The U.S. Government’s Approach to Civilian Security
Focus on Campaign Activities

By George E. Katsos

In an effort to cross-reference U.S. Government policies, practices, and joint doctrine with human security,1 this article completes the discussion2 on its most relevant dimensions—health, food, environmental, and economic security—with a combatant commander campaign activity focus on civilian security (personal, community, political).3 Protection from violence is crucial for people, especially vulnerable populations. The inability to establish and maintain safe and secure environments through effective governance may result in population dislocation or displacement.4 These conditions can overwhelm institutional capacities and disturb regional norms, resulting in assistance or intervention from security providers such as the United Nations (UN), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or the U.S. Government. For civilians who remain in place, the pursuit of desperate or questionable measures to steady a favorable environment or attain a better standard of living may also result in counterproductive stabilization practices and weaken the foundation of civilian security and society as a whole. Therefore, viable security institutions and their active role in providing civilian security are central to U.S. national security interests.

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Definitions and Descriptions
Both governmental and nongovernmental documentation provide insight through definitions and descriptions on current protection practices in order to present a better understanding of civilian security as an element of effective governance. For the U.S. Government, the White House defines protection as capabilities necessary to secure the homeland against acts of terrorism and manmade or natural disasters.5 Within the executive branch, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) defines protection as actions or measures taken to cover or shield from exposure, injury, or destruction including those needed to ensure protective reactions that do not unnecessarily interfere with citizen’s freedoms and liberties.6 The Department of Defense (DOD) adds another definition of protection: to preserve the effectiveness and survivability of mission-related military and nonmilitary personnel, equipment, facilities, information, and infrastructure deployed or located within or outside the boundaries of a given operational area.7 DOD policies further discuss protection as peacekeeping forces that employ active and passive measures to protect themselves against adversaries, accidents, diseases, and other threats to mission success.8

Outside of the government, international organizations such as the UN use the terms protection and protection of civilians when addressing issues related to civilian security. Based on mandate language in UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs), descriptions focus on preventing or responding to threats of physical violence against civilians by the host government. Other definitions in UN workforce documentation include protecting civilians under imminent threat of physical violence and also acknowledge state obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL), international human rights law (IHRL), and refugee law.9 Regional organizations such as NATO define protecting civilians as activities conducted with the intent to safeguard noncombatants from physical violence, secure their rights to access essential services and resources, and contribute to a secure and stable environment for civilians over the long term.10 This approach informs the understanding of operational environments including efforts that alleviate harm, facilitate access to basic needs, and contribute to safe and secure environments.11 Additionally, NATO descriptions include avoiding, minimizing, and mitigating negative effects that might arise from military operations, conflict-related physical violence, or threats of physical violence by other actors.12 The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) defines protection as all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and spirit of the relevant bodies of law, while the concept as a whole ensures authorities and other constituted groups comply with their obligations under IHL, IHRL, and refugee law.13

For purposes here, civilian security includes supporting law and order, the rule of law, and establishing security through effective governance (for example, viable police, justice, and defense systems). These measures contribute to addressing policy issues on sheltering civilians from physical and systematic violence (personal security), providing family and culture protection from identity-based tensions (community security), and protecting from oppressive governing practices such as repression and human rights abuses (political security).14

Legislative and Judicial Actions
U.S. legislative and judicial efforts address civilian security concerns within the boundaries of the Constitution. Per legislative action, Congress develops Federal laws in support of issues such as national defense and protection from oppressive domestic governing. For the latter, the Constitution contains provisions that protect civilians from unlawful imprisonment or detention, punishment for conduct not illegal at the time performed, punishment focused on individuals or groups, states favoring their own citizens over others, and unreasonable searches per the Bill of Rights. Constitutional amendments passed after the Civil War acknowledge citizenship rights, legal and equal protections under the law, and voting rights. Congress can also limit the Federal Government and executive power such as preventing Federal military personnel from enforcing domestic policies at home.15 More recently, Congress authorized the use of military force against nations, organizations, or persons that plan, authorize, commit, or aid in terrorist attacks in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States.16

