

Special Workshop on Engaging Armed Groups in the Protection of Civilians: Background note

By their actions and decisions, armed groups can protect or harm civilians. In situations of armed conflict and violence, civilians face numerous dangers, including death, injury, and threats to their physical and sexual integrity and to family life. They may be harmed, deliberately or incidentally, by armed groups and by the armed forces of a state. Their conduct will determine the extent to which not only civilians but also captured fighters are protected from physical and psychological harm.

Armed non-state actors have obligations under customary international law to respect and protect civilians and those *hors de combat*. The Geneva Academy is continuing to look at both the normative framework and ways to improve compliance with it.

Ownership of Norms project

In January 2012, the Human Security and Migration Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (HSD) commissioned the Geneva Academy to study the response of more than 30 armed groups to humanitarian norms, especially those that protect civilians. Research was undertaken in 2012–13 with support from an Advisory Board of international experts from the Berghof Foundation, Conciliation Resources, Geneva Call, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, HSD, Human Rights Watch, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), serving in a personal capacity. The result of the project was a Policy Briefing: *Reactions to Norms, Armed Groups and the Protection of Civilians*.

The Policy Briefing seeks to assist the development of operational and organizational policies which promote respect for humanitarian norms that protect civilians. It is primarily intended for use by individuals, states, and international and non-governmental organizations that seek to protect people who are at risk as a result of armed violence and conflict. However, it is hoped that the Briefing will also be useful to people who have the same objective and who belong to, or have close links with, an armed group.

The Policy Briefing examines the normative policies of armed groups relating to the protection of civilians in armed conflict and other situations of violence, not their operational practice, though it notes some instances in which the operational practice of a group appears systematically to contradict its stated policy. It is based on declarations and statements by members or representatives of armed groups and policy positions. A number of representatives of armed groups also clarified their positions in direct discussions.

The Academy is currently disseminating the results of the project through regional training workshops organized by the International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP). The first workshop was held in Amman, Jordan, in April 2014. Regional workshops are being organized in Bangkok (19–23 May) and in Nairobi (2–6 June) and in Amman in October (in Arabic, exact date to be confirmed). For details, please contact PHAP's Programme Coordinator, Caterina Luciani (trainings@phap.org). Other punctual events concerning the Policy Briefing will be held in Brussels, Geneva, London, and New York during 2014.

Rules of Engagement

In 2009–2011, at the request of the HSD, the Geneva Academy conducted a study on how to enhance compliance with international norms by armed non-state actors, taking into account the views both of the actors themselves and the experiences of those engaged in dialogue with them. The report of the project, *Rules of Engagement: Protecting Civilians through Dialogue with Armed Non-State Actors*, was published in October 2011 in English, French, and Spanish.

Researchers and contact persons

The Project is being conducted by Dr. Stuart Casey-Maslen and Marina Mattiolo, the main contact person for this project.