contractors, inadequate and unreliable electricity supply, skyrocketing costs for cooking fuel, shoddy school reconstruction and a wide variety of (to them) esoteric projects that left nothing tangible in their wake.

Grossly inadequate humanitarian funding.

What a difference a few years makes. In late 2002, the UN issued a flash appeal for \$193 million to prepare for a humanitarian emergency that was thought to be imminent. A few months later, another flash appeal asked for \$2.2 billion for six months' worth of assistance. But now, organisations trying to save Iraqi lives often struggle to remain operational in an unsupportive donor climate. Donors have been slow to acknowledge and respond to the growing humanitarian emergency. For many of them, doing so would be an admission of failure of their investment of careless billions into their Iraq reconstruction and nation-building project. Ironically, they frequently question the operationality of humanitarian organisations – as if the cloistered Iraqi government or some opportunistic war profiteer had better access to communities in need and a better feel for conditions on the ground. Donors impose a shocking double standard, insisting on far greater accountability standards on spending for life-saving humanitarian action than for ill-conceived rebuilding schemes hatched in the hothouse of the Green Zone. Donor credibility is on the line, among Iraqis and globally.

An international aid worker colleague puts the current dilemma this way: "Donors repeatedly complain that the quality of information available about basic needs in Iraq is not good enough. And for that reason we do nothing? When traditional needs assessments are impossible due to insecurity and mobility

problems, how rigorous does the data need to be? How rigorous was it in April 2003? When, if ever, will the start button get pushed?"

Neither the International Reconstruction Facility for Iraq (IRFFI)² – the World Bank/UN-managed fund established in early 2004 – nor the International Compact for Iraq³ – the initiative launched by world leaders at the conference held in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el Sheikh in April 2007 – provides ready access to funds for emergency humanitarian response; they are also both prone to politicisation by international and Iraqi authorities. Our interviews with aid agency staff and with Iraqi communities suggest serious deficiencies in donor behaviour. Aid agency staff in the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, UN agencies, NCCI and international and national NGOs consistently raised shortages of accessible and flexible donor funding as a threat to current and planned humanitarian programmes.

Ahmed works for a humanitarian NGO. He tries to be invisible as he wends his way around car bombs and checkpoints to organise emergency assistance for the stricken and divided neighbourhoods of his beloved city. Even with a young family at home and excellent prospects abroad, Ahmed has decided to stay on in Baghdad, helping where he can to alleviate the suffering when the bombs go off, troops and insurgents open fire, or militias come calling in the night. "I am ready to go to Paradise," he says. For the most part, the people in Ahmed's neighbourhoods aren't internally displaced persons. Mostly they are internally stuck, fearful of leaving their homes to go to the market, clinic, pharmacy or school down the street. Ahmed works alone most of the time. In the current climate of pervasive mistrust and danger, the organisation that employs him has difficulty finding him an assistant. Such is the fear and loathing in Iraq that an aid worker's affiliations and motives are met with acute suspicion. And he works on a shoestring budget that limits his activity and inflicts a tyranny of small economies, increasing the likelihood that he will be killed.

There are quite a few Iraqis like Ahmed. His organisation is one of several, along with the Iraqi Red Crescent and International Committee of the Red Cross, that have adapted and re-adapted their *modus operandi* as security has worsened and as donor support has dwindled. They need to start feeling that the world is behind them. Some 88 Iraqi and international humanitarian and human rights workers were killed in conflict in Iraq between March 2003 and May 2007. The UN's newfound impetus toward a renewed framework for humanitarian action in Iraq provides a solid point of departure for dealing with the human consequences of Iraq's broken life-support systems. It is a remarkable step forward for an organisation that has been deeply chastened by its previous, fatally politicised attempts to assist and protect Iraqis. The challenge now facing the UN's humanitarian apparatus is to operationalise the Framework, without once again becoming a humanitarian fig-leaf for a UN political role dictated by the Security Council.

In the coming months and years, donors would be well-advised to bear in mind the essential role of real and perceived neutrality in Iraq, and the dangers of linking political and military goals to humanitarian action. The evidence shows that humanitarian action that falls short of the principled ideal in Iraq is prone to rejection.

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Hansen and a team of Iraqis conducted a study on perceptions of humanitarian action for the Humanitarian Agenda: 2015 project of the Feinstein International Center, Tufts University. 'Coming to terms with the humanitarian imperative in Iraq' is online at <http://fic.tufts.edu/?pid=32>. A full country study will shortly be available on the Feinstein International Centre website (www.fic.tufts.edu)

1. www.icrc.org/web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/57JMNB

2. www.irffi.org

3. www.iraqcompact.org