<u>Event Summary:</u>   **Humanitarian Principles, Humanitarian Space: Experiences from Iraq and Afghanistan**

The basic principles of humanitarian action are being challenged from all sides. Governments and the United Nations often seek to use humanitarian assistance in support of political and economic objectives. New actors are arriving on the scene, including military forces, for-profit contractors, and private philanthropists, each with their own interests and with understands of humanitarian principles that are quite different than those of UN agencies, the ICRC, and established non-governmental organizations. Upholding neutrality of humanitarian action and protecting humanitarian space is increasingly difficult – and perhaps nowhere as much as in Afghanistan and Iraq.

On Friday, February 20, from 12:00-2:30pm, as part of an ongoing series on humanitarian issues, the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement hosted a roundtable on the challenges of maintaining humanitarian space in Afghanistan and Iraq. Following an overview of the issues by Brookings Senior Fellow Elizabeth Ferris, two researchers from the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, Antonio Donini and Greg Hansen, presented the results of their research on the state of the humanitarian enterprise in these two countries. Geoff Loane and Susanne Schmeidl provided comment. Vice President for Policy at Refugees International, Joel Charny, moderated the discussion.

The panel featured:
Antonio Donini, Senior Researcher, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University
Elizabeth Ferris, Senior Fellow and Co-Director, Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement
Greg Hansen, Independent Researcher and Consultant, Feinstein International Center
Geoff Loane, Head of Delegation, International Committee of the Red Cross, Regional Delegation for the United States and Canada
Susanne Schmeidl, Senior Research Fellow, Griffith University (Australia)

Joel Charny, Vice President for Policy at Refugees International, moderated the discussion.

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Elizabeth Ferris, Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, opened the panel with a discussion of the term "humanitarian space." The meaning of the term was traced from Médecins Sans Frontières' "a space of freedom, where we are free to evaluate and monitor, where we are free to dialogue with people," to a newer definition where humanitarian space is seen as a political space for negotiating aid.

Humanitarian space was protected by humanitarian principles, which in turn were overseen by a small cadre of western agencies. Now, however, the increasing number of humanitarian actors, and particularly the more assertive role of the military in humanitarian action is threatening humanitarian space. This has caused a conflict of ideas and motives, particularly regarding *why* aid is given: should aid be given on need alone, or can assistance given in support of military objectives be considered humanitarian?

A further challenge is the role of national organizations and national staff of international humanitarian actors. Ferris suggested that the humanitarianism of the future will have a domestic, not an international face; that the humanitarian community must rethink the role of the military; and that the case studies of Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate that we must be creative about the way humanitarians approach and provide aid.

Antonio Donini, Senior Researcher at the Feinstein International Center, provided a case study of humanitarian space in Afghanistan. Arguing that the NGOs and agencies in Afghanistan were too quick to re-label the scenario on the ground as a "post-conflict" situation, Donini noted that their operations changed the focus from humanitarian relief to reconstruction. By accepting this post-conflict mantra, there was an implicit acceptance of the legitimacy of the Karzai government. Many NGOs became implementers of Government programs and some worked for the military-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). This led to a dangerous blurring of lines and to the politicization of humanitarian issues.

The donor community in Afghanistan, with the exception of the Swiss, are belligerent actors in the conflict. Consequently need-based humanitarianism has become almost taboo since donors do not want to recognize the existence of a humanitarian crisis as this would undermine their military mission in the country. Because these donor countries provide much of the funding and space to NGOs and aid agencies, humanitarian actors on the ground are co-opted into the discourse.

No humanitarian consensus exists and there has been little effort to create one. The humanitarian community therefore finds itself in a situation where it is difficult to assess humanitarian need on the ground. According to Donini, however, things are changing. Last year NGOs protested the subordination of humanitarian action to the UN's integrated mission and were successful in their demands for the re-establishment of an independent OCHA office in the country.

