



Aid Worker Security Report 2017

**Behind the attacks:
A look at the perpetrators of
violence against aid workers**

Humanitarian Outcomes

Summary of key findings

- ▶ In 2016, 158 major attacks against aid operations occurred, in which 101 aid workers were killed, 98 wounded and 89 kidnapped. The number of attacks and victims increased only slightly from 2015.
- ▶ For the second consecutive year, South Sudan was the most violent context for aid workers, reflecting the fracturing conflict and an atmosphere of impunity for armed actors.
- ▶ Most aid worker attacks are perpetrated by 'national-level' non-state armed groups (NSAGs) seeking control of the state. Targeting aid operations serves their effort to dominate populations and territories and delegitimise the government in power.
- ▶ Global-level NSAGs, such as the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, are responsible for smaller numbers of attacks but higher fatality rates. They are more lethal in their means and often specifically target international aid workers.
- ▶ However, when measured by body count alone, states are responsible for the highest number of aid worker fatalities. In 2015 and 2016, 54 aid workers were killed by state actors. This was mainly the result of airstrikes by Russia and the US in Syria and Afghanistan and an upsurge in state-sponsored violence in South Sudan.
- ▶ NSAGs view aid organisations as potential threats to their authority as well as useful proxy targets. When attempting to govern territory and provide some measure of public services, NSAGs have incentives to grant aid organisations secure access, but this often requires the aid groups to accept conditions that compromise humanitarian principles.
- ▶ Different types of NSAGs (and different ranks within them) will pose different levels of threat to aid organisations. However, negotiations are almost always possible if humanitarians are willing and equipped to engage with these actors and understand their perceptions, incentives and red lines.

Introduction

Table 1: Major attacks on aid workers: Summary statistics, 2007–2016

| | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
|--|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Number of Incidents | 123 | 165 | 155 | 130 | 152 | 170 | 265 | 190 | 148 | 158 |
| Total aid worker victims | 220 | 278 | 296 | 254 | 309 | 277 | 475 | 329 | 287 | 288 |
| Total killed | 88 | 128 | 109 | 72 | 86 | 70 | 156 | 121 | 109 | 101 |
| Total injured | 87 | 91 | 94 | 84 | 126 | 115 | 178 | 88 | 110 | 98 |
| Total kidnapped | 45 | 59 | 93 | 98 | 97 | 92 | 141 | 120 | 68 | 89 |
| International victims | 34 | 51 | 75 | 46 | 29 | 49 | 58 | 32 | 28 | 43 |
| National victims | 186 | 227 | 221 | 208 | 280 | 228 | 417 | 297 | 259 | 245 |
| UN staff | 39 | 65 | 102 | 44 | 91 | 58 | 110 | 67 | 44 | 71 |
| International NGO staff | 132 | 157 | 129 | 148 | 141 | 86 | 137 | 148 | 176 | 156 |
| National NGO and Red Cross/Crescent Society staff | 35 | 46 | 55 | 47 | 77 | 107 | 206 | 98 | 61 | 46 |
| ICRC staff | 4 | 5 | 9 | 10 | 5 | 3 | 14 | 16 | 3 | 12 |
| IFRC staff | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Other | 10 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 8 | 0 | 3 | 2 |

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The Aid Worker Security Report series provides the latest statistics on major attacks on humanitarian aid workers from the [Aid Worker Security Database \(AWSD\)](#) and uses this evidence base for a deeper exploration of a single thematic topic in humanitarian operational security. Past editions have addressed the topics of [kidnapping](#), [road security](#), and the role of [host states](#), among others.

Whereas these previous reports centred around aid organisations and their operational environment, this one focuses on the perpetrators of violence, asking the question of which groups are responsible for the violence affecting aid workers and why. We strove to present the most empirical analysis possible of perpetrators and their intentionality based on verified data collected in the AWSD from 2011 to 2016. This included systematically reassessing the AWSD’s information related to motives, and re-coding where necessary.

In addition to mining quantitative data from the AWSD, the analysis draws from first-person interviews with members of armed groups responsible for attacks against aid workers: Al Shabaab in Somalia, and the Taliban and Haqqani Network, both part of the ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’. Through local research partners¹ the study conducted structured interviews with 40 individuals at various ranks in the three groups about their experience with and perceptions of aid organisations and what they are trying to accomplish. The research also sought to include the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda viewpoints through a review of their public statements and English-language publications such as *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah* and *Inspire*. By examining the perceptions and stated interests of the groups that have targeted humanitarians, this research seeks a better understanding of the nature of the threat. It complements other research on this subject, including, Geneva Call’s ‘In Their Words: Perceptions of Armed

¹ In Afghanistan we partnered with [The Liaison Office \(TLO\)](#) and in Somalia with Hikmah Consulting.

Non-State Actors on Humanitarian Action’ (Jackson, 2016) which looked at 19 non-state armed actors across 11 countries (most which were less extremist than those this study focuses on) and the earlier work by the same author, Ashley Jackson, ‘Talking to the Other Side’ (2012).

This topic presents unique research challenges and requires a few caveats at the outset. First, in most recorded attacks, the identity of the perpetrator(s) is unconfirmed or unknown. This analysis focuses on the 258 incidents (24 per cent of those recorded between 2011 and 2016) in which it is known that an organised group was responsible. We recognise that the small sample size limits the strength of quantitative analysis. However, even though the ‘unknown’ category is large, we can safely say that most of these unidentified perpetrators are neither state actors (because military operations of state actors are relatively easy to identify) nor members of global NSAGs (such as IS and Al Qaeda, who have incentive to claim credit and thus self-identify most of the time). In other words, most perpetrators in the ‘unknown’ category are likely to be national- or sub-national-level militia, un-affiliated individuals or small criminal groups. Moreover, the results from the subset accord with qualitative findings from interview evidence and document review, increasing our confidence in the validity of the sample.

1

Aid worker attacks: Latest verified statistics

1.1 Global totals

The number of aid worker victims in 2016 (288) remained steady from the previous year (287). The number of separate attacks in 2016 showed a small rise from 2015 from 148 to 158 (Figure 1).

1.2 Countries and means of violence

For the second year in a row, South Sudan had the highest number of attacks on aid workers, followed by Afghanistan, Syria,

D. R. Congo, Somalia and Yemen. In addition, South Sudan’s violence claimed the most victims and most aid worker deaths. Although Syria had fewer incidents recorded than either South Sudan or Afghanistan, attacks there were more lethal, i.e., resulting in more aid workers killed per incident. This is because the prevalent forms of attack differ by country. In Afghanistan, kidnapping remains the principal form of violence affecting aid workers, and these incidents seldom have fatal outcomes. South Sudan incidents consisted mostly of small arms (shooting) and unarmed attacks. In Syria, however, aerial bombardment was the most common means of violence affecting aid workers. This highly lethal form of attack has occurred in Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen and it poses a serious challenge for operational security for aid workers in that it is indiscriminate and difficult to predict. Humanitarian organisations attempt to mitigate the threat mainly through ‘deconfliction’, i.e. by informing warring parties of their

