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Hazardous Partnership: NGOs and United States Intelligence in Small Wars

International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of many stripes and several elements of the United States intelligence community persistently find themselves thrown together on the "front lines" of the international response to small wars and insurgencies in the Third World and former Communist world. Both NGOs and intelligence agencies face (1) transparency questions of what information to make public, share discreetly, or conceal; and (2) operational questions of how they influence the policies of governments and warriors. To function with minimal effectiveness in the dangerous and fluid environment of small wars, NGOs increasingly realize they must have an "information strategy," and intelligence officials an "NGO strategy." The most successful warriors have both.

The convergence of NGOs and U.S. intelligence at the crossroads of small wars has rarely been the harmonious encounter envisioned by some theorists of early warning and conflict prevention. Despite serious efforts in the 1990s to institutionalize it, the relationship has remained hazardous for all the partners—NGOs, American intelligence, and the warriors themselves. Most relevant academic and policy literature fails to address the real issues in this hazardous partnership.

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THE PARTICIPATING RELATIONSHIP

Whether or not U.S. troops are on the ground in small wars and humanitarian operations, a surprisingly broad range of institutions from the American intelligence community are involved, directly or indirectly, either monitoring or guiding policy. Included are elements of the National Intelligence Council, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Security Agency (NSA), National Reconnaissance Office (NRO), intelligence officers in the National Security Council (NSC), the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) in the Department of State, and certain U.S. embassies. Information is brought to bear that originates as imagery intelligence, signals intelligence, human intelligence, diplomatic reporting from embassies, open source information, and gray information.

In addition, more than a hundred distinct international NGOs may become engaged at the peak of a large, widely publicized humanitarian emergency like Bosnia or Somalia. While acknowledging the variability and fluidity of the NGO world, it is possible to sketch the major categories and more prominent organizations. For gathering and analyzing information, particularly important are NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International on human rights, Refugees International and the U.S. Committee for Refugees on refugee issues, and the Carter Center and the Community of Sant' Egidio on conflict resolution. The rubric of relief and development covers the largest number of NGOs, most of which fall into several families of "sister agencies" that share normative affinities but are organized independently and based in different countries. Secular NGO families include Oxfam, CARE, Save the Children, and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). Church-linked NGO families include Caritas (Catholic), Lutheran World Federation, World Council of Churches (mainline Protestant), and World Vision (evangelical Protestant). The International Committee of the Red Cross, which is neither an NGO nor an intergovernmental organization but combines features of both, is also deeply involved in small wars. Sometimes active are NGOs addressing environmental issues, and democratization and civil society.¹ Finally, a few NGOs have been founded and designed for the specific purpose of early warning and conflict prevention. The four most prominent are International Crisis Group, Center for Preventive Action, FEWER, and International Alert.

The "issue-area" boxes into which NGOs place themselves are important for organizational identity and funding, but they are less important operationally. Indeed, one of the defining features of international policy