The Impact of IEDs on the Humanitarian Space in Afghanistan

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Summary

Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are an increasingly common feature of conflicts around the world. Consequently, they pose a growing threat to humanitarian organizations operating in conflict environments. While their impact on civilians and military operations is well documented, there has been little research on their specific impact on humanitarian operations and on those who undertake them. This paper considers the features of IEDs that distinguish them from other threats facing humanitarians and how their use may indicate a more fundamental challenge to the humanitarian sector: the erosion of the principles of neutrality and impartiality owing to the increasing militarization and politicization of humanitarian aid.

Using the specific example of their effects in Afghanistan, this paper assesses the risks IEDs pose and highlights the negative impacts on humanitarian operations that measures used to mitigate this risk can have.

- IEDs pose an unpredictable threat that is not confined to traditional battlefields and is difficult to mitigate. This research considers both IED attacks where humanitarian organizations are deliberately targeted and situations where they are inadvertently caught up in an attack. Since IEDs often cause blast and fragmentation to be projected over a wide area, the risk of harm beyond the immediate target is greater than with other forms of violence such as small arms fire. This risk of being accidentally or indirectly affected means that IEDs create uncertainty for humanitarian operations.

- 'Toughening the target' strategies, for example using armoured cars and building blast walls in compounds, make NGOs more militarized in appearance, alter community perception and can adversely affect the humanitarian operations of NGOs. This is particularly pertinent in Afghanistan, where there is a legacy of military personnel engaging in humanitarian activities and the boundaries of the humanitarian space have become blurred.

- Operating within the comfort zone of compounds and secure locations – so-called 'fortressing' – increases the separation from the local population and damages an organization's reputation. Attempts to operate using remote management techniques risk shifting the danger onto local staff and are impossible for activities such as advocacy. Armed guards, body armour and similar measures can increase security against the danger of small arms but are less effective against the force of an IED.

- The perceived threat of IEDs, magnified through intensive media coverage and their association with terrorism, can compel organizations to react to these dangers more strongly than to others. The level of insecurity and fear that the use of IEDs generates is such that programmes can be closed or moved from areas with acute need. Strategically placed devices may deter delivery of aid for many weeks or months. NGOs risk becoming a pawn of one party to a conflict.

- As well as the loss of staff and the impact this has on colleagues and the organization as a whole, there are also costs in terms of community relations both locally and nationally within a country; post-trauma care that NGOs need to provide to colleagues, even those seemingly not directly affected; and the time and personnel required to manage the expectations of donors, for example where programme outputs will not be met or key programme assets such as vehicles need to be replaced.

Introduction

In the summer of 2010 a remotely detonated improvised explosive device (IED) hit a vehicle as it moved through northeastern Afghanistan to visit an agricultural training project. The vehicle belonged to a major international NGO[1] and the bomb blast killed three of its staff and volunteers and injured two others.

Given the remote area and the fact that few vehicles passed along the road, it is likely they were deliberately targeted. No group claimed responsibility for the attack and no one knows why this NGO and its employees were targeted that day. Among the suggested motives was its employment of women, or the attack may have been part of a local power struggle.

The attack had a crippling impact not only on the affected NGO but also on the people in that remote community of Afghanistan. The organization immediately decided to suspend all operations in the province, pending a full security assessment. Eventually it was decided that the existing programme locations were too remote and required staff to spend too much time on the road, away from the relative safety of their headquarters. The review also showed that staff at the central office in Kabul did not have a full understanding of the security situation in the area where the attack took place. In part this was because of difficulties in access and insecurity that discouraged senior international and national staff from leaving Kabul.

The programme was shut down and a new one started a few hours' drive from the provincial headquarters in Fayzabad. The risk to staff was perceived to have lessened, but at the expense of the remote communities that had depended on the programme. Similar stories have been played out many more times during the Afghan conflict and elsewhere.

IEDs continue to be a daily threat to civilians in conflicts around the world, and globally have been a weapon of choice for non-state armed groups for years.[2] However, much of the existing analysis is framed in terms of counterterrorism and counter-insurgency, and there is as yet little analysis of these weapons in humanitarian terms. This paper assesses the impact of IEDs on humanitarian operations in Afghanistan, both in instances when they are directly targeted and when they are affected by attacks against others. In particular, it considers how NGOs operating in the humanitarian space are affected by these devices, and some of the unique difficulties of working in an environment where they are a significant part of the conflict. The research for the paper drew on a number of existing data sources, including the results of a small survey created by Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) and completed by 12 organizations working in Afghanistan.

This research is part of a wider ongoing attempt by UN agencies, states and civil society better to understand and bring attention to the humanitarian consequences of explosive weapons, and specifically their use in populated areas.[3] It is intended that considering IEDs in these new terms and engaging a different range of experts will encourage innovative and effective approaches to this problem.[4]

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[1] All interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis, and the report refrains from naming organizations in specific cases out of consideration for their ongoing security and confidentiality concerns.

[2] Henry Dodd and Robert Perkins, 'Explosive Events: Monitoring Explosive Violence in 2013', AOAV, April 2014, http://aoav.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/AOAV-Explosive-Events-2013.pdf.