Regarding governmental functions, Congress can create, eliminate, or restructure executive branch entities and agencies. In the first year of George Washington’s Presidency, Congress created the position of Attorney General that now leads the Department of Justice. After World War II, Congress established the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Council, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and DHS.17 For significant judicial decisions, the Supreme Court is the final arbiter of legal issues to be resolved under Federal law. After the Civil War, some rights codified in constitutional amendments were not observed, as subsequent Supreme Court decisions undermined civilian security protections that could have extended under state law.18 However, by the mid-20th century these rights were eventually enforced by subsequent court decisions and new legislation.19

International Engagement
For over a century, the United States has been involved in protecting civilians outside national borders. After World War I, the United States joined the League of Nations to mitigate future conflict between nations. By the end of World War II, the UN replaced the league and broadened its purpose over time to protect civilians beyond the effects of conflict. In 1949, the United States became a signatory to a set of international treaties and protocols known as the Geneva Conventions to protect civilian victims during armed conflict and internal violence. Building on the Geneva Conventions, the Nation ratified the 1954 Hague Convention
for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. In the years following World War II, a body of law was created around IHL (also known as the Law of Armed Conflict) to limit the effects of perpetrator actions against stability and further codify noncombatant legal protection. More recently, IHRL developed as a broader body of law where nations are determined to have a collective duty to protect their own civilian populations against genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

In the spirit of IHRL, UNSCR mandates contain modern “responsibility to protect” language that holds individual national authorities accountable for civilian protection violations. In support of both IHL and IHRL, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement supports civilian security through its components: the ICRC (humanitarian protection and assistance in armed conflict and violent situations), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (coordinates efforts of national societies to provide humanitarian assistance primarily in disaster relief and public health), and National Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies (auxiliary entities to national governments).

**The Executive Branch**

Civilian security fosters confidence in effective governance. Under Article II of the Constitution, the President is granted authority to cultivate that confidence through executive power to protect the people from internal and external threats. As such, the President approves the National Security Strategy to articulate strategic policy goals and national power direction on matters related to civilian security. Subsequently, executive branch departments produce organizational strategies and plans in support of the President’s strategy. In furtherance of setting a political agenda, the President can issue multipurpose policy direction through executive orders to the executive branch on topics such as combating the trafficking of persons and minimizing civilian casualties when applying military force. Executive orders issued specifically for national security purposes are called Presidential directives. Relevant directives include combatting terrorism, counternarcotic activities, and mass atrocity prevention. The following overview captures governmental civilian security efforts within the executive branch in three cascading categories: significant, additional, and remaining.

**Significant Efforts.** Two departments and their agencies partake in significant civilian security efforts through varying degrees of assistance: the Department of

[U.S. Army Captain, 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade, advises Afghan National Army major about security in Logar Province, Pul-e Alam, Afghanistan, August 7, 2018 (NATO/U.S. Navy/Aubrey Page)]
State and Department of Justice. State manages foreign diplomatic affairs for the President while its development component (USAID) implements economic initiatives and facilitates disaster assistance abroad.23 Through diplomacy and development, State and USAID provide a competitive, forward-deployed political capability that can also facilitate security-sector assistance abroad in support of national security objectives.24 At State, many department bureaus lead efforts to develop partner capabilities and build institutional capacities of nations or other organizations that may eventually contribute troops, police, or security forces to future stabilization missions. Bureaus also advance efforts to mitigate conflict; support law and order and police force establishment, maintenance, or reforms; and provide solutions for the displaced. For development and relief purposes, USAID bureaus and offices promote human rights, democratic governance initiatives, and coordinate responses to overseas disasters.

Justice is another entity that supports civilian security. Managed by the Attorney General, Justice preserves confidence in the U.S. judicial system; administers Federal law enforcement entities; and establishes, enables, or reforms justice systems abroad through security sector assistance. Justice components such as its Federal Bureau of Investigation uphold the Constitution and protect the American people from threats. Other entities confine criminal offenders, enforce laws and regulations that bring perpetrators to justice, and consolidate operations such as counterterrorism, counterintelligence, and export control. To support crisis response mechanisms at home, