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**Operational Leadership Challenges
in Emergency Humanitarian Assistance Operations**

by

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union the search for a new world order began. Sanctioned by a United Nations released from the tethers of political stalemate, military forces increasingly have been called upon to deal with the effects of internal strife and political instability. They undertook humanitarian and peace-keeping operations which challenged the very essence of the nation-state—sovereignty. While the specter of nuclear annihilation during the cold war underlined the “interdependence” of mankind, post-cold “interdependence” has fostered responsibility for mankind’s well-being. The political complexity of the tasks confronting the operational commander today have expanded geometrically. As the moorings of the cold war have disintegrated, new ones have been more elusive.

While the undertaking of missions other than war is not new for the military, the political environment in which they are carried out is. Joint doctrine emphasizes the importance of “directing every military operation toward a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective.”¹ However, actually establishing such objectives in humanitarian operations can be a particularly daunting task due to the multiplicity of actors involved as well as changes in the subjective and objective political conditions underlying the emergency.

¹ Doctrine for Joint Operations, Joint Pub 3-0, February 1, 1995, Washington, D.C. Chapter V, p. V-2.

Thus, the challenge confronting the operational commander in emergency humanitarian operations is how to establish clear, attainable objectives and "to blend or synchronize many agencies' activities at the strategic, operational and tactical levels."² The difficulties in forming a coalition and synchronizing efforts in war have provided generous fodder for historians for many years. However, the complexities of achieving synchronization of efforts in an operation other than war may well be insurmountable. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to work toward cooperation, coordination and consensus.³ These are areas which are innately political in nature and require the operational commander to operate in an environment in which flexibility is at a premium.

This paper seeks to elucidate the leadership challenge confronting the operational commander in establishing and refining clear objectives for emergency humanitarian assistance missions which by their very nature have a multiplicity of actors involved. While organizational structure and the successful integration of other military forces in the accomplishment of such missions is important, this paper focuses on the political nature of the process.

Operation Provide Comfort is used as a case study, but it is not an exhaustive study of that operation, since many excellent studies have already been completed (see bibliography). Rather, Operation Provide Comfort is particularly useful in that it was

² D.M. Last and Done Vought, "Interagency Cooperation in Peace Operations: A Conference Report" (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Number K306, 11/24/94) p.2.

³ Ibid.

the first major humanitarian assistance operation following the cold war. And, it established a benchmark from which subsequent operations were judged.

Who Establishes Operational Objectives

The easy answer to this question is that “the CinC is responsible for establishing the operational objectives necessary to translate national-level strategy into field-level actions.”⁴ However, this is clearly an inadequate response for it begs the question how the variety of civilian actors affect and shape the actual objectives to be pursued and how the operational commander actually arrives at the point of enunciating the mission’s objective. Operational objectives cannot be established in a political vacuum. Moreover, as General McCarthy points out, “[there] is no military operation without political consequences.”⁵ The consequences can be particularly acute in humanitarian assistance operations in which the political aspects of the situation more often than not are disguised by the suffering seen on the television screens back home.

In the case of the Kurdish refugee crisis in 1991 this was clearly the case. This exodus brought to the fore the internal security concerns of the Turkish Government which had been fighting its own, increasingly bloody, Kurdish insurgency led by the terrorist PKK (Kurdish Workers’ Party). While the PKK was not aligned with the two

⁴ Michael C. Mitchell, “Coordinating Humanitarian Assistance,” Marine Corps Gazette, No. K 272, 1/1/1995, p. 33.

major Iraqi Kurdish parties, the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) or KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party), it had relied upon areas within northern Iraq and Syria as safe areas for its operations within Turkey.

