



CASE STUDY:
THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TO
CONFLICT IN NORTHERN IRAQ SUMMER 2014

Course on Cooperation in Stability Operations,
April 2015

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PREFACE

The Center for Stabilization and Economic Reconstruction (CSER) of the Institute for Defense and Business in Chapel Hill, NC, regularly conducts a week-long course on Cooperation in Stability Operations for responders to crises. One day of the course is devoted to a case study of cooperation – or lack thereof – during a prior conflict or disaster. The following represents the conclusions of the case study used in April 2015: the humanitarian response to the Northern Iraq crisis of 2014, as seen from the perspectives of military, governmental, international organization, and humanitarian NGO responders. The discussions were held under non-attribution rules, and the conclusions cited do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the organizations involved.

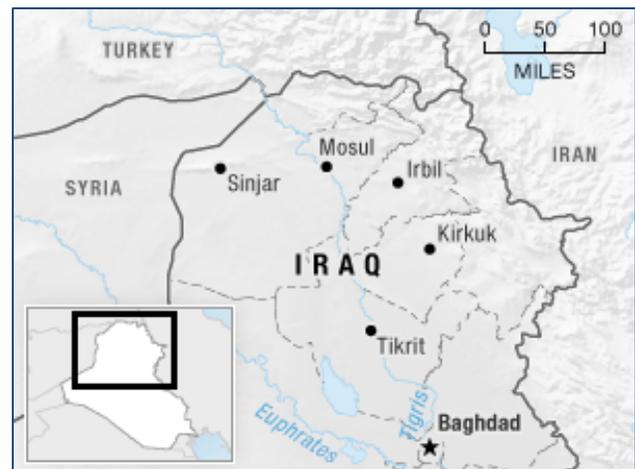
BACKGROUND

On June 9th, 2014, Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, fell to ISIL in one of several large-scale attacks by the violent extremist organization during that summer designed to gain control over the Northern Iraq region. International and local development entities operating in the area changed course and began relief efforts, as other humanitarian support poured into the country. The uncoordinated influx of new actors, an ineffectual Iraqi government in Baghdad, media-enhanced panic, and the very real threats from ISIL, produced a chaotic relief effort.

A variety of organizational cultures – military, humanitarian NGO, civilian government, and intergovernmental – were involved in the summer operations, but international coordination amongst the groups did not gain traction until August. Each entity acted under its own precepts. Some organizations had been operating in the region since 2003, whereas others only became actively engaged following the ISIL attacks. New ISIL-led incidents occurred continually, and infused the humanitarian effort with an additional layer of complexity. As a result, political, security, and humanitarian aspects of the crisis for all practical purposes were forced to reset every two to three weeks. Humanitarian operations were spread across the northern region– especially in Mosul, Erbil, Dohuk, and Sinjar. Strategies and plans shifted constantly in real-time, negatively impacting immediate and longer-term relief operations. Fortunately, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its Pesh Merga security forces filled in many of the gaps that a national government is expected to perform during a national crisis. This was particularly useful in providing security operations around Mount. Sinjar to impede ISIL

advances, and to open up migration corridors for panicking citizens fleeing the area.

The situation on Mount Sinjar in particular received a great deal of media coverage when ISIL forces cornered a portion of the Yazidi population on the mountain. The conditions were extreme: innocent citizens stranded on top of a barren mountain, in intense heat, with little water or shade. News media and social media stressed these harsh conditions, creating additional pressure on the responders to act faster. Reports multiplied of tens of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) on the mountain, all at risk and in an unstable, untenable situation.



Source: npr.org

CHALLENGE #1: INSTITUTIONAL ROADBLOCKS

Institutional barriers among responders further tangled an already complicated situation. The rapid proliferation of humanitarian relief organizations amplified misperceptions and miscommunications among them, and the pressures of the physical environment of Northern Iraq, with its extreme heat and the insufficient access to clean water and stable electricity even in

normal times, set the stage for a taxing burden on the frantic responders.

