

Population-centric Security Force Assistance: Creating a Mindset of Civilian Protection

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Thank you so much for inviting me to share my thoughts with you today. And thank you to AFRICOM, KAIPTC and the Government of Ghana for sponsoring such an important event. I'm always fascinated by the great minds involved in thinking through human security, and I'm pleased to be able to add the views of my organization, the Center for Civilians in Conflict.

I'm going to focus on how security force assistance—like that provided by AFRICOM to many African countries, including many represented here today—should focus more squarely on professionalizing and strengthening security forces to better protect their own populations.

CIVIC is not a typical NGO. We are generally referred to as an advocacy organization, but I'd also call us technical advisors on civilian protection. We work directly with international and regional organizations, governments and militaries to create policies and practices to better 'protect' civilians living in the midst of violence and conflict.

I like to think of our work as bridging the civil-military divide. We're civilians, we advocate on behalf of civilians in conflict and therefore take a "civilian-centric" approach to our work. But we advocate with and advise governments and militaries. In a conflict zone, for example, we talk to civilians about their experiences. It's *this* information that we feed into our policy and military recommendations -- it's a fresh "*population-centric*" perspective that militaries don't often get and it has the potential—and indeed I've seen it—change the minds of officers and soldiers.

So it's great to be speaking on this panel that looks into the relationship between civil society and the military, as I think there are many ways we can work together to make progress, particularly on the African continent. In fact, I see a great deal of progress and promise here, which I'll talk about a bit later.

At CIVIC, we call our work “creating a civilian protection mindset.” We believe that whether you are engaged in major combat operations, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping operations, or – as AFRICOM often focuses on—training of national forces, civilian protection and security should be paramount.

There are of course moral/ethical reasons for this, but there are also incredibly important strategic considerations. In fact, in most cases, I believe you can make the argument that focusing on the population—and indeed how *not* to harm them—is a strategic imperative for mission accomplishment.

First, we know that *human security* is about much more than a traditional military perspective of providing *physical safety*. Human security is also about addressing long-standing political, economic, social and cultural risks. So, if we are approaching security force assistance only from a traditional military viewpoint—teaching soldiers basic military or counterterrorism tactics—we’re already behind the curve.

Trainings and security force assistance rarely place emphasis on the foundational concept of professionalizing the force—including inculcating a “civilian protection mindset.” Training on ethics, civilian control of the military, International Humanitarian Law, and Human Rights are usually boring classroom topics covered for a few hours (at best), leaving most time to be spent on tactical and technical aspects.

The tactical aspect is of course very important, but *it is not in itself sufficient for success, particularly in cases of irregular warfare as we see across the globe and indeed in Africa*. What’s missing in this approach is an understanding of *why* protecting the population is important and *how* to operationalize protection. AFRICOM’s focus and strategy must shift.

Understanding how to practically apply population-centric measures makes success more likely. Not understanding this increases the risk of failure. If we shift focus from simple tactical training toward helping soldiers understand how to appropriately use force in real situations, we give our partners a much better chance of making the correct choice when faced with these decisions in the heat of conflict.

I want to re-emphasize the point: Understanding how *not* to cause harm to civilians as soldiers go about their work is a strategic imperative.

There is evidence of this in real life. I recall a quote from General Ham, former AFRICOM Commander, on US training of Malian soldiers. He said, “We didn’t spend, probably, the requisite time focusing on values, ethics and military ethos. ... When

you put on the uniform of your nation, then you accept the responsibility to defend and protect that nation, to abide by the legitimate civilian authority that has been established.”

I couldn't agree more, but I'll go a bit further.

We must help our partners have a sense of shared goals, in part by focusing on training soldiers to understand that when they put on that uniform they agree they are there to defend and protect not only their nation, but the people of their nation—every one of them—regardless of race, ethnicity, tribe or religion. When they put on that uniform they pledge that they will not only refrain from violating the laws of their own country and international laws and norms -- but that they will also take all feasible precautions to avoid harming their own countrymen and women, even when combatting other armed actors who may not play by the same rules.

This is a tall order, but it can be done, I have seen first hand evidence of it in other conflicts including Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. But I want to give you an African example here because, as I have said, I see incredible promise in this continent in terms of willingness and interest in creating population centric security policies—particularly at the African Union.

Before 2011, AMISOM—the African Union Mission in Somalia—was causing civilian harm as a result of their use of indirect fire weapons—returning fire into populated areas, for example, after being attacked by al Shabbab. It was a problem that AMISON recognized and endeavored to solve.

Later that same year, AMISOM adopted an “indirect fire policy” aimed at curbing the use of this type of response in populated areas. It trained commanders and soldiers on the policy and how to apply it, and civilian casualties went down as a result.

That policy also called for the creation of a civilian casualty tracking cell tasked with gathering, analyzing, and transmitting information to the Force Commander to assist him and his senior officers in understanding the impact of their operations. This analysis can also be used to identify challenges and adjust tactics to better avoid civilians and to ensure that any alleged harm is appropriately investigated and addressed. That cell is currently being set up for AMISOM. I hope it will be used as a template for creating similar cells in the future for all AU missions—a lesson identified and hopefully learned.

The AU is also in the process of creating standing policies on protection of civilians—a very important effort for the success of their peacekeeping operations.

The AU needs to work hard to ensure these new high-level policies lead to practical training and guidance reaching troop contributing countries and soldiers in the field. And Western partners can and should support these efforts.

There are many lessons to be learned and transferred across theatres of operations and indeed across continents—and AFRICOM is the organization that can do it. *To not use training opportunities to transfer this knowledge is to lose a precious opportunity.*

It will take sustained engagement on the strategic and operational level to really dig in to strengthen command and control; it's not as easy as a one-off training. It will take a re-centered focus on training soldiers not only on the tactics and techniques of battle, but also the importance of an ethical and professional military—and of course on appropriate use of force. A professional military trained to understand not just that force can be used but also when and how it is appropriate to use it is what will move us toward more population-centric security.

To be sure, it is not as simple as teaching a new soldier to shoot straight. But if done right, I have no doubt—none at all—it will reap benefits for the US military, the host country militaries, soldiers and the populations they serve for years to come.