Saddam Hussein was well aware of Turkish security concerns based upon pre-Kuwait discussions and cooperation. Hence, the Turkish Government was convinced, and probably rightly so, that the Saddam Hussein engineered the mass exodus of Kurds as an attempt to "empty his country's northern border regions of unwanted minorities" . . . and get revenge for Turkish coalition support in Desert Storm.⁶ The Turkish attitude was further complicated by the fact that it realized that should the refugees be allowed into Turkey, they would remain, adding to Turkey's security concerns and be a substantial financial and political drain.⁷

Despite the extreme remoteness of the Kurdish refugees, the plight of their suffering soon reached television viewers around the world. Within a week of the beginning of Saddam Hussein's counteroffensive against them, the Turkish Government was estimating 250,000 refugees on its border.⁸ This figure would reach

⁵ James P. McCarthy, "Commanding Joint and Coalition Operations," Naval War College Review, vol XLVI, no. 1. Winter 1993, p. 16.

⁶ Clyde Haberman, "Turks Say Hussein Plotted to Drive out the Kurds," New York Times, April 12, 1991, p.A6.

⁷ The 1988 Iraqi chemical weapons attack against Kurdish rebels resulted in tens of thousands fleeing to Turkey. In 1991 over 20,000 remained in Turkish camps without international assistance.

⁸ Clyde Haberman, "Kurds on Turkey Border Scramble for Basics," New York Times, April 6, 1991, p.A4.

452,000 refugees within a few days. An estimated thousand of them would die each day before their condition would be stabilized.⁹

While this tragedy quickly unfolded, efforts to galvanize the international community to action in the UN faltered over fundamental sovereignty issues. Nevertheless, a French-sponsored Security Council resolution (UNSC Resolution 688) succeeded in passing on April 5, 1991 which called for Iraqi cooperation with international relief agencies responding to the crisis.¹⁰ On April 6, Joint Task Force Provide Comfort began with the airlift of food and medicine to the refugees and the deployment of special forces teams directly among the refugees to organize the delivery of food and medicine, but also to assess the situation. These teams were assisted by a core of private voluntary aid workers who made their way to refugees on the border.

Operation Provide Comfort Objectives

For the next ten days critical decisions were made which led to the establishment of Combined Task Force Provide Comfort on April 16 and the wide acceptance of objectives for the operation. The mission statement for Provide Comfort was simple. It stated that "Combined task force Provide Comfort conducts

⁹ John M. Shalikashvili, "Statement," U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, Aspects of Anti-Chaos Aid to the Soviet Union, Hearings (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), p.7 and 9.

¹⁰The resolution passed by a vote of 10-3, with Cuba, Yemen and Zimbabwe opposed and China and India abstaining. See "Iraq Accepts UN Cease-fire Terms for a Formal End to the Persian Gulf War—

multinational humanitarian operations to provide immediate relief to displaced Iraqi civilians until international relief agencies and private voluntary organizations can assume overall supervision.” The objectives established from this mission statement were equally simple and clear:

- Immediate: Stop the dying and suffering; stabilize the population
- Mid-term: Resettle the population at temporary sites; establish sustainable, secure environment.
- Long-term: Return population to their homes.¹¹

Clearly the immediate objective was critical, but it was equally clear that this was an objective which could not be accomplished as long as the refugees remained bottled up in their mountainside refuges. Movement of the refugees was essential, but to where?

Achieving “Consensual” Objectives—The Multinational Factor

As a UN official in Ankara pointed out, the big issue was the political decision—absorb the refugees or carve out a safe haven for them Iraq.¹² The issue of a safe haven, however, involved a variety of issues which appeared to be at variance with a key U.S. strategic interest: the territorial integrity of the countries of the region

One Million Kurds Reported Fleeing Iraq,” World Facts on File News Digest, April 11, 1991, p. 254C1.

¹¹ Shalikashvili, p.9.

¹² John Kifner, “Turkey’s Chief Urges Global Aid to Resettle Kurds,” New York Times, April 17, 1991, p. A13.

and the security of a NATO ally, Turkey. In many respects this appeared to be a conundrum without a solution.