Figure 1: Major security incidents, 2006-2016

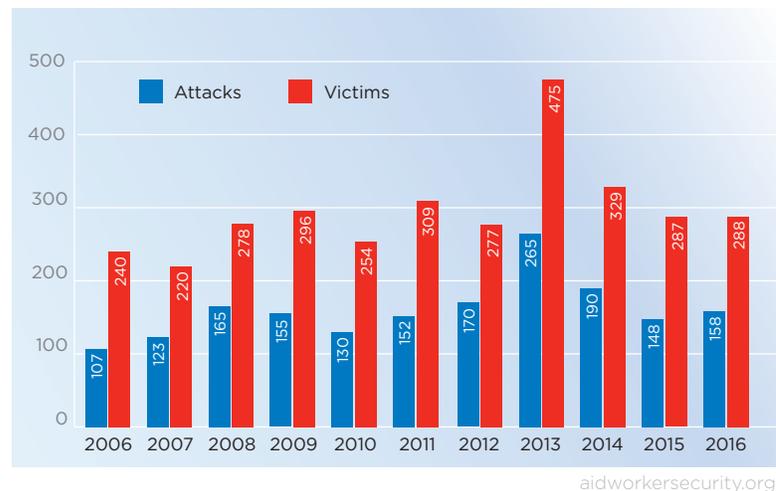
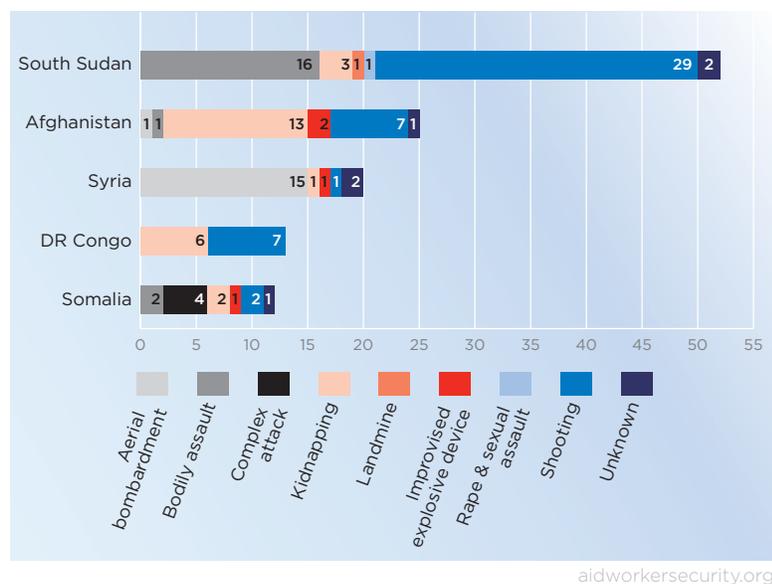


Figure 2: Highest incident countries in 2016 with types of attacks



whereabouts and notifying them if convoys are traveling in areas subject to airstrikes. Nevertheless, the past three years have seen an unprecedented number of attacks on medical facilities and convoys in Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen.

1.3 Incidents by organisation and staff type

As always, most of the aid workers affected by major violence were nationals of the country they were working in, whether local hires of international organisations or employees of

national NGOs or Red Cross/Crescent societies. In 2016, 245 nationals were victims of major attacks, compared to 43 internationals – a fivefold difference. However, given the far lower numbers of international staffers in the field, expatriates still show a higher attack rate compared to their national counterparts (Table 2).

Likewise, although international INGOs had the highest number of total staffers attacked, their rates were in fact lower than that of the UN, given the higher numbers of INGO staff in the field (Table 2).

Table 2: Attack rates

| | 2016 victims | 2016 population (est.) | Attack rate (per 100,000) |
|-------------------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| UN | 71 | 98,000 | 72 |
| INGO | 156 | 547,000 | 29 |
| International RC | 12 | 18,000 | 67 |
| NNGO/NRCS | 46 | 167,000 | 28 |
| Nationals | 245 | 755,000 | 32 |
| Internationals | 43 | 84,000 | 51 |

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The attackers: Patterns and perceptions of the key perpetrator groups

The protected status accorded to humanitarian aid organisations under international humanitarian law (IHL) is widely acknowledged in principle, but in practice has had only the weakest of deterrent effects against attacks. State and non-state actors alike have violated this norm repeatedly and with seeming impunity, as the vast majority of aid worker attacks go unresolved and unpunished. In addition, some perpetrators have justified their attacks by asserting that the victims were not neutral humanitarian actors but abetting parties to the conflict – displaying at once their deference to IHL norms and their ease in subverting them.

In high-conflict scenarios (active armed conflict with multiple warring parties), attacks on aid operations represent a small percentage of the overall violence, and humanitarian actors are rarely the primary target of hostilities. Rather, they usually represent collateral damage or a useful proxy target for militants engaging in asymmetric warfare. Depending on the conflict dynamics and the strategic objectives of the attackers, striking at aid operations can be a means to destabilise and delegitimise the current order, punish or extort a local population, raise their visibility and political profile, or simply obtain economic assets in the form of goods, cash, vehicles or ransoms.

2.1 Why motives matter

Knowing the interests, incentives and ambitions of potential violent actors is key to understanding the nature of the threat and how it might be mitigated. In the case of economic crime, the motive is self-evident, and aid organisations mainly need to consider the means and opportunities of potential criminals to determine how to reduce their exposure. When dealing with organised political groups, on the other hand, other information becomes important. This includes the group's stated (and demonstrated) objectives, its level of power-ambition (local, national or regional) and internal cohesion (i.e., level of command and control) and how these may differ at various levels within the group structure. The motivation and levels of ambition of the different NSAGs are pertinent to humanitarian actors because they can provide some insight on the NSAG's scope of tactics, targeting, and potential willingness to negotiate. It is also important to know that these motives and objectives can be expressed differently by members of the same group, and not always consistently. In other words, that foot soldiers may behave differently from senior commanders.

In Table 3, below, we give examples of the different types of NSAGs along these delineations, and in the sections that follow we examine the quantitative and qualitative evidence around to their interactions with humanitarian actors.

Table 3: Non-state armed groups

| Type/Level of NSAG* | Motivations/power-ambition | Examples** | Areas of operation |
|-------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Global | Overthrow of current world order in behalf of a universal absolutist ideology | Islamic State Al Qaeda (core) Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula | Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria Afghanistan, Pakistan Saudi Arabia, Yemen |
| Regional/transnational | Control or influence over a territory overlapping current national boundaries on ethnic or ideological grounds | Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Boko Haram | Northwest Africa Northern Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger |
| National | Overthrow and replacement of current government within the existing state | Al Shabaab Taliban Tehrik-i-Taliban | Somalia, Kenya Afghanistan Pakistan |
| Sub-national (local) | Autonomy or control over areas within the existing state | Mai Mai Militias Haqqani Network | DRC Northeast Afghanistan |
| Criminal enterprise | Economic gain | “Pirates” | Somalia |

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* Some NSAGs do not fit neatly into one category, but contain features of two. As depicted above, Al-Shabaab is primarily a nationalist movement but has some global jihadist links, and the Haqqani network has criminal elements.

** Not an exhaustive list

As a caveat, we readily acknowledge that many field security professionals reject the notion that a typology of motives for incidents can be gleaned in any way that is useful. They emphasise instead the complexity of circumstances and individual relationships that underlie many incidents, observing that even those that seem straightforward on their face get murkier the more one learns the backstory. And it is doubtless correct that any armed actor will have their own personal motives, whether political power seeker, religious zealot, profiteer or someone seeking a sense of meaning and belonging or retribution for grievances. We argue this is precisely why it only makes sense to derive and consider motives in the aggregate. At the level of the group, the perpetrators’ motives have a coherence of interests and incentives – sanctioned by higher command and forming potentially predictable patterns – that is absent at the individual level.