The diverse institutional “personalities” of the responding organizations impeded the overall cooperation effort. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) did not have the agility or flexibility to interact quickly with parties outside of the U.S. government and military chains of command. Practically speaking, during a humanitarian crisis the U.S. military must coordinate through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to interface with humanitarian NGOs, international organizations, and other international civilian bilateral donors and responders. This is beneficial on one hand, since USAID is an effective and credible interlocutor between the military and humanitarian assistance entities, and is knowledgeable about humanitarian operations in an international context. CENTCOM benefited enormously from its smooth cooperation relationship with a pro-active and aggressive USAID.

At the same time, under the stressful conditions in Northern Iraq, the arms-length relationship with non-USG organizations did little to eliminate biases and misperceptions among the NGO “man in the van,” the military “man in the uniform,” and the governmental “man in the suit.” Moreover, international humanitarian agencies had no standing coordination offices on the ground in Northern Iraq, which might have facilitated more rapid communication and effective collaboration. Similarly, the U.S. military suffered from the absences of both an ad-hoc Joint Task Force – the usual organizing structure for the military in a crisis – and an Embassy-based Office of Military Cooperation – which normally provides institutional memory on local military and security capabilities.

Among the other speed bumps that impacted U.S. military operations negatively was the slowness with which US forces could obtain Iraqi central government authorizations and coordination on air drops, border crossings and overflight clearances.

As ISIL threatened the personal security of local citizens and responders alike, the KRG established security checkpoints in the region to monitor and secure traffic along the major highways and roads. Without adequate channels of communication among responders, these checkpoints created bottlenecks and delays in the response efforts, especially owing to the massive flows of humanity across Northern Iraq between displaced persons and crisis responders. The uncoordinated flight of innocent civilians into the Kurdish region was chaotic.

Operational security also created a key obstacle: CENTCOM forces planned the logistics of the humanitarian aid drop sites for Mount Sinjar, but there were conflicting views on who should have access to the details. CENTCOM forces conducted the actual operation, but there were several other parties that wanted to be involved and know when, where, and how this was going to happen. Given the already high risk of the air drop, the plans were not shared widely, in order to maintain operational security. This compartmentalization compounded the lack of credible, accurate information on which responding organizations could base effective planning and apportion scarce resources.

Frail communications and firewalled technological infrastructure generated more uncertainty as well. In one specific case, a United Nations (UN) representative involved in the planning effort needed to make a phone call over a secure communication line but the line failed, threatening to stall relief efforts. This forced a decision – both options

involving risk – to withhold information or talk on an unsecured line. The latter course was chosen, and fortunately without negative consequences. However, in fast-breaking crises involving mixed organizational cultures, redundancies in communication channels could be essential.

Within certain relief organizations, internal disconnects existed between strategists and financial officers. Strategists plan for emergencies well in advance, but during a crisis, financial realities, as perceived by financial managers, dictate the distribution of funding for the actual response effort. Operators and logisticians wait anxiously for the ‘green light’ for resources to flow, but sometimes intra-organizational politics and lack of effective cooperation among organizational components obstruct an effective and unified approach. Some international responders in Northern Iraq expressed frustration with this kind of delay resulting from internal financial blockages.

This phenomenon was also true within the Iraqi government structure, as political and budgetary disagreements hampered an effective transfer and use of funding between Baghdad and the KRG in Irbil. Even overlapping fiefdoms within the KRG proved to be a drag on effective operations. The lack of funding in general was a huge roadblock for effective planning and execution of rescue and relief efforts. However, the funding doldrums reversed dramatically when Saudi Arabia announced its contribution of \$500 million to the effort on July 1.

When operating in an intense and complex crisis environment, relations among and within responding organizations should not be one of the greatest challenges. Conflict among organizational cultures created substantial inefficiencies, and impeded effective cooperation in Northern Iraq,

especially when efficiency and speed were most crucial.

CHALLENGE #2: TRUSTING AVAILABLE DATA

The news media and social media in today’s crises can be both helpful and harmful. Anyone with access to the internet or a smartphone can post a photo or a message about an event, but how do we know if this information is accurate and credible? When such posts occur with great frequency and in great quantity they often trigger misguided or ill-considered responses with significant negative downstream consequences for the host nation and responders.