On April 8, Secretary of State Baker visited a refugee enclave on the border following a meeting with Turkish President Ozal the previous day. This trip required substantial logistical support in an extremely inaccessible, insecure area. Kurdish leaders at the border and Turkish officials argued that humanitarian assistance alone was insufficient; it was a political problem, "which could be solved only by inducing the Kurds to return to Iraq."¹³ Indirectly Baker acknowledged this fact by intentionally walking across the border to talk with refugees on Iraqi side.

In facilitating this visit less than 48 hours after Special Forces teams had been deployed into the border camps is an example of operational command leadership seeking to shape objectives for the mission. Visiting the border, Baker was able to see vividly exactly why the refugees could not be stabilized for long on the mountainsides and at the same time illustrate their plight for his Turkish counterpart. Further, the visit was indicative of the close coordination of effort between American Embassy Ankara and Provide Comfort Task Force whose headquarters were several hundred miles away at Incirlik Air Base.

It was clear that the Turks would not agree to allow the refugees into Turkey, even temporarily, without a clear plan which would meet their security needs. The establishment of a safe haven along the border within Iraq which would be a defined

¹³ "Iraq Accepts UN Cease-fire Terms for a Formal End to the Persian Gulf War—One Million Kurds Reported Fleeing Iraq," World Facts on File News Digest, April 11, 1991, p. 254C1.

entity from Iraq, in other words a new Gaza, would not be in the security interests of Turkey. As General Shalikasvili subsequently testified, the image of a Gaza Strip was something which he sought to avoid at all cost.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the human tragedy occurring in the mountains on the border was not only an issue for the United States, but also for our European allies and Desert Storm coalition partners. In particular France, Britain, and Germany, struggled to find a solution to the crisis. Prime Minister John Major initially sought support for the idea of establishing a UN-supervised safe haven in Northern Iraq. This was an idea which was initially embraced by Secretary of Defense Cheney on April 7. The European Community accepted Major's safe haven proposal on April 8. However, the Administration *seemed* to back away from the proposal, and was criticized for "damning it with faint praise."¹⁵

The crux of the matter confronting a "safe haven" was the question of establishing a "UN-controlled" safe haven; the difficulty of gaining the necessary support in the UNSC; and determining whether it made sense for U.S. strategic interests. As UN Soviet Ambassador Yuli Vorontsov was reported to have stated, "It's a tricky idea... How can you do this on someone else's sovereign territory?"¹⁶

Meanwhile, relying on the authority contained in UNSC resolution 688, the U.S. sought a means around a formal measure by "warning" Iraq not to undertake any

¹⁴ Shalikasvili, p. 10.

¹⁵ Martin Fletcher, "Faint Praise from the White House," The Times, April 11, 1991, p.1.

¹⁶ Ann Devroy and John M. Goshko, "U.S. Shifts on Refugee Enclaves," Washington Post, April 10, 1991, p. A27.

military operations where relief efforts were underway. This was the first step in creating an "informal" safe haven. The first warning was issued on April 6 and was followed by another on April 10. Warnings and declarations of intent were used throughout Operation Provide Comfort as a means to compel the Iraqi military and security forces to withdraw and cease operations against the Iraqi Kurds.

The outlines of the objectives became clearer when President Bush met with EC Commissioner Jacques Delors and EC president, Luxembourg Prime Minister Jacques Santer. Bush indicated that they were in agreement on the creation of areas within Iraq where refugees would be protected. One may reasonably assume that Bush's view was shaped not so much by the Europeans, as by the first hand accounts from U.S. military sources.

Presidential spokesman Marlin Fitzwater amplified upon President Bush's comments by stating that the administration's policy was to "feed the refugees," adding that 'our preference is to have these refugees be able to stay in Iraq and ultimately be able to return to their own homes.'¹⁷ While following this meeting the tempo of activity to assist the refugees rapidly increased, including a doubling of the number of U.S. forces, administration policy remained that U.S. forces would not be involved in Iraq. International relief organizations would be responsible.¹⁸

¹⁷ John E. Yang, "Bush: U.S., Allies Concur on Refugee Zones in Iraq," Washington Post, April 12, 1991, p.A32

¹⁸ John E. Yang, "Military Mobilized for Refugee Relief," Washington Post, April 13, 1991, p. 1.

The International Relief Organizations Factor

One can surmise that it was clear to the military and civilian leadership on the scene that the international relief organizations were not in a position to provide this assistance within a short period of time. From the very beginning it was recognized that the logistical problems in reaching the muddy mountainsides where the Iraqi refugees had sought shelter was a key difficulty in meeting this challenge, characterized by Cambodian refugee crisis veteran and noted refugee emergency expert Lionel Rosenblatt, as the “greatest challenge ever in the history of refugee relief.”¹⁹

There was another difficulty in utilizing private international relief agencies: the deep-seated antipathy of the Turkish government toward such groups due to their perceived bias against the Turkish state. These concerns were particularly acute in southeastern Turkey, which was under the rule of an appointed “Supergovernor,” Hayri Kozakcioglu, who exercised extraordinary emergency rule powers. While PVO refugee workers were able to get to the border regions and make a quick analysis of the situation, oblique press reports did appear about getting the necessary clearances from the local authorities.²⁰ Regardless, the issue was not that the organizations could not be used, but rather a realization of the difficulties in getting them on the ground in the numbers and in the time needed.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. A16.

²⁰ John Tierney, “Private Relief Agencies Find Big Obstacles to Aiding Kurds,” New York Times, April 12, 1991, p. A6.

Swift response from responsible UN agencies (as well as some PVOs) was also hampered by their legalistic concerns for their position in Iraq as well as Turkey. As the UNICEF representative in Ankara explained, “the work of any international organization is regulated by a basic agreement with the government of that country...[and we have] a mandate to work within the borders to which we are accredited.”²¹ Hence, the ability of the established organizations on the scene to work in a cross border operation were extremely circumscribed without the affected agencies obtaining instructions from the UN.

On April 13 Eric Suy, a Belgian diplomat acting as a special envoy for UN Secretary General Perez de Cuellar set out on a mission to Iraq, Turkey and Iran with the primary purpose of discussing with the Baghdad authorities the idea of “safe havens” for the Kurds in northern Iraq and their acquiescence to UN relief efforts in the area pursuant to UNSC resolution 688.²² By travelling to the border area in Turkey following his meetings in Baghdad, Suy was a useful conduit to explain to the UN leadership the evolving concept for Operation Provide Comfort and was able to give a quick readout of Baghdad’s actual position. Obtaining a readout of Baghdad’s intentions was critical to the shaping of the plan. Further, this contact with Suy was undoubtedly extremely useful in seeking the Secretary General’s support later for the radically new concept and objectives of Operation Provide Comfort. It should be kept

²¹ Glenn Frankel, “Relief Agencies Balk at U.S. Enclave Plan,” Washington Post, April 25, 1991, A17.

²² John E. Yang and Ann Devroy, “U.S. Seeks to Protect Kurd Refugee Areas,” Washington Post, April 11, 1991, p. A36.

in mind that these and other discussions like them were taken even prior to the details of the plan being accepted as U.S. policy.

