Aid Worker Security Report 2022

Collateral violence: Managing risks for aid operations in major conflict

Humanitarian Outcomes

Summary of key findings

- Attacks on aid workers in 2021 claimed more lives than in any year since 2013: 141 reported fatalities.
- The number of individual attacks, 268, was down slightly from last year. In addition to the 141 aid workers killed, 203 were wounded and 117 kidnapped.
- South Sudan remained the most violent context for aid workers, followed by Afghanistan, Syria, Ethiopia, and Mali.
- Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatens to drive up the casualty numbers in 2022, with aid workers at risk of indiscriminate violence such as airstrikes, shelling, rocket attacks, and remnants of war.
- The unpredictable and potentially devastating consequences of airstrikes in particular seem to be a risk threshold that most interactional organisations are unwilling to cross. As a result, most remain at a distance from the front lines, paradoxically relying on less equipped local partners (and unsupported volunteer groups) to provide aid where the fighting is most intense.
- Deconfliction for humanitarian operations has a poor track record, and agencies are increasingly reluctant to share their location information for fear of strikes by military actors acting in bad faith.

The AWSD records major incidents of deliberate violence affecting humanitarian personnel.

These include:

- Killings
- Kidnappings (where the victim is held over 24 hours)
- Serious injuries
- Rape and sexual assault

For each report, the AWSD records the:

- Date
- Country | Geocodes
- Number of affected aid workers
- Gender
- Type of staff: National | International
- Institutional affiliation: UN | INGO | NGO | Other
- Incident outcome: Killed Wounded | Kidnapped
- Means of violence
- Context of attack
- Summary description of incident

Introduction

Table 1: Major attacks on aid workers: summary statistics, 2012-2021

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of incidents	170	265	192	150	163	160	229	276	283	268
Total aid worker victims	277	474	333	290	295	315	409	481	484	461
Total killed	71	159	123	111	109	140	131	125	117	141
Total injured	115	179	89	110	99	103	147	234	242	203
Total kidnapped*	91	136	121	69	87	72	131	122	125	117
International victims	49	60	33	30	43	28	29	27	25	23
National victims	228	414	300	260	252	287	380	454	459	438
UN staff	48	115	64	44	71	48	70	37	58	55
International NGO staff	97	142	152	173	161	109	186	260	228	198
National NGO staff	92	145	71	39	40	84	128	154	168	187
Red Cross/Crescent Movement**	27	58	43	31	21	74	25	16	28	11

* Survivors, or whereabouts unknown

** Includes International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and national societies

Armed conflict is a cause of, or contributor to, nearly every humanitarian emergency the international system responds to each year. It is also the main driver of aid worker casualties, which mostly come in the form of attacks by armed groups—who target aid workers as proxies for their enemies—or to divert or steal aid resources. More rarely will aid workers find themselves working amid major warfare between militaries using heavy and advanced weapons. In such conditions of widescale and intense combat, such as Syria, Yemen, and now Ukraine, humanitarian providers face a different sort of threat and security needs.

This year's Aid Worker Security Report examines the type of security incidents that involve what is often called "collateral damage", which includes airstrikes, shelling, landmines, unexploded ordnance and other remnants of war, and crossfire. The likelihood of staff falling victim to these forms of attack may be low, but because it can be harder to predict, and the consequences can be so severe, the risk is harder to mitigate. As a result, it often becomes the hard line in an agency's decision to be present or not. Across the humanitarian sector generally, aid agencies are not equipped or willing to work amid these risks—and far less the risk of chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) attack or event.

The research for this report included interviews with aid practitioners working in Myanmar, Ethiopia (Tigray), Ukraine, Syria, and Yemen, and other professionals experienced in humanitarian operations in major conflict.

1 Aid worker attacks: latest statistics

1.1 Most violent contexts

Although major attacks affecting aid workers took place in 34 countries in 2021, most of them (57%) occurred in just five settings: South Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria, Ethiopia, and Mali. Other countries with high numbers of major attacks were Myanmar, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Central African Republic (CAR), and Cameroon (Figure 1).

South Sudan, although it has been largely out of the spotlight of international attention, saw a surge in fatal violence during 2021.[1] In the wake of the September 2018 peace agreement, UN peacekeeping forces withdrew leaving a protection vacuum that allowed new intergroup tensions and land use disputes to flare, fuelled by abundant small arms. Militarised cattle raiders, other criminal groups, and youth gangs committed increasing violence across communities and banditry on the roads. In all, this type of violence killed 29 aid workers in South Sudan in 2021—a statistically significant spike in fatality numbers.

Afghanistan also experienced a rise in violence in 2021,[2] mostly in the months preceding the Taliban takeover as the US military pulled out and the Taliban forces intensified their campaign. While Afghanistan had a third fewer total attacks than South Sudan, they resulted in 21 aid worker fatalities. Seven of the killed were polio vaccinators, and in one incident, 10 staff of a demining NGO were killed (and 16 wounded) in a raid by ISIS on the organisation's camp.

As civil conflict continued in Syria, shelling and airstrikes remained the main means of violence affecting aid workers there, with 37 aid workers affected (10 of them killed) in 11 incidents in 2021 (preceded by a statistically significant rise in improvised explosive device (IED) attacks in northwest Syria due to the shifting conflict dynamics).[3]

Casualties in the Ethiopia conflict in Tigray were mostly caused by small arms, but an airstrike there also took the life of one aid worker in 2021.

Mali, usually a dangerous context for UN peacekeeping forces, found itself among the top five most violent contexts towards aid workers. This was primarily due to high numbers of kidnappings for ransom—a tactic used by the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) militia and other armed groups—affecting 41 aid workers in 16 separate incidents.

Also notable in the data were rising incidents in Myanmar, where worsening political violence has been reflected in violence against aid workers—almost exclusively affecting local organisations—despite the severe access constraints and shrinking aid presence in that country.[4]

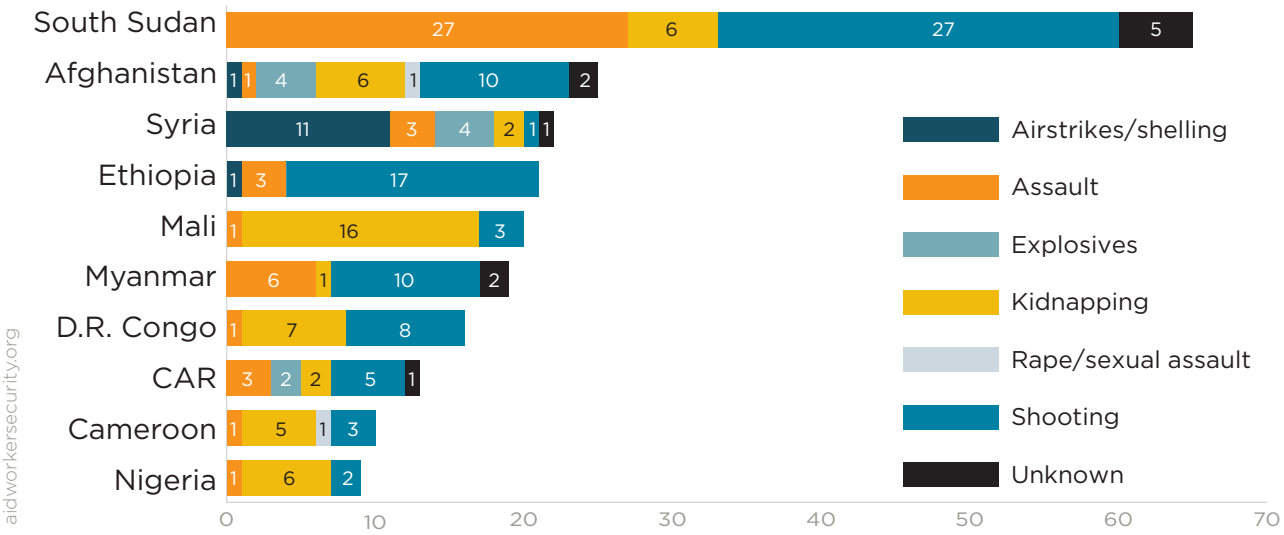
[1] Humanitarian Outcomes. (2021a). AWSD Signal Alert: Fatal attacks on aid workers on the rise in South Sudan. https://aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/AWSD%20Signal%20Alert_South%20Sudan_FINAL.pdf

[2] Humanitarian Outcomes. (2021b). AWSD Signal Alert: Shifting security conditions in Afghanistan. https://aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Signal%20Alert%20Afghanistan_2021.pdf

[3] This prompted our first Signal Alert report. Humanitarian Outcomes. (2020). AWSD Signal Alert: Spike in IED attacks in northwest Syria. https://aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/awsd_signal_alert_syria_2020.pdf

[4] Humanitarian Outcomes. (2021c). AWSD Signal Alert: Politically motived attacks rising in Myanmar. https://aidworkersecurity.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/AWSD%20Signal%20Alert_Myanmar_Final_2021.pdf

Figure 1: Top 10 most violent contexts and means of attack, 2021

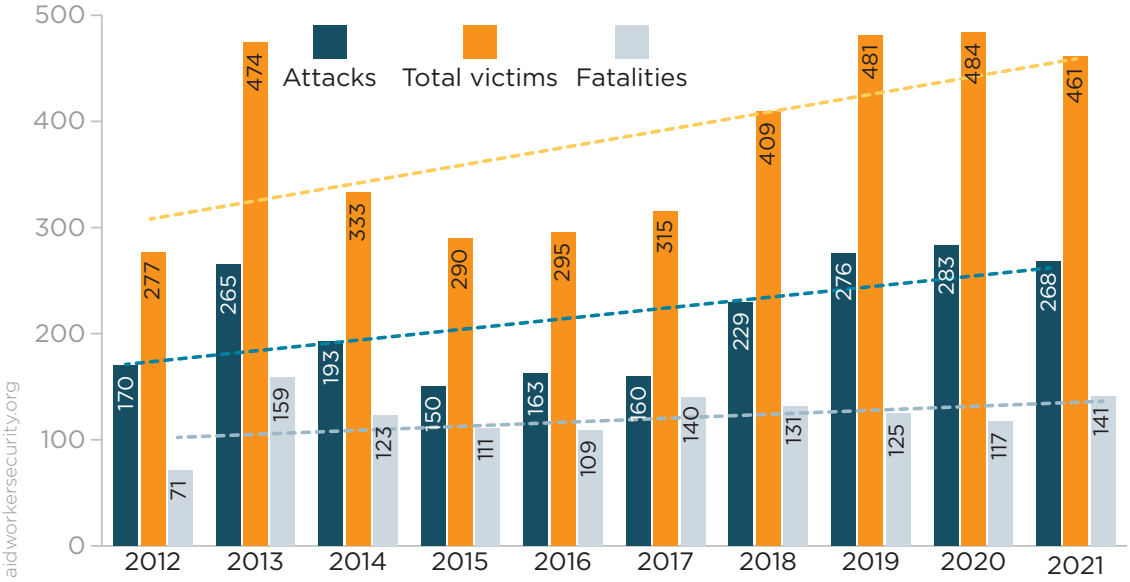


Finally, although data on it is not strong, aid workers interviewed reported rising incidents of arrest and detention risks from increasingly authoritarian regimes—and to mistreatment and even torture of some detainees. For example, an international NGO working in Ethiopia talked about having to invest significant time working with multiple police stations to get people released following arrest.

1.2 Global totals

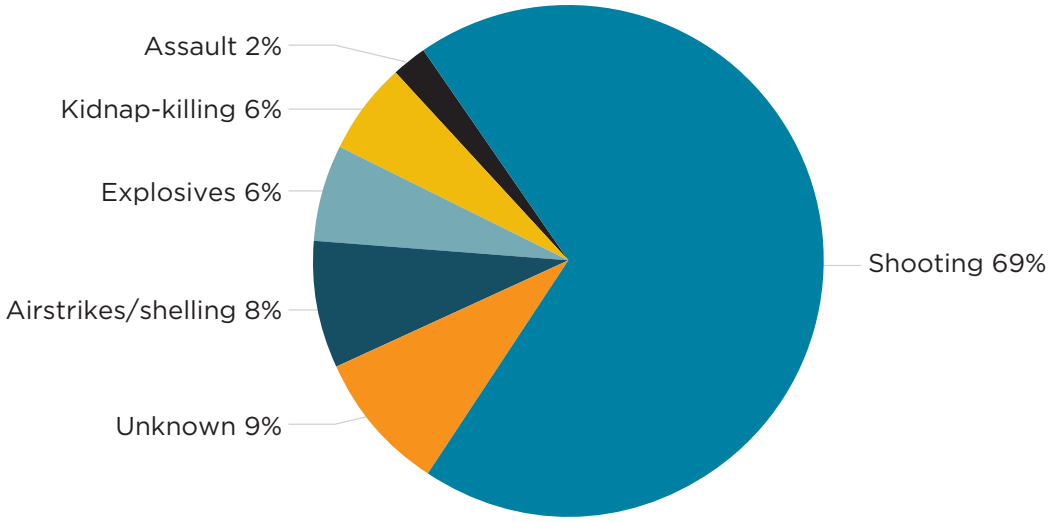
Worldwide there were slightly fewer major incidents of violence affecting aid workers in 2021 compared to the previous two years—but with more lethal outcomes. A total of 268 attacks took place in 34 countries, resulting in 461 aid workers harmed. Of these victims, 203 were seriously injured, 117 were kidnapped, and 141 were killed. The 141 aid worker fatalities in 2021 represent the highest number recorded since 2013 (when 159 aid workers were killed, making it the worst year on record).

Figure 2: Major attacks, victims, and fatalities, 2012-2021



Reflecting the typical composition of national and international aid worker victims, 98% of the aid workers who died were nationals of the emergency country and 2% were internationals. More than half the fatalities (53%) were staff members of national NGOs. Most were killed by small weapons in shooting incidents. The second largest known cause of death was airstrikes and shelling (Figure 2).

Figure 3: Aid worker fatalities and causes, 2021



The threat of heavy weaponry and major combat operations is less often encountered by aid organisations than small arms, but it also tends to be more deadly. For example, although airstrikes made up only 7% of incidents affecting aid workers over the past 10 years, they were responsible for 15% of the fatalities.

2 The ‘collateral violence’ risk

Humanitarians, who work unarmed amid armed conflicts, face a wide range of violence risks. Broadly, these can be divided into targeted attacks and collateral, or ‘ambient’, violence that affects aid workers because they are present on the scene and not necessarily to discourage or divert their aid operations. Throughout this paper we use the term ‘collateral violence’ instead of the more commonplace ‘collateral damage’ because of the latter term’s connotation of inadvertent and unwanted effects of warfare. As this paper will discuss, the harm to humanitarians and other civilian non-combatants caused by this violence is not always inadvertent, but at times can be deliberate or desirable to a combatant, who will then deny or obfuscate their violation of international humanitarian law.

Even if an aid group believed the risk of being hit by shelling, airstrikes or combat-related attacks to be truly inadvertent and untargeted, however, the existence of this threat is often the red line for whether they will deploy staff to an active warzone or not. And most do not. Reasons include the lack of predictability and recourse to active means of mitigation (such as acceptance approaches), but also the high costs and limited efficacy of defensive measures.

2.1 Risk vs uncertainty

The term ‘risk,’ though often used interchangeably with ‘threat’, ‘hazard’, and ‘uncertainty’, has a specific definition: it is a measure of the probability and potential impact of an adverse event. In other words, a risk is the likelihood of encountering a given threat or hazard and the consequences that would result. By assigning scores to the two factors in the risk equation—probability and impact—a security manager can measure and compare different risks and then make decisions and allocate resources accordingly. This model of risk assessment is the cornerstone of security risk management (SRM) in the humanitarian sector.

Of course, not every risk is equally conceivable, and assigning probabilities to them necessarily involves a certain degree of subjective judgement and educated guesses. At one extreme, events can have specific, defined odds, like rolls of a dice—never the case in SRM scenarios. At the other end are the so-called “black swan” events that by definition are impossible to predict and are potentially so impactful that they render any prior risk management efforts irrelevant. Along this spectrum are degrees of unpredictability.