The inability to extract and disseminate accurate and actionable information from open-source data in social media, conversations with local citizens, and classified intelligence reports disrupted the planning and implementation efforts of the operations in Northern Iraq. Estimates of victim populations trapped without food, water, or shelter varied widely in the *tens of thousands*, each report apparently feeding off of the previous one. Ultimately, the responders found only around 2-4,000 people on the mountain, and not all of them suffering from deprivation. As a result, preparations for the rescue were misconceived and inefficient: responders had gathered excessive amounts of relief supplies for the operation; logisticians worked frantically but unnecessarily to load enough aircraft; and aircrews flew missions, executing high-risk aid drops that were not actual priorities.

The responders operated in an unstable environment where ISIL’s capabilities were unknown. The larger governmental organizations were getting much of their information through formal intelligence

channels, and the smaller humanitarian NGOs were getting much of their information from informal conversations with local citizens. Social media posts offered a wide array of information, and the news media published reports from their own respective sources. The credibility and accuracy of the information drawn from this vast amount of data will invariably impact the *functional components* of organizations in different ways. Operators and logisticians in the field may acquire a different perspective of reality than strategists and planners based in rear headquarters. For example, CENTCOM at one point received reporting that the affected population on Mount Sinjar had exceeded 20,000 persons. Other reports from the immediate area showed many fewer. Reconciling those perspectives costs time and impacts efficiency, particularly when information is analyzed by different organizational cultures which by definition have access to different sets of data. This dynamic played out exponentially in the disconnects between and among military, NGO, and international organization strategists, planners, logisticians and operators across Northern Iraq and at their respective headquarters.

CHALLENGE #3: WHEN PRIOR PLANNING IS OVERTAKEN BY EVENTS

Prior to the spring of 2014, some in-theater humanitarian actors had a long-standing presence in Northern Iraq to help in the long-term development of economic growth and infrastructure in the region, such as in education and public health. Since they perceived the northern region as an area of relative stability and security, they were not necessarily prepared for any large-scale conflict, especially with a non-state violent extremist group like ISIL suddenly attacking and gaining control of the cities in which the

organizations operated. There had been chatter that ISIL planned to strike, but no one knew where, when, or with what force an attack might take place. In fact, the security situation in Northern Iraq deteriorated precipitously and rapidly, much to everyone's surprise.

When Mosul fell on June 9th, chaos ensued. All emergency plans prepared before then were essentially deemed worthless. Populations flooded the roads and highways as a result of direct attacks on their homes and neighborhoods, and viral reports from the traditional media and social media. The IDP count surged exponentially. Some international partners who at the time were also heavily focused on Afghanistan were blindsided by the ISIL onslaught in Northern Iraq.

Organizations suddenly changed their operations, whether they had been short-, medium-, or long-term. Some organizations were able to deploy extra teams to respond immediately, while other less agile and flexible organizations had to shut down at least temporarily. In August, the focus on the apparently catastrophic situation of Yazidis near Sinjar brought about surges in the amount of IDPs and numbers of involved responders. Large organizations such as the UN and its specialized agencies understood the cultural, social, and even political dynamics of the region, due to their long-term, long-standing development initiatives. After increased pressure from the news and social media channels, and much discussion in Washington and other capitals, CENTCOM was tasked to assist with the immediate relief effort at Mount Sinjar. The lack of pre-established communications and cooperation between the well-established and the newly arrived organizations did not allow for the alignment and the unification of the diverse visions into an overall plan of action in a quick manner.

The United Kingdom's (UK) contingency planning seems to have been very agile and adaptable. Planning groups included military, intelligence, development (Department for International Development or DfID), and diplomatic (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) representatives. UK budget authorities shifted funding toward DfID to facilitate early intervention and prevention strategies. DfID, like its U.S. counterpart, USAID, is a useful link to UN entities like UNHCR. One merit worthy observation was that an objective of this kind of collaboration must be "integration" versus mere "deconfliction." Deconfliction carries an implication of focusing on avoiding redundancies, but of inattention toward closing gaps.

LESSONS OBSERVED

Three big-picture takeaways emerged from this brief case study of the events of Northern Iraq in the summer of 2014:

TAKEAWAY #1: The sudden onset of crisis demands rapid and effective communication across the humanitarian response enterprise, especially if prior humanitarian or development operations had already been underway separately and independently. The importance of the roles of local governments in this regard cannot be overstated.

Each organization operating in fragile or crisis-prone environments naturally views its own mission within its own strategies, goals, objectives, and resources. In Northern Iraq the usual diversity within the development community, compounded by the influx of new responders and the absence of coordination offices, became a significant handicap in addressing the crisis of 2014. The lack of immediate and effective communication among organizations undermined cohesive response, especially as

organizations planned for the worst. Gaps and redundancies emerged in trying to manage a dynamic IDP flow. "Cultural" norms among military and civilian responders inhibited accurate assessments of conditions which might have benefited from more collaborative analyses. Time was clearly a factor as responders made the best estimates possible with available information, much of which was faulty. The lack of common historical knowledge, political awareness and cultural understanding amongst the different players, resulted in inefficient and ineffective operations. In turn the resultant operations may have compromised prior long-term development goals and operations in the region.

TAKEAWAY #2: Data is plentiful; actionable information is scarce. Social media in particular can be a two-edged sword.

Social media platforms are ubiquitous, even in the most fragile and fragmented societies. During a crisis, these platforms can generate valuable real-time data about the situation across the affected area and help direct priorities. At the same time, social media can very easily generate an overload of data, much of which is inaccurate, out-of-date, or deceptive, resulting in unsound planning and inefficient use of scarce resources. ISIL's horrific attacks on the Yazidi people of Northern Iraq in particular, and the ensuing fear for their survival on Mount Sinjar were an example of how social media can mislead humanitarian relief efforts. The inability of different organizations to vet information led to an inefficient use of resources. This was particularly harmful because of the constantly changing needs of IDPs and others elsewhere, across a rapidly changing landscape.

Fortunately, some organizations have been able to work with big data to tame

information overload from social media sources. All organizations should find ways to utilize the best of these systems to allow social media data to work in favor of successful crisis response. The International Organization for Migration, for example, employs a valuable and detailed tool on migration displacements during a crisis, called the Displacement Tracking Matrix. In addition, large organizations like USAID and the UN can post information updates transparently to all users through collaborative platforms like the UN's Global Cluster System. Discovering the true benefits of posting updates in real-time is a topic currently being researched and on the radar of many community members. A more effective linking of geospatial imagery with social and traditional media reports, within transparent collaboration centers and platforms, can provide useful mitigation of the data overload problem.

TAKEAWAY #3: Cross-organizational communication and cooperation can boost agility and flexibility when prior planning is overtaken by events. Building consensus from the bottom up is difficult but essential in fast-breaking, time-sensitive situations, and is often antithetical to the ethos of top-down organizations like militaries and governmental agencies.

As advanced as technology may be, it is still difficult to determine the exact timing, characteristics and magnitude of a natural or man-made disaster before it takes place. Advanced planning is useful, but not always relevant to the crisis at hand. Thus, the ability of organizations to adapt quickly, open lines of communication on several levels, adjust planning, and make decisions rapidly is something to strive for. Even within organizations, the functional components of policy, planning, logistics and operations will have to remain open to change and adaptation through communication and

cooperation within the organization, especially in redirecting human, material and financial resources. Where organizations choose to focus in terms of their mandates, strengths, and resources along the crisis timeline – immediate relief, medium-term rehabilitation, and long-term development-- is the third critical piece to successful response. Effective transitions among the phases can be achieved through open communication and cooperation about evolving needs assessments and prioritization. In Northern Iraq, CENTCOM's tactical focus on effective air drops and facilitating IDP movements was based upon a different set of priorities, constraints, and measurements of success than the UN's or IOM's management of IDPs in temporary camps, or USAID's or a major NGO's focus on long-term capacity building and economic development among Northern Iraqi populations.

Coordinating all of our efforts in a deliberate way, or at least establishing lines of communication and keeping them open especially during crises, will go a long way to improving crisis response globally. What is certain is that responders will likely see each other in another disaster environment in the near future and the barriers to effective crisis response at the next disaster or conflict should not be human-made.

For more information on the course in Cooperation in Stability Operations (CSO), the Center for Stabilization & Economic Reconstruction (CSER), or the Institute for Defense and Business (IDB), please visit www.IDB.org or contact Amb. (Ret.) David Litt, Executive Director, Center for Stabilization & Economic Reconstruction at litt@idb.org or (919)-969-8008.