Tying the Objectives and Actors Together

On April 15 the noose around the refugees on the mountainside loosened. Turkey announced that it would begin transferring all of the refugees to refugee centers where they could obtain proper care. Further, UN and private relief organizations were invited to come and run the camps as soon as possible by the Emergency Rule "Supergovernor" in southeastern Turkey, Hayri Kazakcioglu.²³ Turkish officials were undoubtedly "encouraged" to take this action following increasing reports of security incidents between the refugees and Turkish security forces as the refugees sought to break out of their mountainside camps.²⁴ Nevertheless, this announcement, particularly coming from the hard-line Kazakcioglu, indicated that Turkish trust and support for the mission and objectives of Operation Provide Comfort had been obtained. However, support did not necessarily mean freedom of action for U.S. forces in the region, but this was a tactical, rather than operational difficulty.²⁵

On April 16 President Bush announced a radical change in U.S. relief efforts and transformed Joint Task Force Provide Comfort into Combined Task Force Provide

²³ Blaine Harden, "Turkey to Move Iraqi Refugees," Washington Post, April 16, 1991, p. A15.

²⁴ Michael Binyon, "Ankara begins to clear camps on mountain," The Times, April 15, 1991, p. 5.

Comfort. As President Bush summed up the new effort, "If we cannot get adequate food, medicine, clothing and shelter to the Kurds living in the mountains along the Turkish Iraq border, we must encourage the Kurds to move to areas in **northern Iraq** [emphasis added] where the geography facilitates rather than frustrates such a large scale relief effort."²⁶ Two questions remained, however—security and the role of the UN.

Upon taking up his duties on April 17 as Combined Task Force Commander, Lt. Gen. Shalikasvili, immediately addressed the first question by meeting with Iraqi General Nashwan along with his British and French counterparts.²⁷ The message to the Iraqis was clear: move their forces 20 miles from the center of relief operations in northern Iraq (Zakho); do not interfere in the relief effort; and, do not fly north of the 36th parallel.²⁸ Establishing an environment in which the refugees felt reasonably secure and to which they would voluntarily return was essential. No private or international relief organization would cooperate with a plan which forcibly repatriated refugees to Iraq.

²⁵ See Joint Unit Lessons Learned Reports (JULLS) report number 71032-79798, Host Nation Support. This provides an example of the difficulties involved in coordinating local support and the necessity of working directly through the Supergovernor's office.

²⁶ "Excerpts from Bush's News Conference: Relief Camps for Kurds in Iraq," The New York Times, April 17, 1991, p. A12.

²⁷ See Blaine Harden, "U.S., Iraq Differ on Zone for Kurds," Washington Post, April 20, 1991, p.A1. Having been kept waiting for six hours by the Iraqis, Shalikasvili reportedly said that he would not meet with the Iraqi military leadership again and that unresolved issues would be resolved through "other channels." This channel would become the Military Command Center (MCC) led by Col. Nabb.

²⁸ Blaine Harden, "U.S., Iraqi Officers To Meet on Aid Plan," Washington Post, April 19, 1991, p.1.

On April 20 the 24th MEU moved into Zakho in a show of force with the result that Iraqi forces began their withdrawal from the security zone without a shot being fired.²⁹ This is not to indicate that security did not remain a problem. The Iraqis sought to test coalition resolve regarding the security zone. Over the next couple of days the Iraqis infiltrated 300 secret police into Zakho. In a coalition operation on April 25-26, American, British and Dutch marines succeeded in apprehending and deporting all the secret police from the security area.³⁰

While the movement into northern Iraq went well, the issue remained when and/or whether the UN would take over operation of the refugee camps. While UN Special Representative Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan obtained Baghdad's agreement to the presence of civilian UN aid workers, no agreement was forthcoming on the question of a security force. The rub was that the Iraqi refugees would not return to Iraq unless their security was assured. Statements offering "amnesty" from Baghdad were not sufficient.

UN aid workers were concerned about working under the coalition forces in northern Iraq. Cooperation with the military was a revolutionary idea for many in the UN. As one anonymous UN official reportedly opined, "...The U.S. government basically wants us to go into northern Iraq as part of a military intervention force, and then it leaves and we run the camps. But the Iraqis will see us as part of an alien force.

²⁹ Donald G. Goff, "Operation Provide Comfort," A Personal Experience Monograph, (May 1992: U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.) p. 25.

³⁰ Ibid., p.28.