Donini concluded by arguing that the manipulation and instrumentalization of humanitarian assistance and aid is becoming a larger issue. First, the assumption that assistance leads to increased security is flawed, and it has serious implications for aid workers. As a result, being associated with NGOs and the UN is dangerous for people on the ground as these traditional aid agencies are believed to be tied to the foreign military forces present in country. Second, the politicization of security decisions, particularly by the UN, has led many organizations to mistakenly believe that it is safe to operate in Afghanistan.

Greg Hansen, Independent Researcher and Consultant at the Feinstein Center, then presented the update to his 2007 case study on humanitarian space in Iraq. There is a prevailing optimism in western capitals and media about the situation in Iraq. Civilian casualties have decreased and the situation has become more stable. However, each of the factors credited with increasing security also contains the potential for renewed conflict. Moreover, the humanitarian need is still high and this is not a time for humanitarian agencies and NGOs relax their humanitarian operations.

Due to the recent Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the humanitarian landscape of Iraq will be shifting and it is essential for aid agencies to consider how the SOFA will impact their work. Greg Hansen drew a distinction between two types of aid agencies or organizations: those who have become explicitly or implicitly reliant on the Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNF-I) and those who are pursuing an independent, neutral and impartial approach. If those reliant on MNF-I do not find other ways to provide aid as the MNF-I winds down, they will have no choice but to leave Iraq. The more independent actors will have an easier time after the MNF-I leaves Iraq since they have already found ways to sustain and even scale up their activities.

This coincides with the slow but gradual shift away from low profile and remotely managed operations to more direct implementation of activities and projects than has occurred over the past few years. Many of these agencies and NGOs used to keep a covert profile, remotely implementing

projects through Iraqi actors. This system of remote management is becoming less effective, however, due to turnover of international managers with direct experience inside Iraq, fatigue amongst Iraqi staff on the ground and the difficulty involved with replacing highly competent Iraqi staff. At the same time, the operational agencies have found that hidden humanitarianism has a high cost: it doesn't demonstrate to local communities that aid agencies are neutral because there is no "ownership" of the aid by the agency. This has begun to change recently as these agencies and organizations are finding new ways to gradually become more visible. Local staff have also been more readily identifying themselves as employed by these agencies.

Hansen also stressed the idea of comparative advantage and added value. In the past, all agencies were confronted with the urgent need to adapt to the local context, which was a highly politicized and insecure environment in Iraq. According to Hansen, the issues of comparative advantage (i.e. effectiveness and efficiency) and added value are becoming more important as aid funds to Iraq are drying up and there is increasing competition for funds among humanitarian agencies. UN agencies stand out as lacking a comparative advantage because of two major failures. First, the UN has failed to adapt its one-size-fits-all security model to the Iraqi context. Second, the UN humanitarian apparatus has been hobbled by being subordinated to the larger political agenda of UNAMI, which emphasizes the "institutional imperative" of being an integrated mission.

Geoff Loane, Head of Delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Regional Delegation for the United States and Canada, provided comments. He stressed that both humanitarian space and humanitarianism are linked to security, a point that came across in both the Afghanistan and Iraq case studies, and which presents a paradox. An environment needs to be secure for humanitarians to operate in a country and this security also provides them with humanitarian space. Security, however, is provided by non-humanitarian actors, and in both of these cases, security is provided by an external military presence, which has in turn had an effect back on the security situation. He then likened the situation in the two countries to Somalia in the early 1990s and commented that security and the ICRC's ability to move about in Mogadishu was better prior to the international military intervention.

In many respects the current paradigm of humanitarianism is over. It is no longer centered in the West or about Western humanitarianism. The West needs to let go of its monopoly on the field, as humanitarianism is now about Iraqis, Afghans, and all other peoples. Broadening the Western paradigm of humanitarianism has two implications for the notion of the ownership of humanitarianism. The former is that humanitarianism is a universal principle to which all people ascribe. The latter is that many differences and problems arise when everyone practices humanitarianism. With respect to a principles approach versus and embedded approach, the ICRC believes strongly in the principled approach but recognizes there are other approaches, including ones in which militaries may have a role, particularly in natural disasters. Loane commented that while he was inspired by the humanitarian idea within Donini's paper it remains unclear how such an idea would square with the multitude of organizational mandates.