[3] See, for example, meetings hosted by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UNOCHA (the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), 'Informal Expert Meeting on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Area', 17–18 June 2014, http://www.inew.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Oslo-Expert-Meeting-Summary-Report.pdf; and by Chatham House and UNOCHA, 'Expert Meeting on Reducing the Humanitarian Impact of the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas', 23–24 September 2013, https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/Expert%20Meeting%20on%20EWIPA%20-%20Summary%20Report.pdf.

[4] To complement this research an expert roundtable was co-hosted by Chatham House and AOAV on this topic; see International Security Department Expert Roundtable Summary, 'The Humanitarian Impact of Improvised Explosive Devices', 18 September 2014, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20140918IEDHumanitarianImpact.pdf.

What is an IED?

IEDs are a rapidly proliferating threat to civilians; a massive surge in their development and use has been seen over recent decades in areas of conflict around the world. As well as being targeted at combatants, they are frequently used against civilians to spread terror and undermine confidence in those providing security. Countries including Iraq, Pakistan, Syria and Nigeria have grappled with the unpredictable danger posed by these home-made weapons; and IEDs have been described starkly as 'the single most deadly threat in Afghanistan', a country that has been beset by armed violence for decades.[5]

IEDs can be cheap and simple to create, and their impact is disproportionately significant relative to their cost. Their average production cost in 2012 was comparatively low, at just over $400. However, a truck packed with explosives can cost almost $20,000 to mobilize.[6]

By their very essence, as *improvised* devices, IEDs are difficult to define. They constitute an extremely broad category of weapons with significant variation across their means of manufacture and component parts. They can be made from commercial, military or home-made explosives, and vary considerably in their size and detonation methods.[7]

Some are buried under roads, others worn below clothes or disguised in empty Coke cans, or they may be so large that they need to be carried by vehicles. The levels of harm they cause differ accordingly. Devices such as car bombs, often containing larger amounts of explosive materials, are capable of projecting the blast and carrying fragmentation over a very wide area.

Some IEDs are detonated on a time-delay using an analogue clock. Such devices are popular owing to their simplicity, but are notorious for being particularly hard to target at a specific objective. IEDs may also be victim-operated and activated when pressure is applied, functioning in the same way as anti-personnel landmines, which are banned by international law.[8] In Afghanistan in 2014 there were 775 recorded civilian deaths and injuries from devices activated in this way.[9]

They may also be command-operated and detonated from a distance using a remote control device such as a mobile phone. In theory these devices can be more accurately targeted to detonate at an optimum time to hit a specific singular target and thus minimize wider incidental or unintentional damage. However, blast effects can still spread beyond the target. It was reported that at least 1,119 civilians were killed and injured in 2014 in incidents of armed opposition groups using remote control devices in Afghanistan.[10] One particularly damaging subset of these command-control IEDs is the suicide-operated device initiated at a time of the bomber's choosing. In 2014 there were 1,582 recorded civilian casualties from suicide bombs in Afghanistan.[11]

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[5] JIEDDO Global Information Research, 'Alternative Motivations for IED Use in Afghanistan', 2009, https://info.publicintelligence.net/JIEDDOafghanieds.pdf.

[6] Tom Vanden Brook, 'Afghan bomb makers shifting to new explosives for IEDs', *USA Today,* 25 June 2013, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/06/25/ammonium-nitrate-potassium-chlorate-ieds-afghanistan/2442191/.

[7] Small Arms Survey, 'Infernal Machines: Improvised Explosive Devices', 2013, http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/A-Yearbook/2013/en/Small-Arms-Survey-2013-Chapter-10-EN.pdf.

[8] 'Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction', September 1997, http://www.un.org/Depts/mine/UNDocs/ban_trty.htm.

[9] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), 'Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 2014', 2014, http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/2015/2014-Annual-Report-on-Protection-of-Civilians-Final.pdf.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

IED casualties in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has consistently seen high levels of casualties from IEDs. A significant proportion of these are civilian. Between 2009 and 2014 there were 15,484 civilian casualties (5,442 deaths and 10,042 injuries) in 4,664 separate IED attacks, according to data collected by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).[12] The International NGO Safety Organization (INSO), which uses a different casualty recording methodology from UNAMA, found that IEDs were responsible for 58 per cent of the civilian fatalities caused by armed opposition groups despite making up only 27 per cent of security incidents.[13]

According to the website icasualties, 1,401 coalition troops in Afghanistan have been killed since 2001 by IEDs, which were responsible for 50 per cent of all recorded troop fatalities. Coalition casualties from IEDs peaked in 2010, with 368 deaths.[14] These figures do not include the casualties among Afghan security forces. As many as 13,000 Afghan troops and police have been killed during the conflict, according to government statistics, and many of these deaths are likely to have been caused by IEDs.[15]

As noted above, because of their methods of deployment, IEDs are often imprecise weapons which can have a large blast radius with impacts far beyond the central target. When IEDs are used in populated areas such as markets and public roads, the collateral damage from a blast in terms of civilian casualties can be significant.[16] In addition, IEDs damage vital infrastructure such as water and electricity facilities, schools and hospitals. Moreover, the secondary impacts of these attacks cannot be underestimated; they continue to affect civilian populations long after the initial incident, with livelihoods frequently ruined and long-term psychological effects. There were nearly 300 incidents of IED use in populated areas between 2011 and 2013, each causing an average of 14 civilian casualties, compared with two casualties from each incident in less populated areas.[17]

Importance of humanitarian operations in Afghanistan

Humanitarian workers in Afghanistan have been directly targeted, inadvertently caught up in the blasts, or otherwise affected by IED attacks, and this is having a serious impact on the situation in the country, where humanitarian organizations play a significant role. The head of the Afghan government's NGO registration office reported that at the end of 2013 there were 2,320 groups registered with the government. In total, this sector employs some 90,000 people, the vast majority of whom are national staff. Around 3,000 international staff are registered with the Afghan government.[18]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] According to INSO data shared with AOAV, between 2011 and 30 June 2014 INSO recorded 51,854 security incidents involving armed opposition groups, of which 14,238 involved IEDs. Over the same time period there were 4,156 civilian fatalities from IEDs and 7,152 total civilian fatalities.

