

Pentagon Needs Advisors to Harmonize “Civilian” Focus

Minimizing and properly addressing civilian harm are critical to US military and political objectives. Several tactical directives in Afghanistan acknowledged that every civilian harmed by US forces creates anger on the ground. There is consensus on this at the highest levels, yet there is no office or senior person at the Pentagon responsible for addressing and planning for civilian harm in current or future operations.

Secretary Hagel should immediately rectify this gap by appointing 1) a retired senior military officer and 2) an experienced analyst to specifically focus on civilian harm in US-operations.

Progressive best practices from Iraq and Afghanistan are a major step forward, but cannot alone create the institutional change necessary to avoid repeating damaging mistakes in future engagements. When it comes to civilians in harm's way, the US response has been ad hoc from Vietnam to Korea to the Gulf War to recent conflicts.

For example: In Iraq there was no strategy in place to address skyrocketing civilian casualties in 2005. When similar insurgent tactics spiked the casualty rate in Afghanistan, the US response was again disorganized and civilians died as a result. It should not take years to translate lessons from theater to theater or from past to present. Good strategies should be uniformly disseminated from a central authority.

For example: In the early days of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflict the military continuously denied keeping casualty data, neglecting obligations under international law to prove proportionality between intended and actual deaths. This policy also denies civilians respect. All known statistics should be recorded in a central database to track what works and what doesn't work in minimizing harm.

For example: The failure to conduct proper battle damage assessments and casualty investigations in Afghanistan has caused intense local anger and delegitimized the US military there. A central authority should have a strategy in place to respond appropriately to the very first incident of civilian harm in any US present or future engagement.

For example: Four years into the Iraq War, and despite new technology, many troops didn't have the necessary gear to safely administer checkpoints. The same was true in Afghanistan. Weapons acquisition teams should have input from a central authority tasked with reducing civilian harm.

For example: Unintended deaths and injuries occur despite careful targeting. In Afghanistan and then again in Iraq, no solatia plan was considered until too many civilians had been harmed. Recent legislation was passed to create a standing guidance on making amends for the US military but a central authority is needed to plan for how to properly address civilian harm before the first shot is ever fired.

A high-level two-person Pentagon team will:

- **Study lessons of past and current engagements and encourage development and deployment of new policies, weapons and tactics designed to diminish civilian harm. The office would be involved both in planning and once the fighting starts;**
- **Ensure proper civilian damage estimates are conducted in targeting and combat damage assessments are made after kinetic operations so that tactics can continue to improve;**
- **Maintain proper investigative and statistical data on civilian casualties and set requirements for reporting by operational forces;**
- **Ensure efficient compensation and recognition procedures are in place for unintentional civilian harm.**

America's revamped military must by design include a focus on civilians. A Pentagon focal point is not a silver bullet to achieve that goal, but leadership at DOD combined with better, smarter approaches on the ground to address civilian harm is critical. And it needs to come from the top.