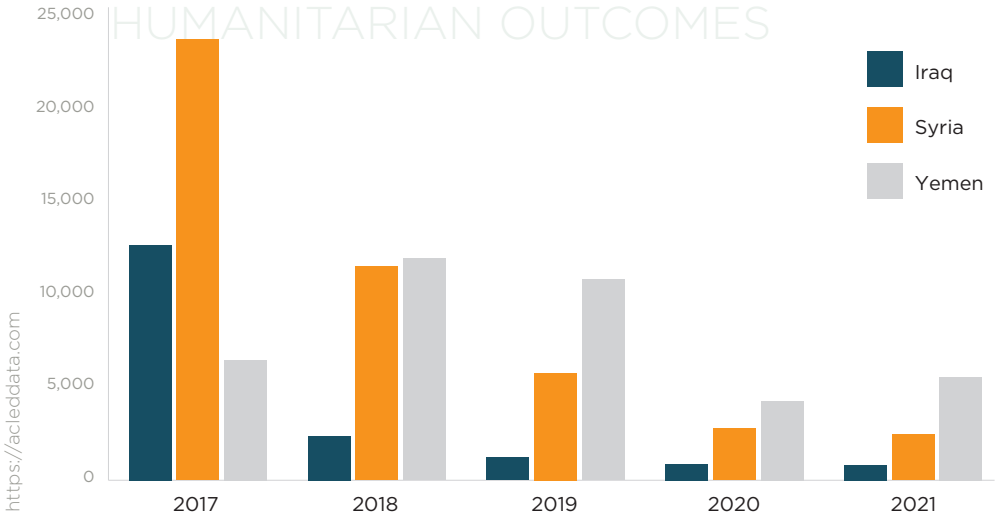
Some airstrikes, like those from remotely piloted drones, can be highly precise and pose less risk of collateral violence, but when dealing with cluster bombs, rocket attacks and heavy artillery, randomness and unpredictability become more salient. Saturation fire, as the name implies, indiscriminately covers wide areas for destruction, such as with multiple rocket launchers, cluster bombs, or carpet-bombing tactics. In other cases, “predicted fire” can sometimes be avoided by keeping away from known targets (e.g. military installations, government buildings, or in the case of Myanmar, banks) or remaining outside the radius of shelling/rocket attacks. In major combat, however, many different weapons and tactics may be used simultaneously. Moreover, an area that was quiet one day may become an active theatre the next, with little warning. As an interviewee in Ukraine observed, even though cities like Lviv are considered much safer than points east, “Really nowhere in Ukraine is totally safe. No matter where people are, they end up spending a lot of time in bunkers.” An international NGO security manager admitted, “The reflex is not to go, because of the randomness of the risk and lack of indicators to help you plan and mitigate.”

This pervasive sense of uncertainty leads organisations to take varying SRM decisions dependent on their own (and that of the organisational culture's) sense of risks, but in the aggregate, it often results in low aid presence, and with the least equipped and experienced aid providers (e.g. local volunteers) facing the greatest danger.[5]

2.2 Threat environments and the decision to be present

Over the past five years, the world's most intense armed conflicts have included three that involved extensive use of air power and heavy artillery: Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.[6] The impact of these weapons and tactics has resulted in high numbers of civilian fatalities (Figure 4). It is also notable that these conflicts are among the hardest to access and therefore underserved by humanitarian relief aid.[7]

Figure 4: Civilian fatalities from airstrikes, shelling, landmines, and unexploded ordinance, 2017-2021



The UN, and some NGOs, use location-specific insecurity ratings to guide decision-making and security resource allocations, but what constitutes an untenable security situation will differ depending on the organisation's mandate and risk threshold. Across many organisations, however, the threat of aerial bombardment and heavy artillery (shells, grenades, and rockets) often represents the common hard line they refuse to let staff cross. One veteran NGO security expert noted that "A context requiring body armour and helmets used to be the threshold for going in or not". There are a number of organisations in Ukraine, for example, that will not go further east than Dnipro, and others that remain in Lviv or across the border, to avoid the risk of collateral violence. In Syria, some humanitarians said, similarly, that they "knew where the hot conflict lines were and stayed away from them". To some security managers, this simplifies things. As one said, "The impact of risks in Ukraine is huge, but there's not that much complexity. It's not like northeast Congo with multiple armed groups that we don't even know about, just potential immense impact that can occur wherever you are".

In Syria, similarly, some organisations said they "knew where the hot conflict lines were and stayed away from them". Some of these same organisations might routinely work in other armed conflict areas, such as Afghanistan pre-Taliban takeover, eastern DRC, and the Sahel, where battlelines are fluid and indistinct. In such places, aid workers run a greater risk of being

[5] Stoddard, A., Harvey, P., Timmins, N., Pakhomenko, V., Breckenridge, M.-J., and Czwarno, M. (2022). Enabling the local response: Emerging humanitarian priorities in Ukraine March-May 2022. Humanitarian Outcomes. https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/ukraine_review_2022.pdf

[6] As yet, there is no verified data for Ukraine but reports suggest the country will top this list in 2022.

[7] See for example, Humanitarian Outcomes research programmes on Secure Access in Violent Environments (https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/save) and Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core).

directly targeted by armed groups, but are more accustomed to mitigating that sort of risk by undertaking acceptance measures and negotiated access.

Security decisions on where and how to work in an active conflict environment are usually taken at the country level by security managers (or senior staff with security responsibilities) according to the best information they can assemble from a variety of sources. And although they may try to objectively assess the risks in terms of their probability and impact, they do not make these decisions in a vacuum, devoid of emotion or without factoring in other considerations. One security director for an international NGO admitted that he considered not just the potential loss of life, but also the almost certain litigation that would follow in the event of staff members being killed as a result of being too close to hostilities. This particular combination of perceived randomness and potentially massive impact of the collateral violence risk challenges security managers and leads to idiosyncratic ways of approaching decisions. As another security director remarked, "We have always said randomness and stupidity are the hardest things to mitigate for".