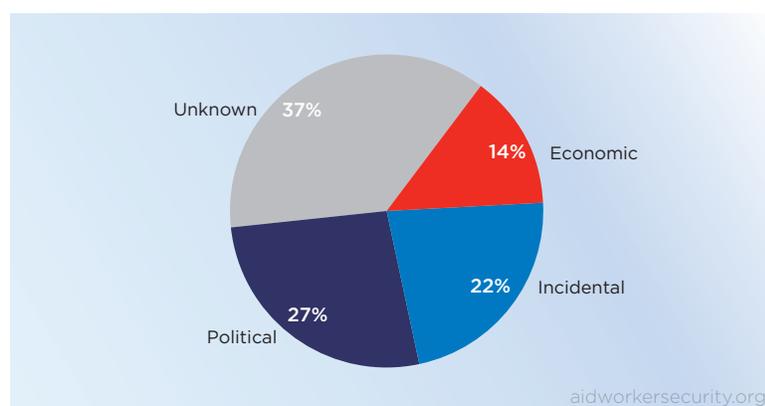
2.2 What the data tell us

When the attack statistics are disaggregated by perpetrator group type, as presented below, it is evident that aid operations encounter violence from national level NSAGs more than any other type of organised group, indicating that their attention and investments should be focused on dealing with this sort of actor primarily. However, in contexts where a global NSAG is present and operational, humanitarian organisations should be aware that the risk for lethal attacks, and particularly targeting international staff, is considerably higher, and based on the evidence available, scope for negotiations lower. Finally, the figures suggest that state actors undertaking air strikes in conflicts are the most lethal to aid workers (in deaths per number of incidents) than any other group type, irrespective of intentionality.

2.2.1 Intentionality

Out of 1,083 incidents during 2011–2016 for which the AWSD has both perpetrator and motive data, 27 per cent of incidents were politically motivated, 22 per cent were incidental, 14 per cent were (purely) economically motivated and 37 per cent were unknown, meaning that the researchers lacked sufficient information to make a judgment as to motive. However, we are reasonably confident that most of the perpetrators in that unknown category are neither state actors nor acting on behalf of a major armed opposition group, as these are much more readily identified.

Figure 3: Incidents by motive, 2011-2016



2.2.2 Overview of perpetrator groups

We classified violent actors, where identified, by group name and typed them according to their scope of operations and ambitions: global (e.g., IS or Al Qaeda), national (e.g., the Taliban), sub-national (e.g., Mai Mai militias) organised criminal (e.g., Somali pirates), and state actor (e.g., state military/security forces, government-aligned militia or foreign state ally).

National-level NSAGs were responsible for 57 per cent of the known group-perpetrated incidents between 2011 and 2016, followed by state actors for 24 per cent (which include host state actors, foreign actors and those that could only be identified as being a state actor). This was followed by global NSAGs with 7 per cent.

² National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) (2016). Global Terrorism Database (data file), retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

³ Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Held Hostage: Analyses of Kidnapping across Time and among Jihadist Organizations Dataset (data file), retrieved from <https://s3.amazonaws.com/com-ter-cen/hostages/index.html>.

Note on classifications

Motives

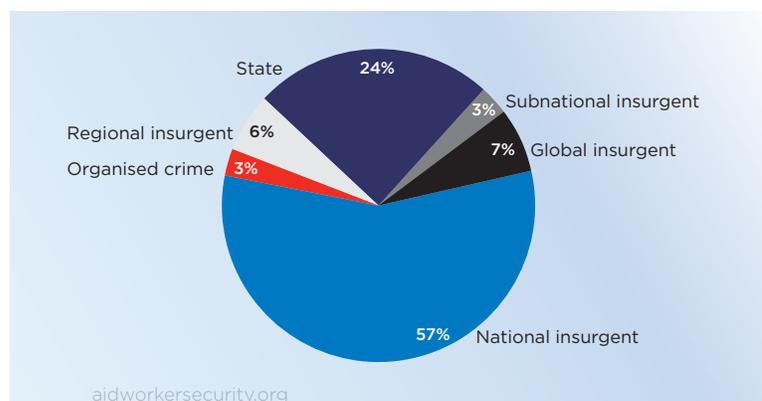
The AWSD captures three types of motives: political, economic, and incidental. (A fourth category – unknown – is applied when none of the other three can be attributed with any certainty.) An economic motive is one where it is reasonably clear that the intent was primarily monetary gain and the perpetrator is without affiliation to a group motivated by political goals. Political motives entail political aspects, i.e., are perpetrated in furtherance of a group’s political ambitions (even if economic gain is also involved). The incidental category applies when the aid worker is not targeted because of their affiliation with a humanitarian organisation but instead is at the wrong place at the wrong time (such as in crossfire cases). While the incidental category is sometimes excluded from our global analysis when it can create a misleadingly inflated picture of the levels of violence against aid operations, we include it within certain metrics of this report because, in the AWSD, this category can include aerial bombardment, which highlights the state as a relevant perpetrator, something that would otherwise be lost in the analysis.

Perpetrators

The incident reports from the field that are tracked by the AWSD use a variety of designations for perpetrators – such as armed actor, anti-government element and opposition group – in deference to member states’ concerns regarding identifying opposing political groups. But this practice is ultimately not helpful analytically. To deepen the perpetrator identification, the AWSD dataset was compared with overlapping incidents from the Global Terrorism Database² and the West Point Center for Combatting Terrorism Held Hostage³ database for 2011–2015, the years available at the time. Sixteen additional perpetrator points of information were sourced from these databases. The majority of identified perpetrators were confirmed by the reporting agencies during annual data verification. For the portion of perpetrators that could not be identified, the incidents were listed as ‘unknown’ (except in the case of Afghanistan where some incidents between 2011 and 2014 had enough identifiable characteristics to provide an identification).

Between 2011 and 2016, the non-state entities responsible for most major attacks on aid workers were the Taliban (51 attacks), Al Shabaab (21), IS (12), and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (5). Other significant perpetrator groups included the Anti-Balaka groups in the Central African Republic (four incidents) and Syria's Jabhat Al Nusra, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Rwanda and Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) (three incidents each).

Figure 4: Incidents per actor category, 2011-2016

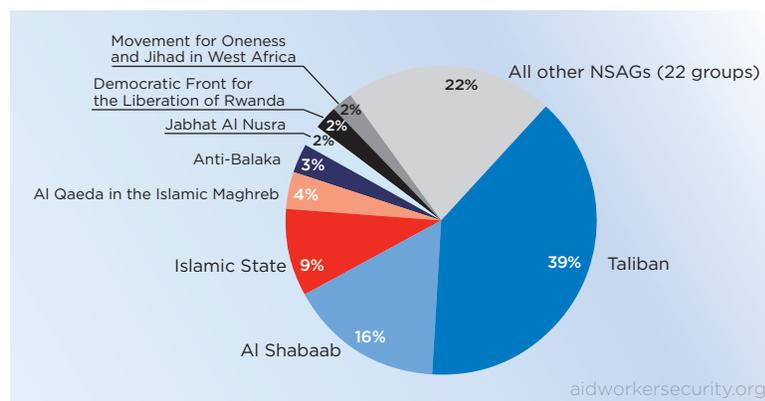


* Excludes the 'incidental' motive category (those attacks in which victims were not targeted due to their affiliation with a humanitarian organisation)

Difference observed in lethality, tactics and targets

Within the top ten groups attributed with the highest number of attacks (Figure 5), kidnappings (and kidnap-killings), were the most prevalent mode of violence (76 incidents) between 2011 and 2016 (See Figure 6 below). Kidnapping is clearly favoured by groups that engage in asymmetric warfare, like the Taliban (who also use kidnapping as a form of 'informal registration' of aid workers in territories they control) and terrorist groups. Kidnappings are followed by shootings (13).