[14] Data up to end of 2014, as of 20 March 2015. 'Operation Enduring Freedom', icasualties.org, http://icasualties.org/OEF/index.aspx.

[15] Rod Nordland, 'War deaths top 13,000 in Afghan security forces', *New York Times,* 3 March 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/04/world/asia/afghan-cabinet-releases-data-on-deaths-of-security-personnel.html?_r=0.

[16] UNAMA, 'Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Mid-year Report 2014', 2014, http://www.unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/2UNAMA%20Protection%20of%20Civilians%20MYR%202014_17%20July%202014_FINAL.pdf.

[17] According to AOAV's explosive weapon media monitoring dataset, which defines a populated area as ' likely to contain concentrations of civilians,' https://aoav.org.uk/explosive-weapon-survey/.

[18] Rod Nordland, 'Attacks on aid workers rise in Afghanistan, UN says,' *New York Times,* 2 December 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/03/world/asia/attacks-rise-on-aid-workers-in-afghanistan.html.

Foreign aid makes up a large part of the Afghan economy. In January 2014 the government approved a $7.6 billion budget, $4.8 billion of which came from international donors.[19] Additionally, aid is seen as an important component of counter-insurgency work in the country.[20]

Given that aid is so bound up in the international stabilization strategy for Afghanistan, humanitarian organizations must operate in a very congested and politicized environment. There are NGOs from around the world; some have been there for decades, others since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, and their scope and size vary enormously.

Much of the aid over the last decade and a half has come from the United States. In 2014 US investment in Afghanistan eclipsed the inflation-adjusted figure for the Marshall Plan as the most expensive nation-building project ever undertaken. Since 2002 some $104 billion has been spent in the country by the United States alone.[21]

Aid spending has been an important part of the coalition forces' counter-insurgency strategy to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan population. The US Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan (ICMCP) states: '[US government] efforts must influence the population's decision to resist the insurgency and support the government while reducing their sense of vulnerability, dissatisfaction and opposition.'[22]

In particular, the work carried out by the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) has come under much criticism. These were teams of civilian operatives supported by troops providing 'force protection' as the teams extended the authority of the Afghan national government into the provinces. There was much criticism of the fact that those delivering development and assistance wore the same uniforms as those fighting the insurgency, as this could lead to confusion over who is delivering humanitarian aid and who is providing military assistance.[23]

This has more significant repercussions for the humanitarian sector, given its imperative of impartiality and neutrality. It is perhaps no coincidence that Afghanistan, a country where aid has long been used to consolidate military gains, is also currently the most dangerous country in the world for aid workers to be based.[24]

The use of aid to produce security-sector reform and to win the hearts and minds of the population has created a humanitarian space that is blurred at the edges and arguably puts NGOs at increased risk. This seems to have resulted in humanitarian aid becoming conflated with defence strategy, and being used overtly as an instrument to achieve Western security policy aims. Experts have called for the international community to 'reduce military involvement in humanitarian, development and reconstruction assistance'.[25] This militarization of the humanitarian sector continues to have a significant impact on NGOs. The targeting of aid workers by organizations such as Islamic State (IS) may reflect the loss of perceived neutrality that was once the humanitarian sector's best

[19] Elias Groll, 'The United States Has Outspent the Marshall Plan to Rebuild Afghanistan', *Foreign Policy*, 30 July 2014, http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/07/30/the_united_states_has_outspent_the_marshall_plan_to_rebuild_afghanistan.

[20] International Crisis Group, 'Aid and Conflict in Afghanistan', 4 August 2011, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/210-%20Aid%20and%20Conflict%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf.

[21] Groll, 'The United States Has Outspent the Marshall Plan to Rebuild Afghanistan'.

[22] Embassy of the United States of America to Kabul and US Forces Afghanistan, 'United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan', 10 August 2009, http://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/0908eikenberryandmcchrystal.pdf.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Kathleen Ryou, 'Unsafe Passage Road Attacks and their Impact on Humanitarian Operations', Humanitarian Outcomes, August 2014, http://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/Aid%20Worker%20Security%20Report%202014.pdf.

[25] International Crisis Group, 'Aid and Conflict in Afghanistan', 4 August 2011, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/210-aid-and-conflict-in-afghanistan.aspx.

defence. It may not not be possible to reverse this trajectory, making aid work an increasingly dangerous profession.