2.3 The dilemma of deconfliction

Deconfliction—the practice of communicating with militaries to avoid inadvertent strikes—along with the wider domain of civil-military coordination, presupposes good faith and trustworthiness on the part of military actors. Over the decades, humanitarian actors have engaged in deconfliction and civil-military efforts individually and jointly, with mixed results.[8]

The basis of civil-military coordination relies on communication and relationship building, and outcomes rely on understanding the motivations of actors (both humanitarian and military). Notwithstanding notable examples and case studies of successful coordination and collaboration efforts,[9] including recent examples in Afghanistan, there are also many examples of failure, and evidence of a deep chasm between the humanitarian and the military sectors generally that makes relationship building a challenge.[10] Humanitarians admit to a deep-seated aversion to working with militaries, both from an optics and an ethical perspective. More specifically, humanitarians point to the experience of Syria, where humanitarians and medical providers who provided their coordinates saw their facilities attacked, as were clearly marked and pre-announced aid convoys.

In both Syria and Yemen, the lack of recourse or accountability after such betrayals for years naturally destroys trust, and several humanitarian organisations interviewed now consider that deconfliction activity, at least with the Russian military, creates more danger than it mitigates. Some have refused to cooperate with the UN-led deconfliction efforts in Ukraine for that reason. Said one, "I just don't see how it works when a party to the conflict has such little respect [for international humanitarian law]".[11]

[8] For thorough review, see Grace, R. (2020). Civilian-military coordination in humanitarian response. Expanding the evidence base. https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs/files/chrhs/imce/research/Civilian-Military%20Coordination%20in%20Humanitarian%20Response_Expanding%20the%20Evidence%20Base.pdf

[9] See: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2022). What is UN-CMCoord? OCHA on Message. https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/OOM%20-UNCMCoord.pdf; Alejandria, M. C. P., Boland, S.T., Brightman, H., Grace, R., Levine, A. C., Nylen, A. J., Polatty, D., and Tayyeb, Z. (2022). Humanitarian-military relations in complex emergencies: Evidence, insights, and recommendations. https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs/files/chrhs/imce/partnerships/Civ-Mil/PRM%20Report%205_26.pdf

[10] Metcalfe-Hough, V., Haysom, S., and Gordon, S. (2014). Trends and challenges in humanitarian civil-military coordination. HPG Working Paper. ODI. https://odi.org/en/publications/trends-and-challenges-in-humanitarian-civilmilitary-coordination/

[11] Public healthcare personnel and facilities also suffer high casualties while purportedly protected from conflict under international humanitarian law. The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition's (SHCC) map on attacks on healthcare shows that, as of 5 August 2022, there were 1,279 health facilities damaged, 995 healthcare workers killed and 1,920 injured due to conflict-related attacks since 2015. See: Insecurity Insight. (2022). Attacked and threatened: Health care at risk. Retrieved 5 August 2022 from https://map.insecurityinsight.org/health.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has led the sector on developing guidance on humanitarian notification systems for deconfliction purposes. Known as Humanitarian Notification System for Deconfliction (HNS4D), the system was created to decrease the accidental targeting of humanitarian sites and operations, along with "civilian objects that fulfil a humanitarian function, movements of humanitarian staff and supplies, and critical civilian infrastructure".[12] In addition to disagreements over what constitutes a legitimate civilian or humanitarian site, HNS4D has been challenged by instances where information in the system was reportedly shared with actors who had no interest in facilitating humanitarian aid or safety.[13] There also appears to be little understanding or clarity on the chain of custody for the data and who is allowed to access it.

Interviews make clear that humanitarians worry that sharing location information will result in them being intentionally targeted by military actors, and the fact that the mechanism functions on a voluntary basis without any legally binding provisions or Security Council resolutions undercuts accountability. A UN Board of Inquiry investigation on attacks on deconflicted sites in Syria (childcare centres, schools, clinics, and hospitals, especially in Idlib, northern Hama, and Western Aleppo) failed to name Russia as an "equal culprit" to the bombing owing to Russia's veto power on the Security Council.[14] Meanwhile, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) documented 595 attacks on approximately 350 different health care facilities that killed 923 medical workers.[15] PHR found that 90% of the attacks could be tied to the Syrian government and its allies, including Russia.

HNS4D and other notification systems cannot provide what humanitarians insist is vital—an accountability mechanism. Without it, agencies say that it is too easy for military actors to deny having received the shared coordinates. Technological innovation has been explored, mostly around blockchain technology to create immutable records, information validation, and metadata sharing protocols and controls, which humanitarians hoped could limit what information is being shared and with whom, and provide an accountability measure—but the possibility for future implementation remains a big question mark.[16]

On an individual agency level, some international organisations that operate in the most extreme environments (and there are usually no more than a handful) are accustomed to conducting their own frontline negotiations and deconfliction efforts, but this works better when the area and force command in question are smaller and localised. Even so, when battle conditions are fluid, the hard-won contacts and relationships may not last. In Tigray an international NGO lost its local contacts after a counterattack by Tigrayan forces, in which they lost a staff member, and the Ethiopian government forces retreated. With no local or national level military contacts, they had to abandon their operations to find and care for wounded civilians.

The growing reluctance of humanitarians to participate in deconfliction mechanisms has led some to worry that efforts on civil-military coordination more generally will suffer. Interviewees noted that negotiating with armed actors at multiple levels (locally, nationally, and regionally) remains central to enabling continued access in active conflicts and to good security management.

[12] OCHA. (2021). Humanitarian notification system supporting access and protection. Standard operating procedures for humanitarian actors on the notification process in Syria, p. 2. https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/humanitarian_notification_-_syria_-_sop.pdf

[13] On 3 October 2015, US airstrikes destroyed an MSF trauma hospital. MSF reaffirmed the Kabul Trauma Center's location in emails to the US Department of Defense, Afghanistan's Ministries of Interior and Defense, and the US army in Kabul. See: Bouchet-Saulnier, F. and Whittall, J. (2018). An environment conducive to mistakes? Lessons learnt from the attack on the Médecins Sans Frontières hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan. International Review of the Red Cross, 100(907-909), 337-372. doi:10.1017/S1816383118000619; Médecins Sans Frontières. (2015, 4 December). War comes to the hospital: Kunduz and beyond. https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/latest/war-comes-hospital-kunduz-and-beyond

[14] A few of these were S/2012/538, S/2011/612, S/2020/667.

