HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

Mini MBA Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord): preserving access and principles with armed actors

Course handout · Week 2 : Knowing armed actors: who they are, how they think, how they decide

A programme of exactly 3 months (12 weeks, 144 hours) to coordinate humanitarian action with armed actors: principles, armed actors and their culture, the Oslo and MCDA Guidelines, foreign military assets in disasters, complex emergencies and integrated missions, armed escorts, humanitarian notification and information sharing, access negotiation, liaison and forums, protection, country-specific guidelines and dilemmas. Based on the public texts of OCHA and the IASC. Corrected numerical exercises, three monthly exams with case studies, and a verifiable diploma from the Humanitarian Academy. Independent course: it is not OCHA's official UN-CMCoord course, to which it refers, and it does not award any United Nations certification.

https://humanitairejobs.org/en/academy/mini-mba-coordination-civilo-militaire/semaine-2/

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Week 2 : Knowing armed actors: who they are, how they think, how they decide

Objectives

- Distinguish the main armed actors in a crisis: forces of the affected State, foreign militaries, peace missions, non-State armed groups, police and private companies.
- Understand military organisation, chain of command and vocabulary in order to talk to the right counterpart.
- Map the armed actors in an area and define an interaction mode for each of them.

A family of very different actors

"The military" are not a single block. The interaction mode depends on the actor's **status** and its **role in the conflict**:

- **Armed forces and civil defence of the affected State**: often the first to respond to disasters; they act under the authority of the government, which has the primary responsibility to protect and assist its population.
- **Foreign militaries**: deployed as bilateral support after a disaster, or as parties to a conflict within a coalition or an agreement.
- **Peacekeeping missions** of the United Nations or regional organisations: military, police and civilian components, with a Security Council mandate, often including the protection of civilians.
- **Non-State armed groups**: very diverse, from a structured movement administering territory to a local militia.
- **Police forces** and **private security companies**: civilian status, but weapons and a security logic.

How an army is organised

Armies follow a clear **chain of command**. An officer in the field applies orders and often cannot commit beyond them; the useful counterpart for a decision is sometimes two levels higher.

In headquarters, functions are often numbered ("J" system for a joint force, "G" for land forces): **1** personnel, **2** intelligence, **3** operations, **4** logistics, **5** planning, **6** communications, **9** civil-military cooperation in many armies. The J9 or G9 officer is often the first contact, but decisions on movements belong to the 3.

Armies work through **planning**, **written orders**, short **rotations** (often four to twelve months) and a culture of quick results. A humanitarian who presents a clear request (what, where, when, how much, why) gets an answer faster.

Cultures clash, and that is normal

Cultural differences explain many misunderstandings:

- **Hierarchy** versus **consensus**: the army decides quickly through the chain of command; humanitarians coordinate among independent organisations, with no single leader.
- **Information security**: the army classifies, humanitarians publish and share.
- **Indicators**: the army measures tasks completed, humanitarians measure needs met and people protected.
- **Time**: the force leaves when its mission ends; humanitarians and populations stay.

Understanding these differences does not mean erasing them: the distinction of roles is itself a protection.

Non-State armed groups

In many conflicts, it is **non-State armed groups** that control access to populations. International humanitarian law (Article 3 common to the Geneva Conventions and, where it applies, Additional Protocol II) binds them in non-international armed conflicts.

Humanitarian dialogue with them is legitimate and necessary to obtain access and security. It gives them no legal status. It must, however, take into account **counter-terrorism laws and sanctions regimes**, donor clauses and the organisation's internal rules: the content of contacts and any transaction must be controlled and documented.

> Talking to every weapon bearer who controls access is not taking sides. It is what makes it possible to help on both sides of a front line.

Mapping armed actors

A simple tool: a table with one row per actor and the following columns.

- **Status**: affected State, foreign, peace mission, non-State, private.
- **Role in the conflict**: party to hostilities or not.
- **Area and capabilities**: where it operates, what assets (air, engineering, medical).
- **Chain of command** and **counterparts**.
- **Perception** by the population and by other armed actors.
- **Recommended interaction mode**: cooperation, coordination, coexistence.

The mapping is updated at every significant change and shared in humanitarian forums according to the agreed confidentiality rules.

Exercise: mapping a province

In the fictitious province of Rémi, there are: the national army, which is conducting an offensive; a peacekeeping mission tasked with protecting civilians, not a party to the conflict; an armed group controlling two districts; a private security company guarding a mine.

Build the mapping table (status, role, interaction mode) and say which counterpart you would contact first for a convoy to a district controlled by the armed group.

Model answer. National army: party to the conflict, coexistence, notification of movements. Peace mission: coordination (security information, protection of civilians). Armed group: coexistence, dialogue on access through humanitarian channels. Private company: no humanitarian role, keep distance. For the convoy: the armed group controlling the area and the national army operating around it, in parallel, through the agreed notification mechanisms.

Key takeaways

- The interaction mode depends on the armed actor's status and its role in the conflict.
- Find the right level: the CIMIC contact (often J9/G9) is not always the one who decides on movements (J3/G3).
- Cultural differences are normal; the distinction of roles protects.
- Dialogue with non-State armed groups is legitimate, framed and documented (sanctions, counter-terrorism).
- An up-to-date mapping of armed actors guides every interaction.

Quiz

1. Who has the primary responsibility to assist the population affected by a disaster?
   A. International NGOs
   B. The peace mission
   C. The affected State
   D. Foreign armies
2. In many armies, function 3 of a headquarters corresponds to:
   A. Operations
   B. Intelligence
   C. Communications
   D. Logistics

3. Humanitarian dialogue with a non-State armed group:
   A. Gives it State status recognised by the UN
   B. Must go through the country's national army
   C. Is legitimate, without giving it any status
   D. Is always prohibited by humanitarian law

4. A peacekeeping mission that is not a party to the conflict rather calls for:
   A. Strict coexistence
   B. Coordination, without integration
   C. Integrated distributions
   D. No contact with any armed actor in the area

5. Why take sanctions regimes into account in contacts with certain groups?
   A. To control and document the exchanges
   B. To obtain additional funds from donors
   C. To inform the press of every contact
   D. To refuse any contact with these groups

Quiz answers : 1. D · 2. D · 3. A · 4. C · 5. B