Humanitarian workers operating in armed conflicts are considered non-combatants and are protected by the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the related Protocols I and II of 1977. In 2003 the UN Security Council condemned all forms of violence against those participating in humanitarian operations and called for even greater protection.[26] The evidence gathered in this project underscores the need for strong international norms to protect humanitarian workers, particularly those that are operating outside a recognized conflict zone but still in areas that remain volatile and insecure.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which has been operating in Afghanistan since 1981, was forced to withdraw from the country after a team of five workers was killed in a roadside ambush in June 2004. MSF personnel only returned after a five-year absence.[27] The Taliban claimed responsibility for the killing, and claimed that it had targeted MSF because it perceived the agency to be under the control of the US-led forces.[28] In October 2010 a kidnapped British aid worker was killed by a grenade during a rescue attempt by NATO troops.[29] On 13 August 2008, four International Rescue Committee workers (three international staff and an Afghan driver) were killed by gunfire in an ambush in Logar province.[30]

Humanitarian and development work plays a huge part in both the US military strategy in Afghanistan and the national government's attempt to forge a functioning state. NGOs find themselves operating in a politically delicate position that requires them to tread a careful path between carrying out their missions and not being seen to be taking one side in the conflict. The involvement of the military in humanitarian activities has made this position both more important and more precarious. NGOs are therefore faced with a dual threat of being deliberately targeted as well as caught up indirectly in the violence that persists across the country.

This politicized context of NGO activity in Afghanistan, and the associated patterns of violence and their indirect effects, are particularly evident when analysing how IEDs affect humanitarian operations in Afghanistan.

Impact of IEDs on NGOs

The use and impact of IEDs on NGOs can be understood by considering the following categories: impact on staff; impact on operations; and impact on programming.

Impact on staff

Working in the humanitarian sector entails an inherent and expected risk. Very often the crises that require humanitarian assistance result from conflicts, which can be ongoing when the humanitarian response is delivered. Aid workers therefore necessarily operate in dangerous and unstable environments. The use of IEDs, however, is exacerbating the risk to aid workers' safety.

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[26] UN Security Council Resolution 1502 (2003), 'Protection of United Nations Personnel, Associated Personnel and Humanitarian Personnel in Conflict Zones', Adopted by the Security Council at its 4814th meeting, 26 August 2003, http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/io/rls/othr/23564.htm.
[27] Joel Alas, 'Five years after slayings: Doctors Without Borders returns to Afghanistan', *Spiegel Online,* 12 October 2009, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/five-years-after-slayings-doctors-without-borders-returns-to-afghanistan-a-654702.html.
[28] Carlotta Gall, 'Killings drive doctor group to leave Afghanistan', *New York Times,* 29 July 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/29/world/killings-drive-doctor-group-to-leave-afghanistan.html.
[29] BBC, 'Linda Norgrove: Afghan kidnappers "told her she would live"', http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-19869971, 8 October 2012.
[30] International Rescue Committee, 'Four International Rescue Committee Aid Workers killed', undated, http://www.rescue.org/news/four-international-rescue-committee-aid-workers-killed-afghanistan-4382.

According to figures from the Aid Worker Security database, there were 400 attacks against aid workers in Afghanistan between 1997 and the end of 2013,[31] the number dwarfing those in other hostile environments. In 2013 there were nearly twice as many attacks against aid workers in Afghanistan as in the next most affected country, Syria.[32]

IEDs make up a significant proportion of the security challenges facing NGOs in Afghanistan (see Figure 1). At least 122 (111 national and 11 international) staff were killed or injured in attacks involving IEDs between 2004 and 1 August 2014 (including those working for the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and NGOs), according to figures from the same database.[33] A third of all the recorded aid worker casualties from IEDs globally occurred in Afghanistan (122 out of 367).

Figure 1: Aid worker casualties from IEDs in Afghanistan

Note: Incident refers to an IED detonation that killed or injured an aid worker.
Source: Aid Worker Security Database.

There are three main ways in which IEDs can kill and injure aid workers:

• They may be deliberately targeted in an attack.

• They may be incidentally caught in the blast and fragmentation effects of an attack against another target, sometimes referred to as collateral damage.

• They may be affected by one of the large number of IED attacks in Afghanistan that have no apparent target other than to kill and injure large numbers of civilians.

Data from INSO show that in most incidents where NGOs were affected by IEDs, they were not deliberately targeted. Between 2011 and June 2014 there were 65 incidents where the use of IEDs by armed opposition groups affected NGOs. Of these incidents, 58 per cent were classified as accidental or collateral attacks and 20 per cent as targeted attacks (see Figure 2).[34]

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[31] This includes incidents involving shooting, kidnapping and bodily assault as well as explosives. The targets of these attacks include UN and ICRC staff as well as NGOs.
[32] According to the Aid Worker Security Database, 81 in Afghanistan compared with 44 in Syria, https://aidworkersecurity.org/incidents/report/country.
[33] Data accessed on 16 March 2015. The dataset was last updated on 24 February 2015 and has been verified up to 31 December 2013. IED figures are obtained by combining the categories of 'bombing (set explosives with a stationary target), vehicle-borne IED, vehicle-borne IED (suicide), vehicle-borne IED (remote control), body-borne IED, roadside IED and complex attack (explosives in conjunction with small arms)'. See https://aidworkersecurity.org/incidents/search?detail=1&country=AF.
[34] In 17 per cent of incidents it was unclear, and in 5 per cent the NGO was targeted accidentally. These data are not publicly available, but selected figures were shared with the authors by INSO.

