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"Modern Warfare: Armed Groups, Private Militaries, Humanitarian Organizations, and the Law (Book Review)" edited by Benjamin Perrin

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Book Reviews



Modern Warfare: Armed Groups, Private Militaries, Humanitarian Organizations, and the Law. Benjamin Perrin eds. Vancouver: University of Vancouver Press, 2012. Pp. 336.

The evolution of modern conflict to predominantly asymmetrical warfare, involving both state and non-state armed groups, has resulted in an increasing complexity surrounding the actors operating within the humanitarian space and their relationship to international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL). Benjamin Perrin explores this dynamic relationship between armed groups, humanitarian organizations, and non-combatants, within the context of IHL in the edited work *Modern Warfare*. In it, the various authors examine the changing nature of armed conflict and the evolution of the rule of law in these complex security environments. This book was a culmination of “The Edges of Conflict” project, a joint initiative in 2007 between University of British Columbia’s Liu Institute for Global Issues and the Canadian Red Cross, that sought to examine and debate the challenges of modern armed conflict, develop new conceptual approaches and raise awareness on contemporary conflict issues.

The book is neatly divided into four main sections all addressing various topics in what Perrin describes as “the new culture of war that concepts like humanitarian space and counterinsurgency

doctrine have attempted to confront” (p. 2). The first section explores the compliance of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) with IHL. The second section examines the controversial use of private military and security companies (PMSCs) by humanitarian organizations. The third section delves into the theoretical and conceptual debate surrounding the shrinking humanitarian space. The book then concludes with a unique section on how humanitarian organizations can utilize tools of international humanitarian and human rights law to cope with endemic urban violence particularly against women and children.

The primary theme of the book is nicely introduced in the first section where chapters one to five examine the crisis in compliance to IHL amongst non-state armed groups. These chapters provide a basic understanding of international humanitarian law and recognize that non-state armed groups will be hard pressed to comply with any international body of laws that restricts and limits the military methods they can employ. In some cases “the very objective of such NSAGs is to violate IHL” (p. 3), thus these chapters further address the challenges of promoting compliance by NSAGs with IHL. In chapters one and two, Rene Provost and Sophie Rondeau debate the reliance on reciprocity as a method of ensuring compliance with IHL. Their debate is heavily bogged down in legal and theoretical jargon and can at times be difficult to read if not previously immersed in the subject. Chapter three, however, provides a fascinating look at a specific effort to bring NSAGs into compliance with IHL through the program known as Geneva Call. Geneva Call has successfully obtained signatures and written commitments from almost sixty NSAGs prohibiting the use of anti-personnel landmines. The authors of this chapter, Warner, Somer and Bongard, highlight the changing nature of modern conflict by showing how a traditionally inter-state topic, as represented by the 1997 Ottawa Convention banning the use of landmines, can be applied to groups not represented by this traditional inter-state forum. They offer a legitimate example of how NSAGs can be brought into the negotiation process and given ownership of their compliance with IHL.

The second section of this book examines the use of private military and security companies (PMSCs) by humanitarian organizations and elucidates the controversial debate surrounding their employment in the humanitarian space. As a result of their controversial behavior in Iraq and Afghanistan, many of the largest humanitarian organizations—International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) for example—have

publicly condemned the use of PMSCs by humanitarian organizations in high-risk security environments, opting instead to cease operations when personnel are threatened. Benjamin Perrin contributes a chapter to this discussion and argues that the utilization of PMSCs does not affect the neutrality, impartiality or independence (fundamental humanitarian principles) of humanitarian personnel as long as PMSCs operate within the framework of proportional self-defence. In fact, Perrin points out that based on IHL PMSCs protecting non-combatants would be well within their legal right to use force to protect humanitarian personnel without jeopardizing their neutrality. He does stress, however, that approval from the recognized state authority should be obtained before proceeding. Perrin argues for more transparency between PMSCs and a greater dialogue between them and humanitarian organizations in order to foster a stronger working relationship in line with humanitarian principles.

In chapters seven and eight, Andrew Bearpark and Jamie Williamson take opposing positions on the use of PMSCs by humanitarian organizations. Bearpark argues that the objective of providing aid to those in need outweighs the criticisms leveled against such use, whereas Williamson claims that the short-term gains of employing PMSCs will result in a long-term erosion of the status of humanitarian organizations. Fred Schreier concludes this excellent section by showing how existing IHL already provides an international framework for the behavior of PMSCs in these complex security environments.

The third section of this text explores the changing concept of humanitarian space from one traditionally defined as “the freedom of non-governmental humanitarian organizations to assess humanitarian needs and deliver aid and assistance independently” (p. 8) to a more modern version incorporating many state-actors who now consider humanitarian aid part of their operational doctrine. Sylvain Beauchamp addresses the tension between state and non-state actors within the humanitarian space arguing that the debate should shift away from who can operate within this space and focus directly on the recipients of the aid and the method that aid is delivered. Emily Paddon and Taylor Owen go on to examine these tensions in Afghanistan and argue that the model of ‘integrated peacekeeping’ employed in the country has blurred the lines between state and non-state humanitarian efforts. They argue that greater distinction must be made between “military and humanitarian aspects of the

international effort in Afghanistan” (p. 280) where military and civilian activities are clearly distinguished.

The final section of the book is a fascinating look at what the 2007 International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent identified as one of the four great challenges facing the world today, endemic urban violence in non-conflict states. This section is unique in that this problem is relatively new in terms of humanitarian organizations seriously considering methods of humanitarian assistance in these violent environments: Haiti, Brazil, and Guatemala being a few examples. Chapter sixteen stands out in its examination of stabilization efforts in the cities of Cite Soleil and Bel Air in Haiti from 2006 to 2010. In it, Robert Muggah explains how certain NGOs were unwilling to cooperate with the UN stabilization mission and other state-led initiatives like the US Haiti Stabilization Initiative (HIS). Muggah labels this opposition to integration with political or military actors as the ‘Dunantist’ approach. The ‘Wilsonian’ NGOs, however—such as Oxfam, CARE and Concern—took a more pragmatic approach that involved closer cooperation with political and military initiatives. Muggah argues, however, that by 2009 both the ‘Dunantists’ and ‘Wilsonians’ were working quite closely with the various state and military-led initiatives with noticeable success in urban Haiti.

Modern Warfare is an excellent read that delves into serious issues affecting the application of humanitarian law in combat and non-combat zones. The authors are all extremely well informed and obviously, with its roots in the 2007 conference, have seriously researched their topics. This book is particularly relevant to those in the political science and international relations field who are attempting to understand current IHL and some of the issues that are affecting humanitarian organizations in a world where the humanitarian space is shrinking, integrated peacekeeping is blurring the line between civilian and military, and new, complicated problems like endemic urban violence are coming to the forefront of policy discussion. Benjamin Perrin has organized the book thematically and in such a way as to give the reader a sense of the complexity and evolving nature of the topics addressed. It allows the reader to get a sense of some of the pressing issues facing both state and non-state actors in the delivery of humanitarian aid and provides new ideas and avenues for further exploration.

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