

Reverberating Effects from Military Action

PAX Protections of Civilians Conference 2020 – Day 3
Considerations for Military Actors¹

Context

On December 3, 2020, as part of the PAX Protection of Civilians Conference, we discussed the long-term and reverberating effects on civilians of military use of force in conflict with a wide range of participants. Today, civilians continue to experience the harmful effects of use of force in conflicts around the world. Throughout the day, presentations from experts and interactions with participants showed that all military actors can cause harm to civilians, not only non-state armed groups or regimes that have turned against their own populations: **Even state actors and organised armed forces that actively seek to protect civilians use force that can cause considerable harm to civilians.** This is evident from, for example, military interventions by the International Coalition against ISIS, leading to large-scale destruction in cities like Mosul and Raqqa, and subsequent harm to their inhabitants. Loss of livelihood, continued displacement, deteriorated living conditions, as well as loss of access to or decreased quality of education, healthcare, water and electricity continue to characterise everyday civilian life in these cities.²

Nonetheless, this ugly reality of the reverberating effects of warfare on civilians is not reflected in the international, political discourse on armed

conflict. Instead, the success of a military campaign is overwhelmingly discussed and weighed as a trade-off between the military outcome on the one hand, and the direct, physical impact on the other hand. We may count the dead, and report injured civilians. We sometimes even reflect on the material damage in urban warfare. But we invariably look away and ignore effects of armed conflict that are more indirect or long-term in nature, and in so doing, we obscure a substantial part of the overall human costs of conflict.

Many participants argued that the reverberating effects of the use of force on civilians must be integrated more robustly in our thinking about conflict and the protection of civilians. Not only can this mitigate or prevent civilian harm in future operations, and provide recognition for the suffering of people living through conflict, it is also imperative from a military-strategic point of view. As remarked by one of the participants, failing to protect civilians “**will inevitably cause long-lasting, reverberating effects, and will turn the local population against our forces.**”

¹ The recommendations in this brief are the outcome of discussions between policy makers, researchers, and humanitarian and military practitioners during the third day of the PAX PoC Conference, which focused exclusively on the reverberating effects of armed conflict.

² See, for instance, Airwars & PAX (2020). *Seeing Through the Rubble: The civilian impact of the use of explosive weapons in the fight against ISIS.*

Recommendations

We closed the conference by discussing practical recommendations for military actors to better take into account, and account for, the reverberating effects of military action. The implementation of the following recommendations will achieve more effective protection of civilians in practice.

To military institutions (e.g. National Armed Forces), we recommend:

- ◆ To continue to build and embed consistent language [defining civilian harm](#), including both direct and reverberating effects;
- ◆ To develop policies and doctrine which ensure that reverberating effects of weapons use and strategies are adequately integrated and reflected in military planning, evaluation, training, and assistance efforts (e.g. including anticipated reverberating effects from a military action in proportionality assessments);
- ◆ To centralise PoC responsibilities in military institutional structures because, as one participant remarked, “many people don’t know who to talk to about PoC. We are struggling to find a department that covers all these subjects in one place”;
- ◆ To institutionalise civilian harm mitigation teams, with reach across the J2, J3/5 and J9 military command structure.

To units and commands actively engaged in conflict, we recommend:

- ◆ To avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas, given that such weapons are not designed for use in urban areas, where they tend to create considerable reverberating effects;
- ◆ To log and actively share best practices and lessons learned on how to mitigate the negative impact of particular weapons use or military strategies on civilians;
- ◆ Where possible, to systematically gather and proactively make available all relevant data about potential indirect civilian harm from military actions, including:

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- Assessments of damages to critical infrastructure;
 - Assessments of damages to houses, schools, hospitals and other civilian structures;
 - Mapping of contamination hotspots potentially leading to negative longer-term environmental or public health effects;
- ◆ To replicate known best practices (e.g. AMISOM's revised and more restrictive indirect fire policy).

To governments, we recommend:

- ◆ To join the international declaration on EWIPA and start building a community of practice;
- ◆ To actively investigate, on behalf of national actors, PoC failures in the field, and, in case of significant negligence, to ensure accountability, along with adequate and appropriate compensation.
- ◆ To develop holistic national policies and implementation plans on PoC.

About the conference

The annual PoC Conferences are organized by PAX's PoC Team in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. On December 1-3, 2020, the PAX Protection of Civilians Conference brought together a network of PoC partners on three key themes: People and Protection, National Contributions to PoC, and the Reverberating Effects of Civilian Harm.

About the program

The PAX Protection of Civilians (PoC) programs seeks to increase the effectiveness of PoC interventions by enabling civilians to hold local and international security actors to account, and by enabling and motivating security actors to design and implement protection strategies that are civilian centered.

Contact details

Erin Bijl
bijl@paxforpeace.nl
www.paxforpeace.nl
www.protectionofcivilians.org