Figure 2: Armed opposition group IED incidents affecting NGOs
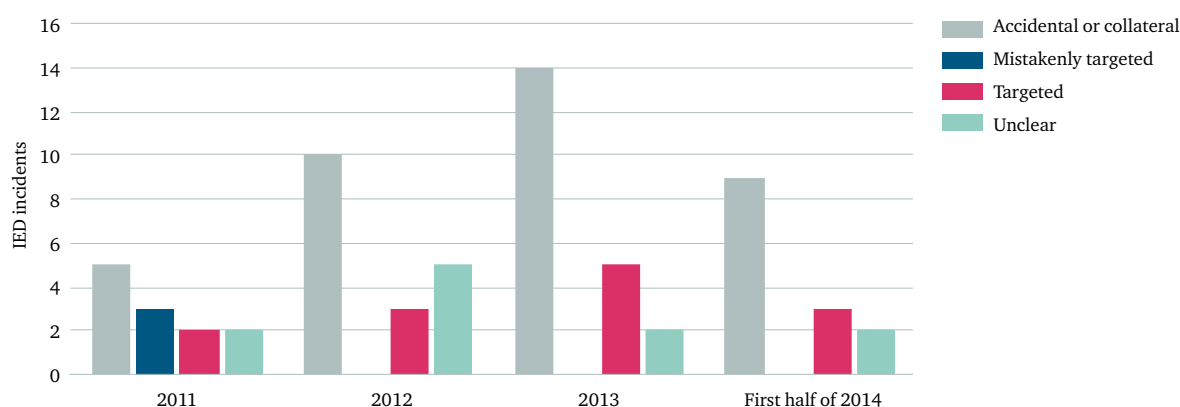
Source: INSO, unpublished data shared with authors.

One organization interviewed described how a training school for midwives was damaged when a motorcycle packed with explosives was detonated across the road. The intended target was a police station, but the IED caused damage to the whole surrounding area. In the words of one interviewee: 'At the moment the major danger is being at the wrong place at the wrong moment.' This highlights a key issue related to the use of IEDs: that the risk is difficult to mitigate. Whereas the risks of landmines, for example, can often be reduced (though by no means eliminated) by following some simple safety procedures, such as staying on used, marked roads or paths, IED attacks are sporadic and unpredictable, and the randomness is an essential part of their effectiveness as a tool of conflict. As one interviewee put it, 'IEDs create uncertainty.'

This uncertainty stems from two sources. First is the unpredictable way in which IEDs detonate. A warning is rarely given and there are few clues as to whether an attack is imminent. Nor are they confined to the traditional battlefield; many attacks take place in civilian areas such as mosques and markets. Second is the difficulty in protecting oneself against an imminent attack. Since these weapons work by affecting a wide area, it is impossible to be confident of one's own security even when one can be sure of not being the target.

Protecting staff from IED attacks is a challenge for NGOs, which tend to have limited resources and are anxious to maintain their ethos of neutrality. Interviewees repeatedly stated that they felt their best form of protection came from acceptance by the local community rather than the alternative of 'toughening the target' through additional security such as armoured cars.[35] By remaining less conspicuous and less militarized in appearance, NGOs help avoid confusion between the identity of military and humanitarian personnel, which, as noted, is particularly pertinent in contexts such as Afghanistan where military personnel have been implementing humanitarian activities.

NGOs often rely first on their image and reputation to avoid being deliberately targeted. The data on IED attacks suggest, however, that this may not be enough. While acceptance within local communities may reduce some of the risk of being deliberately targeted, it does not alter the

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[35] A 2007 study of security perceptions among NGO workers around the world found that security measures related to acceptance, rather than deterrence or protective measures, were viewed much more favourably. Larissa Fast and Dawn Wiest, 'Final Report Security Perceptions Survey', European Interagency Security Forum, August 2007, https://www.eisf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/0009-Fast-Wiest-2007-Security-Perceptions-Survey10.pdf.

danger of being collaterally affected by IEDs. Addressing this risk requires either increasing physical protection or avoiding areas where IEDs are likely. But both of these measures can have a negative impact on the organization's programmes and operations, as detailed below.

Impact on operations

Twelve representatives responsible for the security of their organizations' operations in Afghanistan were surveyed during the research for this paper. It was found that a quarter of them had seen staff killed or injured by IEDs, and two-thirds had had their work in Afghanistan disrupted by attacks involving such devices at some point.

The IEDs most likely to affect NGOs (accounting for 30 per cent of casualties) are roadside bombs, according to the Aid Worker Security Database. In Afganistan there were nearly four times as many IED incidents on roads as in the next most affected location, organizational compounds.[36]

Restriction of access

NGOs have limited means available to help address this threat. The 'toughening the target' approach, used in Afghanistan by the military, which spent billions of dollars on Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, is not an option for NGOs with limited budgets, which, as noted, are anxious to distinguish themselves clearly as neutral humanitarians.[37] Indeed, the vulnerability of aid workers may have increased as a result of the large investment in troop protection, making softer targets more attractive to armed opposition groups. NGOs thus adopt measures such as using low-profile vehicles, not driving near to police and other authority vehicles, and not leaving the compound too early and being the first vehicle on the road – in effect accepting restrictions on their freedom of movement.