Figure 5: Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) with highest attacks attributed, 2011-2016



asymmetric warfare, like the Taliban (who also use kidnapping as a form of 'informal registration' of aid workers in territories they control) and terrorist groups. Kidnappings are followed by shootings (13).

Victims

As in previous AWSD reports, national staff members represent the largest number of victims because they are represented in far larger numbers than international staff in their local contexts. Similarly, of the perpetrator groups, national-level NSAGs are responsible for the largest number of attacks against national staff.

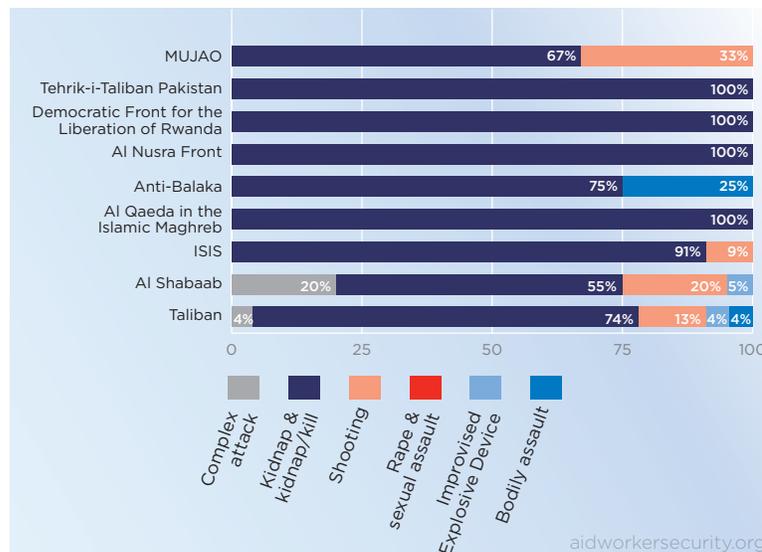
Similarly, of the perpetrator groups, national-level NSAGs are responsible for the largest number of attacks against national staff.

The state, as represented here, combines national state actors, state-aligned militias, foreign coalition forces and unknown state actors (a designation where the researchers could identify that a state actor was involved but not which one). It is responsible for the second-highest number of attacks on national aid workers, with 172 affected from 2011 to 2016.

Global NSAGs (IS, Al Qaeda and its affiliates, like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) are more likely to target international staff for political reasons (e.g., as an anti-Western statement) or for economic opportunities (e.g., securing larger ransoms).

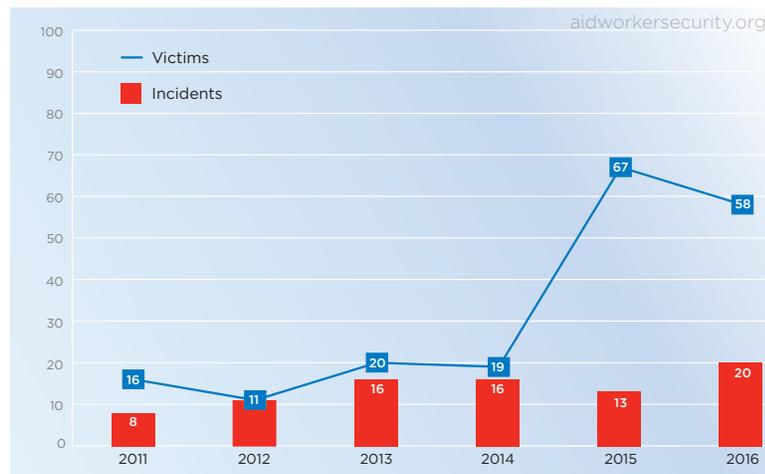
The number of attacks attributed to state actors has grown exponentially over the last two years, with the highest number of aid workers affected in 2015 (67), followed by a decrease in 2016 (58) that is still higher than in any previous year from 2011 to 2014, inclusive (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Incidents by means of violence, 2011-2016



* This figure does not include the 'incidental' motive category.

Figure 7: Aid worker victims of state based violence affecting aidworkers, 2011- 2016



* Includes the 'incidental' category, i.e. when aid workers are not deliberately targeted but rather collateral casualties.

As explained earlier in the report, aerial bombing campaigns in countries such as Syria and Afghanistan have contributed to this increase and the lethality of attacks. In the last two years, incidents attributed to aerial bombardment have increased dramatically, with 2015 recording the highest number of affected aid workers (60) and 2016 following with 40. Previous to 2015 however, the numbers ranged in the single digits. Out of 17 aerial bombings, the majority of incidents in 2016 (12) occurred in Syria, and while most could not be narrowed down to a specific state actor, in four, Assad's government and his allies were responsible.

2.3 When the perpetrator is the state

The figures on aid worker attacks attributed to state actors include two types of violence: (1) deliberate and targeted attacks by the host state (in this period primarily perpetrated by the military forces of the South Sudan government) and (2) incidents of crossfire and air strikes by the host state and intervening powers, which include accidents and collateral damage as well as cases that, given available information, arouse suspicion of intent.

A previous Aid Worker Security Report ([Humanitarian Outcomes, 2012](#)) addressed the role and responsibilities of host states, including ways some states fail in their responsibilities to uphold IHL and to provide a protective environment for the provision of humanitarian aid to civilians. Statistical regression analysis in that report found correlations between aid worker violence and other indicators of state fragility and failure.

The case of South Sudan, where military atrocities are committed against aid workers (along with many more against South Sudanese citizens), goes well beyond the typical lack of capacity to extend law and order to secure operations. Rather, it reflects a brutal, ethnically driven military campaign, disintegration of command and control, an environment of impunity for offenders⁴ and a festering hostility against the international humanitarian community upon which a great many South Sudanese rely for their basic needs. Attacks by soldiers of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA)⁵ have included murder, gang rape and beatings/torture, and they have resulted in a dramatic decrease in the operational aid presence in the country. In South Sudan, the situation is less like an asymmetric battle between a government and an insurgency and more like a war between equally lawless belligerents, growing more chaotic as fracturing between the parties continues. The UN and donor nations have condemned the violence and applied a range of targeted sanctions to the South Sudanese leadership, but to limited effect.

In Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen, aid workers have been killed in airstrikes against relief convoys and medical facilities, also direct and flagrant violations of IHL. The bombing of the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, by US planes in October 2015 was widely decried in the media and general public, but resulted in little action in the political arena (Poza Marin, 2017). The US military took responsibility for the accidental bombing that killed 42 people including 14 MSF staff, but there was no investigation by the Afghan government (amid reports that Afghanistan National Army elements may have intentionally provided the wrong coordinates to punish MSF for what they saw as their collusion with the other side). Like the Kunduz hospital bombing, the UN/Red Crescent relief convoy to Aleppo in early 2017 had provided all coordinates and identification to the warring parties as required by 'deconfliction' good practice, but the convoy was attacked all the same, by either Syrian or Russian aircraft, killing 20. UN Secretary-General condemned the 'apparently deliberate' attack, along with the international humanitarian community. To some observers, these and other recent airstrikes exemplify a disturbing trend toward softening of the international norms of war among the larger powers. The UN Security Council is the main organ responsible for safeguarding IHL and responding to violations. But when the members of the Permanent Five are themselves the violators, the humanitarian community has little recourse.