It is a formula for disaster.”³¹ This perception, however, changed as it became apparent that the Iraqis were interested in getting the coalition forces out of northern Iraq. In order to accomplish this the UN would need to take over.

On April 25 UN Secretary General Perez de Cuellar told reporters that he thought that the UN, the Iraqis and the coalition were in agreement.³² This agreement became clearer when on April 28, Stefan Demistura, a special UN representative, met with Shalikasvili at Zakho. Demistura confirmed that on April 30 the UN flag would begin to fly over the refugee camp in Zakho as two UN relief convoys, one from Baghdad and one from Turkey, meet in Zakho. Shalikasvili was “delighted.”³³ With this development the necessary coordination and cooperation had been achieved for the mission and objectives of Operation Provide Comfort.

Conclusion

The success of Operation Provide Comfort was made possible by the unique characteristics of the situation and the creative leadership demonstrated by the military and civilians. The magnitude and swiftness of this crisis forced civilian and military leaders to work together in forging a framework for the operation. For the military the

³¹ Glenn Frankel, “Relief Agencies Balk at U.S. Enclave Plan,” Washington Post, April 25, 1991, p.A17.

³² David Hoffman and Molly Moore, “Iraq Accepts Order to Leave Campsite,” Washington Post, April 26, 1991, p. A37.

³³ John Kifner, “U.N. Ready to Take U.S. Refugee Role,” The New York Times, April 29, 1991, p. A1.

development of the operation without a warning order or virtually any other notice beyond a press release did lead to some consternation.³⁴ However, the exigencies and political imperatives of the situation made this impractical.

In Operation Provide Comfort the skills demanded of the military commander were uniquely “political” in nature and required substantial courage. As an interagency conference report noted of the Provide Comfort experience, field initiatives often superseded Washington instructions as to the best course of action. As way of example, the plan to repatriate the refugees was made despite Washington’s suggestion to form refugee camps.³⁵

In developing a mission statement and objectives for an emergency humanitarian crisis there is no set answer. Each crisis is unique. However, it is clear that the *leadership skills and talents* demanded in formulating a framework for action are similar—consensus building, coordination, and flexibility. These are not the usual qualities demanded of a military leader. The operational commander needs to seek and develop that expertise.

Organizational structures are important, but I would argue are not essential to the success of a humanitarian mission. Rather, the development of a shared mission and objectives for both civilian and military elements involved in a humanitarian operation are more critical to success. How to forge this is the leadership challenge for

³⁴ JULLS number 51235-27595, “Use of the Crises Action System (CAS) for Provide Comfort.”

³⁵ U.S. Department of State, External Research Program, Conference Report: Improving Coordination of Humanitarian and Military Operation. (Washington: U.S. Department of State, 1994), p. 6.

the operational commander. Further, the operational commander needs to shape the “political” area of operations as well as the field of operations. As General McCarthy noted even such seemingly straightforward items as announcing new coalition members in Provide Comfort were “purposely paced” to encourage other nations to join.³⁶

While Provide Comfort was a remarkable success, it would be wrong to seek to look at it as a blueprint for other humanitarian operations. Unfortunately, the success of this operation may well have led to false expectations for similar humanitarian interventions such as in Somalia. While it has been noted that Operation Restore Hope was well structured, it lacked a clear mission and civilian links.³⁷

Developing a mission statement and objectives in concert with civilian players, which meet political requirements, the likelihood of mission success undoubtedly is increased. I hope that in this examination of Operation Provide Comfort it is clear that operational objectives in humanitarian emergencies are formulated and evolve as part of a flexible, collaborative “political” effort with a multiplicity of actors. Working within this political milieu is the real leadership challenge for the operational commander.

³⁶ James P. McCarthy, “Commanding Joint and Coalition Operations,” Naval War College Review, Winter 1993, p. 19.

³⁷ U.S. Department of State, p. 7.

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