The most drastic response is not to travel on roads at all. Of the 12 surveyed organizations, 11 listed 'avoiding certain roads' as one of the measures that they have taken to address the threat of IEDs. Inevitably, however, this tactic can have knock-on effects on operations and on a programme's beneficiaries. The same number of organizations said that they have been unable to work with target beneficiaries at some point because of the risk from IEDs. These are commonly the most vulnerable communities, selected on the basis of need – not according to ease of access.
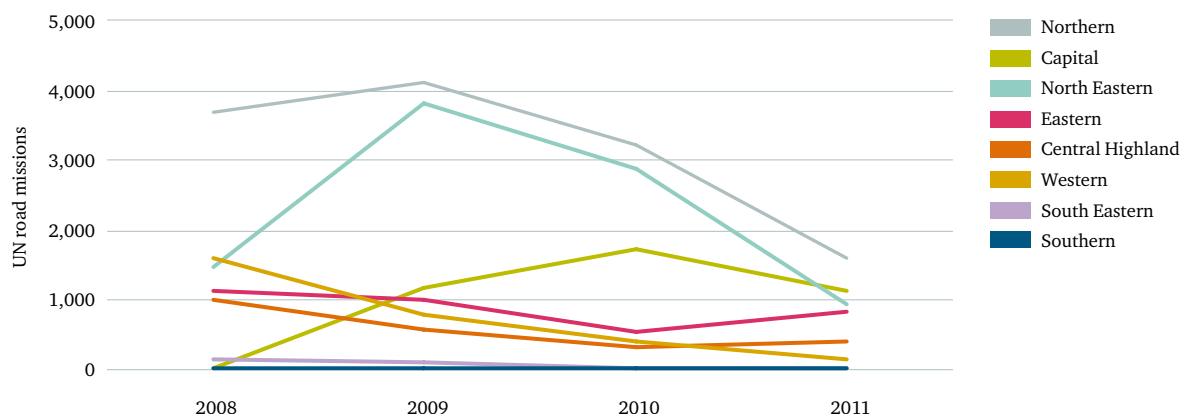
Save the Children has highlighted the link between the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and the denial of humanitarian access to children – one of the six grave violations outlined in UN Security Council Resolution 1612. The use of explosive weapons in such situations has resulted in the denial of humanitarian aid to children and civilian populations as a whole, either by making the area of operations too dangerous to work in or by damaging vital infrastructure that enables aid to reach affected populations.[38]

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[36] Aid worker security database, https://aidworkersecurity.org/incidents/search?detail=1&country=AF. Between 2004 and 21 December 2014, 27 incidents were recorded as occurring on roads compared with seven in compounds and offices.
[37] Alex Rogers, 'The MRAP: Brilliant Buy, or Billions Wasted?', *Time,* 2 October 2012, http://nation.time.com/2012/10/02/the-mrap-brilliant-buy-or-billions-wasted/.
[38] Save the Children, 'Explosive Weapons and Grave Violations Against Children', 2013, http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Explosive_Weapons_and_Grave_Violations_Against_Children.pdf, p. 15.

Figure 3: UN road missions in Afghanistan, by region

Source: UNOCHA, 'United Nations Office Locations and Road Missions', 1 October 2011, http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/
www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/pdfpreview/48a03c95443276dd056ec975b7dbfb7b.jpg.

Figure 3 shows how the UN has reduced the number of activities carried out via road access in almost every region of Afghanistan. In all regions, the absolute number of road missions has fallen, in direct and inverse correlation to the rise in roadside attacks described earlier in this paper. The regions with the least travel encompass some of the most dangerous provinces, such as Helmand in the Southern region.

To make up for the inability to work away from secure compounds, some organizations have elected to operate using remote management. Three of the 12 interviewed had taken the decision to operate solely through a local NGO partner in a region because of the risk of IEDs. A recent report claimed that road trips have all but ceased for the UN; international NGOs are similarly reluctant to move outside the comfort zone of government-held cities where they have their offices and a few areas where community relations have remained strong.[39]

Remote management involves operating with a reduced international staff presence and relying on local partners for implementation. Visits and supervision from international staff may vary depending on the security situation.[40]

While there are benefits from such an approach in that it extends the reach of NGOs, can help develop local civil society capacity and has lower costs than a protective approach, there are also substantial disadvantages. Remote management operates on the assumption that local actors have greater levels of acceptance in the community and are therefore at a lower risk than international staff. However, an analysis of organizations undertaking remote management has shown that there has been a failure 'to adequately assess the unique threats faced by different types of locally and nationally hired workers'.[41]

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[39] Prisca Benelli, Antonio Donini and Norah Niland, 'Afghanistan: Humanitarianism in Uncertain Times', Feinstein Center, November 2012 http://www.scribd.com/doc/115791712/Afghanistan-Humanitarianism-in-Uncertain-Times#fullscreen.
[40] It is important to distinguish operating remotely because of security concerns and as a departure from standard practice from the operations of those NGOs that have traditionally worked through local organizations in order to build capacity. Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Jean S. Renouf, 'Once Removed: Lessons and Challenges in Remote Management of Humanitarian Operations for Insecure Areas', Humanitarian Outcomes, 25 February 2010, http://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/resources/RemoteManagementApr20101.pdf.
[41] Ibid.