Like any international norm, IHL is based and depends on mutual self-interest. Disincentives for violations will only be as strong as the accountability for violators that follows, but repeated lack of consequences for perpetrators and looser interpretations of IHL by state powers breed contempt for the strictures, a normalisation of the violence, and a gradual breakdown of the collective sense of responsibility.

⁴ In one exceptional case, twelve soldiers currently stand trial for the rape of five and killing of one aid worker in the Terrain Hotel in Juba in 2016.

⁵ In 2017 the president of South Sudan renamed the army, from Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to South Sudan Defence Forces. We continue to use the SPLA acronym here as it was the name at the time of the incidents in question.

2.4 Types of non-state armed groups and the logic of attacks on aid workers

We will now look in more detail at the non-state armed groups and how those with different levels of ambition (i.e., local, national or global – see Table 1) have correspondingly different patterns of hostile behaviour toward aid workers. What these findings suggest is that the type of group active in a given area has important implications for the risk faced by aid agencies and their security stance, as well as their approach to negotiations.

National-level NSAGs battling over contested areas will use attacks on aid workers to destabilise the situation and seize assets while delegitimising the current order and making a show of strength to the local population. These incentives, combined with general confusion and fluidity of the situation in active conflict areas, create a particularly dangerous moment for aid agencies. By contrast, once their control over a territory is more firmly established, national NSAGs have strong incentives to make deals with humanitarian actors to provide services to the population (and aid groups can be a revenue source as well, through imposed ‘taxes’ and other concessions). Global NSAGs who are not attempting to govern a population have less incentive to negotiate, and pose the greatest threat to international staff members who represent an opportunity for symbolic messaging (and/or potentially large ransoms).

Interviews with members of Al Shabaab, Taliban and Haqqani Network, and desk-based analysis of international groups, further support these findings while at the same time revealing nuances in how perceptions, interests and incentives are expressed differently depending on the organisational rank and education level of the interviewee.

For our qualitative analysis on the organised groups responsible for attacks on aid workers, we selected three groups where it was possible through local research partners to interview members directly: Al Shabaab in Somalia, and the Taliban and Haqqani Network in Afghanistan. Interviewees were identified through local contacts and represented different geographical locations and positions in the organisations. Our questions aimed to elicit the extent of their knowledge of the humanitarian sector as well as opinions on aid groups’ work, ethics and motives. Above all, we were interested in when and why they strike against aid operations and how they justify these acts.

Although we were not able to interview representatives directly, this report also tries to capture the views of global NSAGs such as IS and Al Qaeda. These are non-state actors in an even truer sense – operating outside and in opposition to the modern nation state system. However, in attempting to establish the physical beginnings of a global caliphate, IS has found itself at times (in Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and other places in Syria and Iraq) in the position of having to provide a measure of governance and public goods to the populations under its control, and often the only options for doing so may be tolerating aid efforts (although not necessarily international aid). Humanitarian actors confirm that IS has been known to be open to negotiating, but also to

Survey questions posed to NSAG members

1. Are aid organisations working in your area? Who are they?
2. Do you see any important differences between different aid group types (e.g., UN, national NGOs, international NGOs, Red Crescent)?
3. Are there aid groups that you consider to be neutral parties (not taking part in the conflict) and deserving of protected status from all sides?
4. What are acceptable aid activities for such groups to undertake, and what is unacceptable?
5. Is it ever legitimate to use force against these groups? Why?
6. Under what circumstances will they be tolerated?
7. Is your approach different to that of other conflict parties, in your view?

double-cross. In the areas IS controls in Syria it has agreed to some infrastructure aid (water supply, etc.) and health facilities, but continued to target (particularly foreign) aid workers for ransom and propaganda opportunities, resulting in the departure of non-Syrians working outside of government controlled areas.

Given the prominence of absolutist religious ideology among these global jihadist groups and their demonstrated capacity for extreme violence against a broadly defined enemy, arguably they are sui generis and not typical of NSAGs throughout history. We are not making the claim that the perspectives they express are typical of all NSAGs everywhere. However, as these groups are responsible for a large portion of organised attacks currently affecting aid workers, examining them directly for an analysis of the risk they pose is necessary. Recent research on NSAGs (Jackson, 2016), which intentionally omits some of the more extremist groups from the analysis in order to capture a wide-ranging sample, concludes that for humanitarians to gain secure access to contested areas it is most important that they adhere to humanitarian principles and performance standards. We would argue further that in some violent contexts, upholding humanitarian principles and good performance standards are necessary but insufficient conditions for gaining secure access. There are and have been times when simply being Western or Western-associated, or employing women, is reason for attack, and aid organisations may be tragically remiss if they do not know the limits of what is possible to achieve through negotiations and principled practice.

Armed-group profiles

The Taliban is an example of a longstanding national-level insurgency with a great deal of experience with aid organisations, some of which have been working in Afghanistan for upwards of 30 years. Traditionally Taliban leadership has welcomed certain types of aid, such as medical care, and rejected others, such as girls' education. Recent changes in leadership and the emergence of IS in the country has reportedly increased splintering within the organisation and distracted it from governance/shadow-state building. Although a recent change, according to some UN security professionals and other experts it signals less coherence in command and decreased ability to deal with aid agencies.

The Haqqani network is allied with the Taliban and part of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan umbrella, but has its own leadership and characteristics that are worth delineating. Operating mainly in the Northeast of Afghanistan and across the Pakistan border, is described as a hybrid of a political militia and criminal gang. It committed a large number of kidnappings as leverage for prisoner swaps, but kidnapping also serves as a revenue generator. Security experts believe this group knows well which governments pay (or facilitate family payments of) ransom and that it targets its kidnappings accordingly. Not as concerned as the Taliban with seizing, holding and building governance over territory, it is ostensibly more unpredictable and less amenable to negotiation.

Al Shabaab in Somalia is primarily a nationalist movement with some internationalist factions and pursuits. Experts interviewed for this study spoke of a split in Shabaab leadership between those interested in pursuing wider ambitions (such as aligning with AQ and, more recently, IS) and those who are more nationalist and circumscribed in their aims. The more ideological jihadist elements tend to be found among the younger members, compared to the more traditional insurgents aiming primarily to seize control of the Somali government. Like the clans, Shabaab leaders take a very transactional approach to aid work in areas under their control, typically demanding 'their cut' of the aid work business taking place in their territory. Notably, the aid presence is now extremely low in Shabaab-held areas for reasons of perceived risk – both of violence and the fiduciary and legal risk of working in an area under heavy international sanctions and counter-terror regulations.