Loane concluded by stressing the importance of thoroughly understanding local context, making informed decisions, and balancing a top-down approach with a bottom-up approach.

Susanne Schmeidl, Senior Research Fellow at Griffith University, provided comment. She argued that this debate on humanitarian space should have occurred in 2001, not now when it seems to be too late. One major issue is the conflict of objectives in Afghanistan. There are multiple military

forces in the nation, including ISAF/NATO, Coalition Forces, and Special forces, and it is unclear whether their objectives are peacebuilding or fighting terrorism. Schmeidl stressed that this is a very similar situation to the politicization that occurred in the 1980s.

People are now critical of engagement (i.e. quick impact projects) because there is no critical evaluation of what is happening in the field. This is compounded by donors who only want to hear positive developments from those on the ground. Furthermore, there is a lack of data and little knowledge that there is even a problem of internal, secondary, or conflict-induced displacement. Additionally, many Afghans are not only fleeing from the Taliban but also from the international forces. Therefore, Schmeidl argued, in Afghanistan, the international community is also part of the problem.

Schmeidl then turned the discussion towards the different humanitarian actors on the ground in Afghanistan. On the military side several actors occupy the humanitarian space, each with different objectives. They neither talk nor coordinate with one another. If the humanitarians are not doing their jobs, contractors are brought in. Contractors, however, do not work under humanitarian principles but are out for profit, and are therefore also shrinking humanitarian space. The fact that most of the expatriates and humanitarian workers in Afghanistan are young and inexperienced also poses a major problem in Afghanistan. Due to the lack of security, more experienced humanitarian workers do not want to go to Afghanistan and so organizations are forced to settle for those willing to go, which further jeopardizes humanitarian space. She also referenced a document "Preserving Humanitarian Space, Protection and Security" by UNICEF, which cited the lack of culturally sensitive behavior by some humanitarian workers, which is common in inexperienced humanitarians.

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Joel Charny then opened up the discussion to the other participants.

The first was the idea of *deconstructing humanitarianism* – finding out, essentially, what the necessary elements of humanitarianism and humanitarian space are. It was suggested that humanitarianism consists of three elements: trust, veracity (i.e. following through on promises), and efficiency and effectiveness. Donini remarked that this issue could be examined by asking how the humanitarian community would rebuild humanitarianism if it started over. He suggested that it would be more grounded and more in sync with other cultures. Hansen added that there is an enormous amount of potential for synergies between western humanitarianism and Muslim or Arab humanitarianism, but the discrepancy between humanitarian ideals and practices must be resolved before this can happen.

A second theme was the *role of the state* in humanitarian space. One participant noted that none of the panelists mentioned the role of the state institutions as actors in humanitarian space. One response was that states are indeed the ones responsible in times of crisis, not humanitarian actors. However, many times NGOs have to navigate around the state because it is inefficient, and it is often unclear who holds power in state institutions. Hansen added than there is always humanitarian interaction with the state in post-, pre-, or conflict situations. He also noted that there is often a humanitarian crisis because of the inadequacy or the malfunctioning of the state. Ferris added that the state is sometimes the missing actor in humanitarian space, and the state operates on both the national and provincial/municipal levels. Schmeidl questioned the existence of state "institutions" in

Afghanistan, where there is a lack of institutionalization which further limits engagement. Ministries and their foci change depending who the minister is.

Third, participants discussed the new competition between humanitarian agencies. With limited amounts of funds (and funders), agencies often find themselves competing for resources, limiting the desire for a truly collaborative approach.

Joel Charny closed the seminar by thanking the Feinstein International Center and recognizing the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement for organizing the event.

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