Figure 4: Security responses to IEDs by organizations surveyed
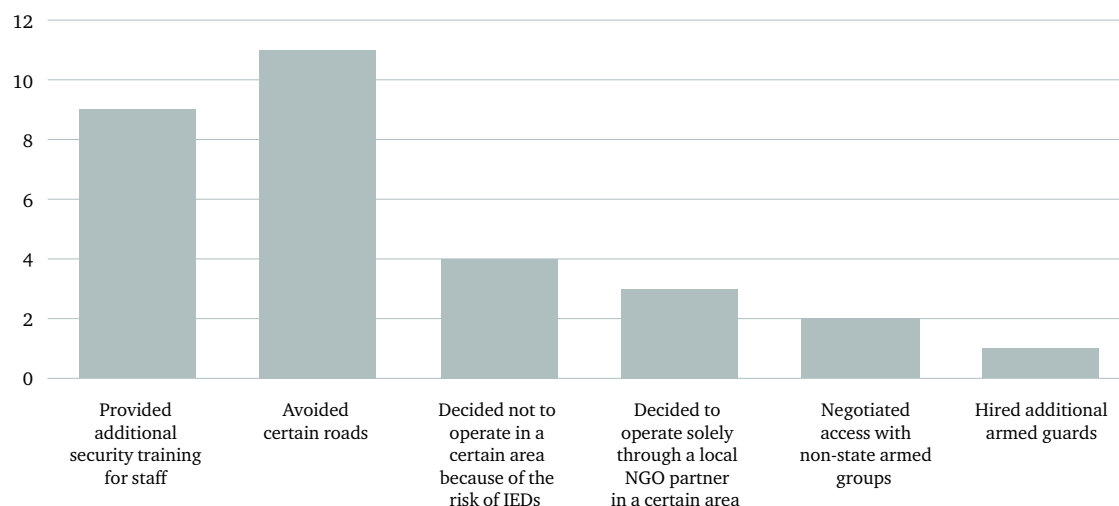
Source: Organizations surveyed for this research by AOAV (2014).

There is a danger that such remote management techniques simply transfer the risk to local staff. One organization interviewed, which operated through local partners in Helmand province, said that it provided security training and equipment to avoid this risk. Invariably, however, this approach merely mitigates the risk rather than removing it.

It has also been highlighted that some activities carried out by NGOs are 'nearly impossible to attempt remotely'.[42] This is particularly true of advocacy efforts, where local organizations do not always have the same independence that is afforded to international NGOs. Similarly, international NGOs that have shifted to remote management lose some of their credibility for humanitarian advocacy without a direct presence on the ground, and it has been noted that the 'quality of implementation in remote management arrangements tends to diminish over time'.[43]

Remote management also means a reduction in real-time information that exists when on the ground. To compensate for this, some NGOs have been monitoring projects using technology. In 2010 Mercy Corps revealed that it was using GPS cameras to 'extend the reach of our program managers … and expand the service to communities where it's too insecure to work, or too remote'.[44]

The lack of access as a result of IED attacks can potentially be managed better with improved technology or through working with local partners. However, both of these methods have disadvantages and increase the distance between the project and the organization.

Fortressing

Although not their first option, organizations do undertake a variety of responses centred on 'toughening the target' to respond to the IED threat. This can range from securing compounds with blast walls to using armed guards and restricting travel by staff outside compounds. However, these measures can be costly and impair the implementation of programmes.

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Benelli, Donini and Niland, 'Afghanistan: Humanitarianism in Uncertain Times'.

[44] Nathan Hodge, 'Using Google Earth and GPS to Track Afghanistan Cash', *Wired,* 25 February 2010, http://www.wired.com/2010/02/using-laptops-cameras-and-gps-to-track-afghanistan-cash/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%253A+WiredDanger Room+%2528Blog+-+Danger+Room%2529.

One option to improve protection while away from the security of the organizational compound is to use armoured vehicles when travelling. However, in many cases the cost is prohibitive and the additional security provided questionable.

None of the surveyed organizations had used mine-resistant vehicles, electronic jamming technology or private security contractors, nor had they operated under the security of PRTs to extend their reach into dangerous areas. In part this can be ascribed to a need to avoid any appearance of militarization or of being part of the conflict; arguably such fortressing strategies would entail an even greater reputational cost than the significant financial outlay required.

The truth that IEDs are harder to protect against than other security risks is supported by interviews with organizations working in Afghanistan. While bulletproof vests and armoured cars could help reduce the danger of small arms, they are less effective against the explosive force of an IED. Working with security contractors – a huge ethical challenge for NGOs anyway – does not provide defence against a hidden roadside bomb. The equipment required to address IEDs directly is both far more expensive and more militaristic in appearance. Even using a single armoured car 'is a big statement', according to one interviewee.

Beyond the financial or reputational costs involved, strategies that force NGOs to hide from a threat have far more insidious impacts for staff members and the work they are trying to carry out. Measures such as strengthening compound security and restricting the movement of staff produce a fortressing or bunkerizing effect. Walls and security restrictions separate staff from the local population both physically and psychologically. They also force a kind of 'mission reduction', as organizations become unable to work in some areas or to carry out certain kinds of projects. Such distancing fundamentally undermines attempts to maintain healthy levels of community acceptance as a means of providing security.

Impact on programming

There are broader implications for NGOs and the humanitarian sector operating in environments where IEDs are employed. Their use and the variety of possible responses are fundamental challenges to the humanitarian imperative of neutrality and impartiality. NGOs that are forced to alter their programming to ensure they demonstrate a rigorous duty of care towards their staff do so potentially at the cost of their independence. While NGOs constantly make decisions based on practical constraints (such as lack of access caused by severe weather conditions), basing decisions solely on the use of IEDs may translate into an NGO becoming a pawn of one party to a conflict.