[15] The upward overall trend of attacks against health care is well documented. See: Druce, P., Bogatyreva, E., Siem, F.F., Gates, S., Kaade, H., Sundby, J. et al. (2019). Approaches to protect and maintain health care services in armed conflict—meeting SDGs 3 and 16. Conflict and Health 13, 2. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-019-0186-0

[16] Park, D.C. (2022). Exploring distributed ledger applications in OCHA's Humanitarian Notification System for Confliction (HNS4D) active in Syria. The Public Sphere: Journal of Public Policy. https://psj.lse.ac.uk/articles/abstract/116/

3 Observed practice and existing guidance

The humanitarian security guidance mainstay Good Practice Review 8: Operational Security Management in Violent Environments (GPR8), includes a chapter on combat-related threats and remnants of war, which opens with blunt advice for aid agencies: "Key issues to consider in active combat areas include whether the agency should be there at all… and whether the benefits of staying (i.e. the programme impact) outweigh the risks."[17] Indeed, a majority of organisations find they do not, and instead most choose to operate from areas safely outside the zone of active combat.[18]

Those organisations that accept the risks of working close to active combat display some common adaptations and practices. These include the use of periodic hibernation, short work/R&R cycles for internationals, and reducing staff numbers and relying more on local partners. Even organisations that usually implement programmes directly will work more through local partners in some cases, limiting their own staff to brief "in and out" visits to the project sites. Some interviewees noted that the experience of working during COVID-19 lockdowns has driven greater use of remote consultation and training, which is also employed in these non-permissive environments.

Unlike other areas of humanitarian security risk management, which deal with human complexities such as access negotiations, acceptance strategies, and personal risk profiling, not much new guidance regarding conflict-related risk and heavy weaponry has emerged that significantly expands on early materials like the GPR8. Such guidance is usefully collated and summarised in Global INGO Security Forum (GISF)'s NGO Security Toolbox and in the security training courses offered by INSSA and RedR among others.[19] With external guidance sources and training available, it may not be necessarily problematic that most international organisations interviewed reported that their own internal security guidance "cover security in hot conflicts, but not in depth". That fact may be more indicative of the reality that very few organisations operate in hot conflict zones.

There are some basic readiness elements that aid groups need to ensure when collateral violence risks are present.

Air strikes and shelling

Mitigating the risk to staff of heavy bombardment requires aid organisations to consider what means of extraction would be available, and alternate strategies for when extraction is impossible. Planning and preparedness efforts must therefore involve a plan for how people under fire will shelter and sustain themselves for days, or even weeks, until they can safely move, or be evacuated or negotiated out. In addition to places to shelter (preferably underground), they will need adequate supplies of water, food, means of communication, and other necessities. (One expert in the field remarked that exit plans too often rely on unfounded assumptions, such as airlines being operational or the UN or partner organisations being willing and able to perform rescue missions.)

[17] Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN). (2010). Good practice review. Operational security management in violent environments. p. 253. Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI. https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/GPR_8_revised2.pdf

[18] Stoddard, A., Jillani, S., Caccavale, J., Cooke, P., Guillemois, D., and Klimentov, V. (2017). Out of reach: How insecurity prevents humanitarian aid from reaching the neediest. Stability: International Journal of Security and Development, 6(1). http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.506

[19] Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF). (2022). Air attacks, explosives, bombs, shootings, and weapon finds guidance. Threat guides. NGO Security Toolbox. https://gisf.ngo/toolbox-pwa/resource/6-threat-guides/

Key preparedness elements include:

- Identification/mapping of shelters
  - They should be reachable on foot within five minutes and not locked. Facilities should meet minimum standards, but with the understanding that they still may not protect people against a large direct hit
  - They should not be located close to likely military targets "such as airfields, barracks, fuel depots, official buildings or strategic points such as crossroads, railheads, power stations and radio and TV buildings"[20]
- Training: Ensure staff know where the nearest shelters are and that they drill getting to shelters as well as how to 'hit the deck' and find cover for sudden strikes, blasts, or shooting events
- Fall-back locations: Identify alternative facilities further from front lines to pull staff and operations back to, if fighting intensifies and there is time to move
- Safety protocols: e.g., have staff travel in twos, at a minimum, and carrying first aid kit
- Go-bags in vehicles and offices/accommodations
- Delay period protocol: Before moving after a strike, staff should know to wait for an agreed length of time in case of double-tap or follow-up attack

Remnants of war

A good deal of detailed guidance and training courses exist on mines, IEDs, unexploded ordnance (UXOs) including rockets, grenades, shells, bullets and other so called 'remnants of war'—all collateral violence risks that could create a devastating impact if encountered by staff. Awareness raising and training for how to avoid these munitions, and report them if encountered, is critical for the safety of staff and local people and is the responsibility of any organisations responding in areas where this threat exists.

Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear

The war in Ukraine has raised the spectre of the risk of CBRN attacks or accidents, heightened recently by reports of shelling around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. It is a challenging prospect, to say the least, for aid organisations that struggle to provide staff with adequate accommodation and transport to think about mitigation measures from what all agree is an unlikely but still a "non-zero probability" of a CBRN event. It is fair to say that most have no specific contingency plans or preparedness measures. A few organisations said they had stockpiled potassium iodide pills in the event of radiation, and hazmat suits and/or escape hoods for short-term protection in the event of chemical attacks—but not nearly in numbers sufficient to cover all staff members, much less local civilians. The gravity of such risks lends a certain fatalism to conversations about risk management. As one security professional said, "Much more than that you can't do. Russians have occupied the second biggest nuclear plant in Europe a couple of days ago, and this could pose a fatal threat to everyone here".