Tactics and targets differ between global jihadist ‘foreign fighters’ and home-grown NSAGs. Suicide attacks were exceedingly rare in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban’s adoption of them in the last decade, modelling Al Qaeda. ‘Complex attacks’ utilising raiders preceded by vehicle-borne explosives were also popularised by the global NSAGs. IS now uses a complex suicide technique called a ‘plunge attack’ designed to maximise fatalities within a contained area until the fighters are overrun. Whereas the Taliban’s main targets are Afghan national army and police, IS has also claimed responsibility for attacking non-Sunni Afghans such as the Hazaras and other Shias. Both Taliban and Haqqani interviewees criticised IS for their tactics and the extent of their cruelty, painting themselves as the reasonable and cooperative ones by comparison as well.⁶

‘IS have . . . killed people, took people’s women by force, killed children, so how can you expect a good reaction from their side towards the aid agencies and other organisations? They don’t give permission for the schools, clinics, and Red Crescent in the Nangarhar province and they are dishonouring the tribal elders by imprisoning them, and in their area, they take the people’s lands or homes and create conflict among people.’

— Haqqani fighter, Khost

‘ISIS kills anyone that they think is not supporting them, without having any evidence. They even kill children and elders, whom we respect and protect.’

— Taliban troop leader, Helmand

2.5 NSAGs’ perceptions of humanitarian actors: Threats and opportunities

Although the concepts of charity and altruism are universal, the concept of a professional humanitarian sector is alien to many of the cultural contexts in which it operates (despite the longstanding presence of aid organisations there). The affected populations often view international aid groups (most of which are Western-founded and -funded) with suspicion or even cynicism regarding their motives.

For their part, aid agencies may derive their organisational mission from humanitarian values but cannot avoid the reality that certain business interests and competitive aspects can be found in the sector. Indeed, sometimes these aspects seem more evident to local actors (if usually exaggerated) than to the humanitarian organisations themselves.

Previous research has highlighted that NSAGs such as the Taliban and Al Shabaab that have posed threats to humanitarians do not view aid workers as neutral entities providing aid for the good of the people, but ascribe to them more practical, if not nefarious, motives, including that they are acting as spies or profiteers (Jackson, 2014).

In interviews for this research, some common themes emerged on how aid workers are perceived. Foremost was the near-universal accusation of corrupt practices and the perception that only small amounts of aid money ultimately reach the affected people (the estimate of ‘less than half’ was widely repeated). As reflected in this comment by one respondent: ‘The difference is that international NGOs such as UN implement the projects by the foreigners, and these foreigners spend less than half of the money and the remaining goes to their pockets’ (Taliban fighter, Khost).

⁶ Many lower-ranking IS fighters in Afghanistan are former Taliban fighters who were given salary incentives to switch sides (Mansfield, 2016).

Interviewees also made exceptions when they had favourable views of the work done in their areas; for instance as one said, speaking of specific projects and aid agencies that brought benefit to the local people, 'I can name you DACAAR, CARE, UNHCR, and Red Crescent as neutral organisations in Helmand province. But most of the other organisations are not' (Taliban commander, Helmand).

Corruption and profiteering are seldom cited as justification for major violence, however. When it comes to rationales for major attacks, groups perceived aid organisations as threats in various ways: as agents of the enemy, rivals for authority, a harmful influence on local people (creating dependency), and violators of religious laws and cultural norms.

Not surprisingly, younger soldiers and those of lower rank and education displayed a more limited understanding of the international community and were more prone to generalities and dogmatism, making statements such as, 'all of them are spies,' or 'they are against Islam.' More senior individuals showed a much more nuanced appreciation, and at times quite detailed knowledge, of the different types of organisations and the sort of work they do. Several interviewees could list the names of agencies and NGOs working in their respective territories and express opinions on their capacities. Local NGOs, and especially Red Crescent societies generally, came out the best in opinions on usefulness of their work and their ethics.

Agents of the enemy

In nearly every contested environment, aid agencies have come under suspicion as being the eyes and ears of a state party – a reputation not helped by known uses of false NGOs as fronts or real NGOs as cover for intelligence or covert operations by intelligence agencies. Even if they don't believe aid agency members are spies, NSAGs may still suspect them of colluding with political actors – from whom they get their funding and whose agenda they de facto support. At best, they lump them together as associates of the opposing side. Associating aid agencies with a warring party of course has serious implications and can and has been used to justify strikes against them. If they are not neutral parties they have no claim to protected status under IHL.

'Principally [Al Shabaab] believes that all NGOs work for spying agencies and it is AS policy to make it difficult for NGOs to work in AS controlled area. They say they are here for humanitarian purpose but what they are actually doing is spying, measuring the land and reconnaissance.'

— Al Shabaab former social affairs officer, Bardera

'The case of [a journalist kidnapped and beheaded by IS] contains a direct refutation against those who portray western journalism and humanitarian aid as purely innocent.' (IS, *Dabiq* magazine, Issue 4)

'Fourth: you must cease all interference in the religion, society, politics, economy, and government of the Islamic world. This means putting an immediate stop to the deployment of your economic hitmen, CIA Jackals, Peace Corps volunteers, US Aid employees, and UN and US sponsored nongovernmental organizations. All of which put together represent the vanguard of American interference in our region and the world.'
(Al Qaeda *Inspire* magazine, Fall 2010)

Rivals for authority/creators of dependency

NSAGs seeking to expand territory aim to exert firm and total control over a population, particularly in the beginning. The existence of independent entities that provide goods, services, education and employment can threaten this projection of power, and incentivise NSAGs to threaten or harm them as a lesson in who is really calling the shots.

‘Another issue is the fact that they believe the aid organisations work against them by creating segments of society that do not need AS at all. These include the employees, the contractors and beneficiaries.’

— **Al Shabaab former commander, Kismayo**

‘We want to reduce population’s dependency on humanitarian assistance because if they get a lot of access we can’t control both the people and agencies.’

— **Al Shabaab district-level revenue collector, Middle Juba**

Although it was not heard from the other NSAGs interviewed, more than one Al Shabaab interviewee gave voice to the related idea that aid organisations aim to make recipients dependent on their aid as a deliberate strategy to humiliate and subjugate the people.

‘The food they bring is expired food and they bring sack of maize from America to undercut the Somali production, to cheat and humiliate our people. The purpose is to make the Somalis people who can do nothing for themselves.’

— **Al Shabaab member and former spokesman**

Violators of religious and cultural norms

None of the groups interviewed are global NSAGs of the type of IS or Al Qaeda, so their priorities tend more to the parochial in comparison, but nevertheless religious ideology is extremely salient in their motivations and a frequently repeated justification for attacks on humanitarian actors, who are accused of offending and transgressing Islamic dictates. Foreign aid workers’ status as ‘infidels’ and their efforts to enhance the status of women came up frequently across all three groups, and was most prevalent among the statements of the younger and lower-ranked interviewees.

‘We are strongly against organisations working for defaming Islam and we have severe types of punishments for their employees whether they are local staff or foreign staff.’

— **Haqani fighter, Khost**

On the positive side, interviewees admitted that certain aid operations are welcome and can also represent an opportunity to meet local needs, score political points and make economic gains.

Practical value of services or genuine concern for needs of people?

As previously mentioned, NSAGs have an appreciation for medical services, particularly when they can take advantage of them for their war wounded. This has a practical benefit to the NSAG that aid agencies can leverage for access.

‘When MSF was here they were useful to us. They were helping our injured soldiers as well as the general public. They were useful.’

— **Al Shabaab district commander**

‘The Red Crescent, an international organisation, always help people from all groups and ethnicities. This organisation provides healthcare services for people who get injured both civilians and opponents involved in war.’

