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U.S. Risks Strategic Failure if Protection of Civilian Lessons Are Forgotten

New Report Urges United States to Learn from Afghanistan and Create Lasting Policy on Protection of Civilians

Washington, D.C., June 6, 2016 – U.S. forces and their partners have underestimated the strategic costs to their missions when they kill or harm civilians, warns a new report by U.S. Army combat veteran Christopher Kolenda and the Open Society Foundations.

Without reform, the United States still faces serious, strategic risks as a result of civilian harm caused by U.S. military and partner forces in Iraq, Syria, and other conflicts. In Afghanistan, the United States and its allies learned invaluable lessons about the strategic impact of civilian harm, and how to better protect civilians without sacrificing force protection—lessons that are in danger of being lost, at serious, strategic cost to the United States.

"How we treat civilians is a force multiplier for us, and a force-detractor for the enemy," former U.S. Marine Corps General John Allen said.

The report details how the U.S. military dramatically reduced civilian harm in Afghanistan and how the U.S. military can ensure those lessons are transferred to current and future operations and to partner forces.

Based on interviews with current and former senior U.S. and Afghan government and military officials, including Generals David Petraeus and Allen, as well as Afghanistan's former president, Hamad Karzai, the report examines the near-fatal strategic impact of civilian harm in Afghanistan, which intelligence failures and predatory partners exacerbated.

The report also demonstrates how senior U.S. military leaders succeeded in reversing a dangerous course by improving civilian protection, without jeopardizing the safety of U.S. troops on the ground.

However, a close look at U.S. operations and partner forces in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Pakistan reveals a failure to fully institutionalize these lessons, putting it at risk of repeating costly mistakes made in Afghanistan.

"I'm a believer in American exceptionalism," former deputy assistant secretary of defense David Sedney said, "but only if you keep proving it."

The report urges U.S. officials to adopt a Uniform Policy on Civilian Protection that would cover civilian harm wherever the U.S. military is operating. Reforms also would address the impact of civilian harm by partner forces, often engaged in their own counterinsurgency operations, lowering the risks to U.S. credibility and helping advance U.S. strategic interests.

"Civilian harm accelerated the insurgency and undermined the U.S. and Afghan governments," Kolenda said. "It was like burning a candle at both ends with a blowtorch."

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The Open Society Foundations work to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens. Working with local communities in more than 100 countries, the Open Society Foundations support justice and human rights, freedom of expression, and access to public health and education.

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Please join us for the public launch of the report on **June 8, 2016, from 1:00 – 2:00pm** at the **U.S. Institute of Peace.** Michele Flournoy, former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, will moderate a panel with Chris Kolenda and Rachel Reid, Irreversible Damage: Civilian Harm in Modern Conflict.

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