Personnel and training issues

Security managers interviewed for this report returned often to the subject of human resources. Even before considering training needs, it is important to get the right profile of staff in place for extreme settings, where levels of stress and uncertainty are high and unremitting, and staff member fear and trauma is its own risk. Unfortunately, according to these professionals, human resources are stretched thin at the best of times, and they rarely have the luxury of choice when it comes to filling these positions. Organisations responding to Ukraine almost universally

[20] HPN. (2010). p. 255.

expressed difficulty in recruiting adequate numbers of staff, both international and national. Ideally, they said, the people they seek to hire will have prior experience working in active conflict settings, as it is hard to predict in advance how a given person will react to the extreme stress, but the pool of candidates is simply not large enough for this experience to be a prerequisite.

In terms of training, a shift partly driven by COVID-19 to more remote learning is enabling greater numbers of national staff and local partner organisations to receive security training. There has also been greater investment in translation to enable local staff and partners to receive security training in their own languages. International organisations working in conflict environments commonly provide hostile environment awareness training (HEAT) courses (or agency specific variants), at least for their international staff. Interviewees had divergent views on its utility for the collateral violence risk in a "traditional" war involving major combat, such as Ukraine. Some thought there was over-investment in the focus on personal awareness type of training that HEAT offers, as opposed to investing in stronger security management systems and staff capacity to manage them. However, most thought that a HEAT course of some type was vital for all staff, if context-specific and tailored to the most relevant threats in the environment. In Ukraine, for example, one security manager said, "People need mine awareness, UXO awareness, hibernation, and evacuation/relocation drills first. Not radio, checkpoint training, call signs, or anything like this. So 80% of the basic HEAT course is obsolete here"."

3.1 Lessons from the White Helmets and other promising practices

Founded in the first year of Syria's civil war (2012), Syria Civil Defence—commonly known as the White Helmets—runs rescue teams for civilians trapped or injured amid bombardment. The danger to its staff comes not only from the necessity of their being present amid the most intense combat operations, but also from direct targeting by Syrian government and Russian forces, including the common and insidious practice of double-tap strikes, where combatants will wait until the rescuers arrive on the scene to strike a second time. Initially organised as small groups of volunteers in some of the non-government controlled areas, the group grew rapidly as it professionalised and expanded operations across eight governorates in Syria.

Despite its brief history, probably no other single organisation has had greater direct experience with bombardment, as testified by its hundreds of casualties. Published with the permission of Syria Civil Defence leadership, below are some of the practices developed by the organisation to maximise the security of its staff.

Observers/early warning system

Every operational centre has a sentry service, where an observer with a radio is assigned to watch the sky, monitor aircraft movements, and communicate with other observers and any teams responding. A network of reliable civilians also provides information that is triangulated with those of the observers to predict locations of airstrikes and broadcast warnings.

Civilian alerts

Regionally-based Telegram channels, Twitter, and other rapid means of communication are used to share security information and warning messages with local people, schools, and hospitals, adding an active protection element to rescue and medical programming. In addition to digital messaging, the alert system uses sirens and a visual warning system (VWS—in cooperation with Hala Systems) using coloured lights installed in community centres and medical, educational, and protection facilities, and other community centres to indicate specific threats.

Excerpt from Syria Civil Defence's "What is VWS (visual warning system)"

The system analyzes the warnings received from the observatories, and these warnings are processed under specific conditions, and then sends commands to the light warning devices, in the areas of the expected threat to activate the lights according to the type of threat.

This process is done automatically (provided that the devices are connected to electricity and the Internet), and therefore there is no need for a human being beside it to be activated.

Lights indication:

Yellow light: Indicates the danger of an aircraft approaching, and it works in the case:

- Watching aircraft flying towards the facility area, 50 km away, and the area around the facility was previously bombed (during the last 15 to 180 days).

Red light: indicates the danger of direct targeting, and it works in one of two cases:

- An aircraft was seen flying towards the facility area, 25 km away, and the vicinity of the facility was recently bombed (in the last 15 days).
- In case that the aircraft is flying in a circle around the facility area.

Blue light: (for medical facilities only) Prepared for the possibility of receiving injured, and works in the case of:

- Reports of a confirmed air strike within 20 kilometers of the medical facility area (only through a notification issued by the SCD members).

Low-profile movements

Motorcycle scouting was an important security innovation. To avoid double-tap targeting, each centre has a motorcycle for initial discreet scouting runs after an airstrike, before the full rescue team is deployed. Team members also avoid wearing reflective clothing, which can be seen from the sky, and cover any emblems on vehicles.

Other promising practices

A small number of international NGOs reported developing new practices or adaptations to working in extreme environments that are worthy of consideration for possible replication.

An international NGO has constructed a relatively low-cost system to track the locations of staff and vehicles in extremely high-risk areas, allowing it to quickly ascertain if any staff are in the vicinity of airstrikes, or to react to carjacking/kidnapping events. Using GPS locators in staff cell phones and Garmin inReach devices in each vehicle, the organisation can remotely monitor the exact location of all staff operating in highly insecure locations. The devices and platform (using the Iridium satellite system) are highly affordable if used on a small scale (a few hundred dollars per device and a fixed fee per month). Costs increase considerably, however, if an organisation seeks to staff a 24/7 operations room and emergency standby facility. Though most NGOs do not have this level of budget, it could be a useful area for collaboration and cost-sharing.