— Taliban commander, Helmand

Some interviewees expressed real concern over local people’s needs and the importance of access to aid. One AS commander, moved by drought needs, defied his superiors and spoke out publicly against their decision to constrain aid operations. Speaking under house arrest, he said, ‘The way forward now is to prioritise people’s lives. We know that we have to deal with those in charge if we need to reach people under their rule. Ignoring them is stupid and counterproductive. The politicisation of aid must be avoided.’ Another district commander voiced similar sentiments: ‘Now there are few private clinics that can’t do much. We need NGOs to come back. The people need them and our leaders need to listen to the needs of the people. The way I see it is that the decision is wrong and should be changed. NGOs should be allowed to help people.’

This combination of practical usefulness to armed groups and a sense of responsibility for helping meet the needs of the population spells a negotiation opportunity for an aid agency willing to engage in communication.

Financial incentives: Tax revenue and war spoils

The interviews conducted for this study provided further confirmation to recent research done for the Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) study: that pressures to pay or make other concessions for access is common in contested areas and that, privately, most humanitarian actors are complying. However, aid agencies and their donors acknowledge little of this publicly (Carter and Haver, 2016).

‘We also want resources and they are among the few available resources. We don’t charge them same, some we charge 30 per cent, 25 per cent, 20 per cent, 15 per cent and 10 per cent. The difference is based on trust of what they tell us, how long they have been working with us, how much we can depend on them when it comes to voluntary contribution and how we trust them not spying [on] us or related to our enemies.’

— Al Shabaab district-level revenue collector, Middle Juba

2.6 Conditions for acceptance: Obey the rules, address the need (as we define it) and pay up

The interviews included an explicit question: Under what conditions would the NSAG tolerate an agency and allow it to remain and work? The answers ranged from the broad (‘They should never do any activity that is against Islam’) to the specific (‘They should submit their beneficiary list to us before they give anything’). Overall, the respondents were broadly consistent that agencies should defer to their authority and their interpretation of Islamic law, should perform up to a certain standard and should make some level of concession or payment.

‘The first condition is that they should not and should never do any activity that is against Islam or for defaming of Islam, secondly they should not have any female employee and they should come to our area with Islamic clothes on, thirdly they should contact the tribal elders of the area and then they will contact us and we will give them permission through the local elders of the area, fourthly they should purely work to help the local people.’

— Haqqani, Sabri District fighter, Khost

‘Organisations and their employees have to respect our traditions and Quran. I mean they have to implement projects that benefit our people and ensure their future, such as establishing Islamic schools... Our policy is that we always welcome their services in agricultural, education, and healthcare sectors. They should not intervene in political, social, religious, and cultural affairs of our country. Therefore, if they follow our rules, they will be allowed to work here otherwise they will be punished.’

— Taliban fighter, Helmand

‘All NGOs and agencies including those who are banned can work in our areas if they renegotiate and accept our terms. They can’t negotiate as group, each organisation must negotiate on its own.’

— former operations spokesman, Al Shabaab

Many of the conditions stated above are anathema to humanitarian principles and could justifiably be considered non-starters from aid agencies’ points of view. What is striking, however, is that conditions were readily proffered by the interviewees that were acceptable from their standpoint, and none indicated that aid groups never would be tolerated under any circumstance; demonstrating again that negotiated access is at least theoretically possible. The question humanitarians would need to ask concerns how far their organisations are willing to compromise on principles and make concessions, both monetary and programmatic, to gain access to needy populations.

2.7 The logic of targeting aid workers: Justifications for the violence

‘Spying’ and social/religious transgressions

Since violence can be justified against one’s enemy in war, the interviewees made clear they had no compunction against using force if aid agencies reveal themselves as legitimate enemies. Suspicion of spying (a hostile military act) is one such rationale (despite that it was always presented in generalised terms with no evidence of such acts), but since these groups also embrace a concept of holy war in their mission, so too is proselytising for other religions or otherwise defaming Islam. In these cases, the fighters believe, violence is not only justified, but required of them.

‘Yes, it is always legitimate to use force against the groups, if they are non-Muslims and doing things against Islam, against our culture, against our people, against our religion, against our norms and standard of life, against our women, against our mujahids (fighters), against our poor people, so we have to use force against them, in fact this is our duty to use it.’

— Taliban fighter, Helmand

In some circumstance Al Shabaab has raised the stakes of collecting payments from aid groups: non-payment can mark them as an enemy of Islam.

‘Because they see aid agencies as businesses they also ask them to contribute to the jihad (war) effort periodically as they do with all businesses in their area of control. If you don’t pay, you are against them and that makes you a legitimate target.’

— former Al Shabaab commander, Kismayo

'A kind of payment': Violence as a motivating and unifying force

One Al Shabaab interviewee spoke frankly that the act of attacking aid workers was provided almost as a perk to young soldiers and a way for them to let off steam.

'Most of the members are youngsters who are not paid regularly and are highly charged and emotional as a result of the constant indoctrinations to keep them going. The older members can distinguish and know the differences and exceptions (between aid agencies) but the youngsters don't and actually don't care. They are looking for an infidel to kill and when they can't find them, Muslims are tagged as infidels. This freedom they have, to do what suits them with impunity, is also part of AS's way of keeping their soldiers highly motivated. They are not paid, hence are left to follow their instincts to destroy and feel high. This is a kind of payment.'

— former Al Shabaab commander, Kismayo

Many past attacks by young fighters and junior commanders have appeared as breaks in the chain of command – where the foot soldiers never received the message that the higher-ups were allowing aid workers secure access. Possibly, in at least some of these cases, senior leadership was turning a blind eye for the good of esprit de corps.

Surviving norms against violence and for allowing aid

Despite the seemingly liberally applied justifications for aid worker attacks by members of these groups, who can rationalise them in the name of war and religion, a strong sense remains that the violence needs to be justified under some moral calculus. This too is evident from respondents' statements, and references to other groups as being 'worse' when it comes to violence.

'Yes, we do use force against some groups who do not follow our rules. But I have to mention that we are the group that have used less force against aid organisations but we sometimes we have to use force in order to keep our area clean of the foreigners' invasion.'

— Haqqani fighter

'I don't know a lot about other conflicting parties, but I have heard about Daesh (IS), they are cruel, they are against everything in everyone of Afghanistan, they are even against local people of Afghanistan, but we are not like them, we have our rules, we have our own laws and we are following it strictly.'

— Taliban fighter, Helmand

An internal letter from Taliban leadership addressed this issue and seemed to be trying to rein in violence against agencies. The letter commanded Taliban members: 'Stop killing people under suspicion traveling on roads. Stop bombing bridges, roads, and other similar places. Stop killing aid and construction workers who are helping our nation and building our homeland' (Azami, 2016). According to a UN security expert based in Kabul, the Taliban use coercive measures to change aid, not just to divert or disrupt it. For instance, at one time they forcibly closed clinics of one NGO in Herat, Laghman and Kunar because they actually wanted more and better quality medical services than the NGO was providing – and it worked. The NGO agreed to provide additional services and professionals.

3.1 Knowing who is out there

The above analysis and other research indicate that despite how humanitarian actors are perceived, and despite the sometimes-violent behaviour towards them, parties to the conflict, including NSAGs, are open to negotiation for securing safe passage and the supply of aid goods and services. Conversely, most humanitarian organisations are not institutionally well-equipped to undertake strategic negotiations, particularly negotiations with NSAGs. While strong examples of good practice can be found, from ICRC and a handful of organisations intent on supporting those most vulnerable in conflict environments, the majority of humanitarian agencies are not deeply invested, or strategic, in their approach to understanding the rules and behaviour of militant groups like those we interviewed for this study.