Threat perception

The perceived threat of IEDs, magnified through intensive media coverage and their association with terrorism, can compel organizations to react differently from the way they deal with other threats. One organization said that the concern around IED attacks was partly driven by the knowledge that an attack 'will cause everything to stop … international staff will be evacuated and projects will be delayed'. A single incident can destroy decades of hard work. Four of the 12 organizations interviewed said that they had decided not to operate in an area of Afghanistan at some point because of the risk from IEDs. The significant potential impact of such an attack forces NGOs to respond more strongly than they might to other risks.

The impact of this perceived threat on programming is significant. The level of insecurity and fear generated by the use of IEDs is such that programmes can be closed or moved from areas with acute need. Strategically placed devices could deter delivery of aid for many weeks or months. In some cases specific types of programmes, which may have been offered or provided in a secure environment, could be withdrawn if considered inflammatory. These could include advocacy programmes that deal with contentious issues such as sexual health.

When decisions are taken on this basis, they threaten to compromise the fundamental humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. This reaction enables users of IEDs to influence the level of humanitarian response that is provided to certain areas, as they become effective means to close roads, preventing access to health or education facilities.

One security adviser interviewed said that 'IEDs may force a stronger security response from INGOs because although perhaps the likelihood of such an incident is low, the potential impact can be extremely high compared to a traffic accident'. There were an estimated 6,209 road traffic fatalities in Afghanistan in 2010, according to data published by the World Health Organization (WHO).[45] By contrast, there were 940 civilian fatalities from IEDs in 2010, according to UNAMA.[46] While NGOs take a range of measures to avoid traffic accidents (for example, avoiding driving in rural areas after dark), if an accident does occur there is not always such a strong reaction. If an IED is deployed, however, even if the NGO was not targeted specifically, the threat is perceived as much greater.

Financial implications

The cost of disruption to humanitarian programming resulting from an IED attack is a factor that has not been generally quantified by international NGOs. The impact related to the suspension and sometimes withdrawal of programming is significant in areas that rely on humanitarian support. As well as the impact of the loss of staff on the organization and colleagues, there are also costs in terms of community relations both locally and nationally within a country; post-trauma care that NGOs need to provide to colleagues, even those not directly affected; and the time and personnel required to manage the expectations of donors that support programmes, for example where programme outputs will not be met or key programme assets such as vehicles need to be replaced. This may have further implications related to long-term support to NGOs, as donors could withdraw funding if operations cannot be implemented.

It was noted during the research that quantifying these costs is often not appealing or not a priority for NGOs, as the human cost outweighs any financial equivalent. However, such analysis is useful to understand the full impact of IEDs on NGOs.

Conclusion

The impact of IEDs is a daily reality for NGOs operating in Afghanistan, entailing specific direct costs. These may be financial costs (expensive mitigation or avoidance strategies such as GPS tracking software or armoured vehicles); time and efficiency costs (identifying alternative, less direct but safer routes); or reputational costs (distancing NGOs from local communities or identifying too closely with

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[45] World Health Organization, 'Road Traffic Deaths and Proportion of Deaths by Road User, by Country/Area', http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/road_safety_status/2013/data/table_a2.pdf. Taken from World Health Organization, 'Global Status Report on Road Safety 2013', 2013, http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/road_safety_status/2013/en/.
[46] UNAMA, 'Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 2014'.

a military presence). All are highly relevant in a contested and competitive environment where many NGOs are forced to face a choice about whether they can afford or are able to operate as they wish, or whether they can operate at all.

Analysing the impact of IEDs on the humanitarian space in Afghanistan contributes to the growing body of evidence on the humanitarian impacts, both direct and indirect, of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Understanding the wider consequences of such attacks highlights the urgency of the need to address this problem.

Long-term costs to the humanitarian sector are far-reaching. The use of IEDs against NGOs may be understood as a reaction to the politicization of the humanitarian sector, reflecting in part the growing involvement of militaries in the delivery of humanitarian aid, and in part the increasing conflation of humanitarian aid and defence policies. The legacy of the conflict in Afghanistan for the humanitarian sector will now need to be confronted in the light of the withdrawal of UK and US troops. On the one hand, there is concern that the international withdrawal will lead to the loss of knowledge and equipment for safely detecting, analysing and disposing of IEDs.[47] On the other hand, there is an opportunity to redefine and recover some of the trust and understanding that have been eroded over the past 10 years, and to re-establish a clearly defined and mandated humanitarian space.

Achieving this goal will be at best a slow process that is dependent on some degree of unified approach by NGOs, concerned governments (both donor and host governments), militaries and non-state actors. It is a lot to expect and hope for, but crucial if the operations of NGOs are not to be further compromised.

About the authors

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Henry Dodd has been coordinator of the International Security Department at Chatham House since January 2015. He previously worked as a senior weapons researcher at the NGO Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), where his research covered the humanitarian impact of explosive weapons, with a particular focus on the harm caused by IEDs. His reports looking at the global casualties from explosive weapons have been cited in the UN Secretary-General's report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. In 2014 he was named as one of the '30 under 30' young people working in humanitarian disarmament. He has a BA in English from the University of Exeter and an MA in international studies and diplomacy from SOAS, University of London.

Acknowledgments

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[47] Ibid.

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