Security professionals agree it is also useful to avoid reinventing the wheel if existing measures prove adequate. None of the NGOs interviewed in Ukraine, for example, had stood up its own early warning communications system, choosing instead to use the Ukrainian government-approved smartphone app, used across the country for airstrike alerts.

One international NGO stressed the importance of preparedness, scenario planning, and granular context analysis during active conflict periods in Syria and Libya. Having moved offices away from front lines, they shifted their emphasis to training local teams and partners and using mobile teams and hub-based operations for a more flexible approach to reaching affected populations as conflict events occurred.

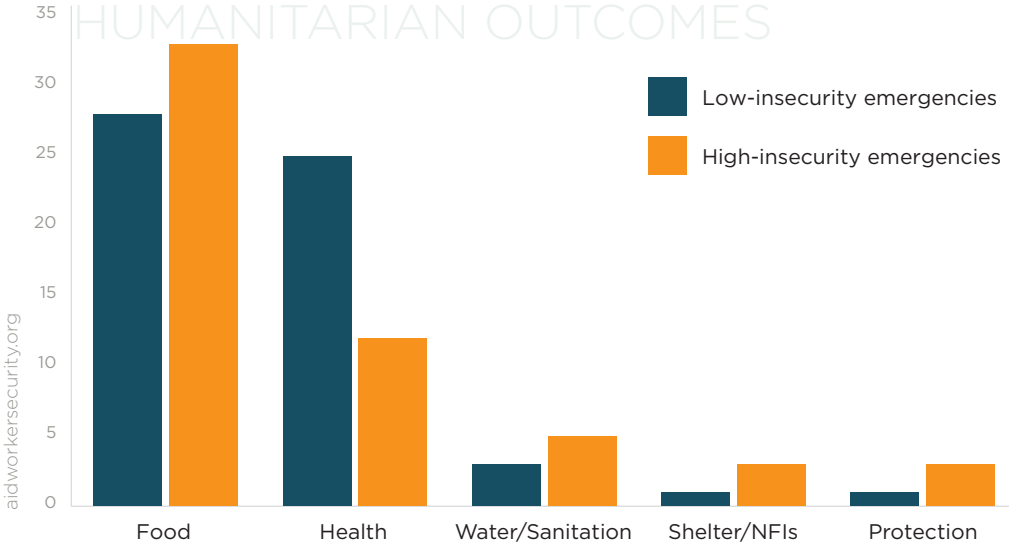
3.2 Weaknesses

Interviews for this paper also revealed common problematic practices or gap areas.

The missing protection piece

Apart from organisations whose missions or mandates primarily involve protecting or rescuing civilians from violence, such as ICRC and Syria Civil Defence, there is little evidence of an increased programming focus aimed at the protection of affected populations across the humanitarian sector. This conforms to a longstanding pattern in humanitarian response in insecure contexts—as conflicts intensify and civilian casualties mount, resources for protection activities increase only by a small amount, and nowhere near commensurate to the increase in protection needs. Protection remains a small fraction of overall humanitarian programming, even in contexts labelled as primarily "protection crises", like South Sudan at the height of the civil war.

Figure 5: Funding by sector as a percentage of total contributions, 2011-2014. Source: SAVE (2016).



Risk transfer and insufficient duty of care to national staff and partners

Humanitarians widely agree that duty of care and the ethics of working with partners remains a major problem area in high-risk contexts. In Syria, when government forces overtook areas causing people to flee, aid agencies abruptly stopped working with their partner organisations and provided little or no support (such as severance payments) for their displaced partner staff members. Despite increasing reliance on local organisations in active conflicts, support for them in terms of training, greater funding, support for stronger security management systems, and duty of care continues to be seen as inadequate.[21] Besides security training and cooperation, other types of support that would be of great value to local partners would include, for instance: the ability to pay salaries in advance during active conflict periods so that people can relocate as needed; support for self-insurance schemes; assistance with evacuation and temporary accommodation; and psychosocial support. An interviewee spoke of having lobbied but failed to get international NGOs to provide a relocation grant to their partners in Syria, citing "casual disregard" for people and partners. Despite a commonly felt "ethical duty of care" to national partner organisations (for whom there is no legal duty of care responsibility), agencies admit they have a long way to go to meet this standard. Said one, "We work a lot with partners [but] we're not there yet in terms of extending SOPs [standard operating procedures] and guidance. With hindsight, we could have done more."

[21] GISF. (2020). Partnerships and security risk management: From the local partner's perspective. https://gisf.ngo/resource/partnerships-and-security-risk-management-from-the-local-partners-perspective/

Conclusion

No aid organisation is prepared to lose large numbers of staff or even think in terms of "acceptable losses" as militaries do. In hot conflict environments, as the uncertainty and potential impact of threats increase and risks become harder to predict and mitigate, we reliably see international organisations differentiating from each other in terms of:

- whether they will respond inside the affected country or focus instead on refugee aid across the border
- how close to the front lines they will work
- (most rarely) if they will work behind the front lines.

The extent of risk-taking, and the reasoning behind it, becomes more idiosyncratic as managers are faced with large unknowns and must make decisions based on the organisations mission, culture, unique risk appetite, and their own personal psychological comfort level. As a result, two organisations may take completely opposite decisions (for instance, regarding whether it is less risky to move staff by rail or by road in Ukraine) based on their own security calculus. What should not be left up to discretion, however, is the ethical imperative to lend support to national aid workers, volunteers and first responders, who have assumed the greatest risk in these scenarios. The fundamental principles of humanitarian action call for aid to address suffering wherever it is found, and according to who needs it most. While it may be inevitable that local actors take on the greatest risks in this effort, better equipped and funded international aid agencies have an obligation to help them mitigate the risks as much as possible, by passing the resources forward.

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Locations of airstrikes and shelling incidents killing aid workers from 2014 to 2021

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