Part of the challenge relates to a general need to invest in analysing the political and social dimensions of aid in conflict settings and, more specifically, in actor mapping to understand the perspectives and motives of different groups factions within those groups (Egeland et al. 2011; Haver and Carter, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Majid and Harmer, 2017). Only a few agencies invest in this mapping, and where it is done, it is often a snapshot taken at the start of a programme, rather than a long-term continual assessment of possible changing allegiances, factions and conflict dynamics. The tendency is to ignore or play down stated ideological motivations of certain groups – particularly when groups invoke religious rationales. And yet understanding these positions and dealing with actors on their own terms is fundamental to obtaining and maintaining secure access (Jackson, 2016).

3.2 Who negotiates and with whom?

Most negotiations take place bilaterally (i.e., between a single agency and the armed group) at the local level and by the agency's locally hired staff (Haver and Carter, 2016). This is partly because negotiations are mostly localised and ad hoc and often focused on gaining permission for specific activities or movements.

Negotiations with militant groups are also often done *indirectly*, through community elders or informal government or justice structures. The decision to use an indirect approach is not necessarily based on an assessment of whether it is the most appropriate means for negotiating access, and in fact a reasonable correlation exists between organisations with good access in hard-to-reach areas and organisations that undertake direct negotiations. But, organisations lacking policy guidance and training have less confidence in negotiating directly with armed groups (Carter and Haver, 2016). An additional factor is whether the armed group has been designated as a terrorist organisation. In these cases, fearing legal and political repercussions, many agencies are more reticent to attempt a dialogue. While providing material support has been criminalised, IHL has very clear provisions for humanitarian actors to engage in a dialogue with parties to the conflict to enable access. However, particularly in the case of IS and Al Shabaab, a desire to test out what that might mean in practice seems to be limited. As recent studies confirmed, the uncertainty about when aid or negotiation constitutes material assistance has had a significant impact, such that many agencies are hesitant to work in areas controlled by designated groups – or, if they do, they avoid speaking with them (NRC, 2015; Stoddard et al., 2016; Haver and Carter, 2016).

Agencies that recognise the necessity of establishing a direct dialogue with militant groups rely on context-specific approaches, with the goal of engaging with those who are controlling the violence in the given area. Very few attempt higher-level engagement with the top leadership of armed groups, ICRC and MSF being among the rare exceptions that conduct negotiations at the national and regional levels. It is at local levels where loyalties can often shift with changing conflict dynamics. This also impacts the trust aid actors have in negotiating higher up the line, and leads to concerns about whether senior level agreement can be effectively communicated to foot soldiers, or whether those security assurances will be respected.

You can speak with the authorities and commanders, but you hang up the phone after the negotiation and your assurances are in the air . . . you don't know the pressure of influence coming from other guys around him, who wants what. It's a house of cards. (Quote from Carter and Haver, 2016.)

While inter-agency initiatives, particularly those at the national level, tend to be important for setting broad ground rules or engaging at senior levels, especially when dealing with relatively coherent entities, they can equally be hampered by the challenges of getting common agreement amongst diverse aid actors and by the political and operational limitations of the UN when it is in the lead. Aid agencies lack strong incentives to coordinate with each other on broader and longer-term access negotiations. They are most crucial and effective when establishing a high-level dialogue with state-based military actors, including for the purposes of deconfliction – ensuring that warring parties know an agency's coordinates and are notified of planned convoys in areas subject to airstrikes. As noted earlier, however, multiple examples illustrate that exercises in deconfliction have not mitigated state-based attacks, and some evidence shows that these attacks have been in full knowledge of the parties to the conflict.

3.3 What makes for successful negotiations?

Recent work has examined whether successful negotiations are based on power or interest, behaviour or culture, or a combination. As yet, there is no consensus. This is constrained by the lack of documentation and data and practice-sharing amongst agencies of their experience (Keogh and Ruijters, 2012; ICRC, 2015; Carter and Haver, 2016).

There's no doubt that perception of aid agency behaviour matters, as does the quality of aid delivery, particularly for less extremist groups. But as noted earlier, high quality aid may also be insufficient. A number of agencies indicated that, in their experience, their primary concern was securing trust. In some cases, however, securing the trust of armed actors was seen as impossible or greatly doubted based on past or others' experience. In the example of negotiations with IS, an interviewee from the SAVE study noted that:

We had to make a decision about whether to continue working in areas controlled by the Islamic State. We decided to stop working there, because we didn't want to enter direct negotiations with them. This was too risky for us – you upset one of them, and you find out that all of your staff are dead. (Quote from Carter and Haver, 2016.)

Another factor is the way in which agencies operate. Large-scale, visible programmes that are well known enable aid agencies to establish local acceptance. This is often not possible, however, for those operating with low visibility in remote areas (Haver and Carter, 2016).

Some agencies rely on a relatively simple formula. As one interviewee commented:

For us it wasn't about values or perceptions of Western groups, but it was a cold look at whether there was an interest from that group in what we provide.

The biggest risk (and often a reason why indirect negotiations fail) is when agencies assume the linkages between armed groups and communities that don't exist or that change over time. In addition, one of the clearest findings was that aid groups are most exposed when factionalism and infighting occur between militant groups (as compared to when one group has sole control of an area). This underscores the need for ongoing contextual analysis to anticipate potential shifts in armed actor group cohesion, disruptions in the chain of command, increased number of new groups, or a weakening of command and control.

4 Conclusion

It bears repeating that providing humanitarian aid in war is and has always been dangerous, and even with the best situational awareness and mitigation strategies reducing the risk of violence to zero is not possible. Aid agencies can help to reduce their residual risk, however, by investing in gaining a better understanding of the types of armed actors in their environment, what they want, how they behave, and how they view humanitarian assistance and those delivering it.

In the case of NSAGs, particularly those with national-level and governing ambitions, agencies can enhance their security by doing much more outreach and negotiation, and by engaging at higher levels on both sides. This will need to be accompanied by a clear organisational decision to engage with all parties to the conflict – irrespective of their political designation – something that is not only acceptable but necessary for the purposes of gaining access. It also requires a more structured way of considering the strategic compromises the agency is prepared to make to gain access and what it is not. It may be possible to gain security guarantees to operate in an area if all rules are obeyed – including that services exclude benefits to women or other groups or that payments are made – but it may not be acceptable. Documenting and reviewing decisions is critical to improving practice and learning, as well as ensuring senior management accountability.

In terms of state actors, the path forward for humanitarians is less clear. When the host state is not only unable and unwilling to protect aid actors, but also a major source of attacks against them, humanitarians seeking to secure their staff must approach the situation as it exists de facto, not in the aspirational terms of global political actors seeking to prop up a fiction of a functioning and legitimate government. This doesn't mean bypassing the state, but requires careful targeted outreach and the development of relationships at different levels of the government and with military actors.

More broadly, the rationalisation and normalisation of international humanitarian law transgressions by powerful state actors mandated to uphold it may not be foremost on the minds of aid agencies seeking secure access, but may lead to an uncertain and potentially very dangerous environment for humanitarian actors. Strong, collective humanitarian advocacy in national capitals and in global forums is critical to push for accountability and fight against the degradation of the norms of humanity.

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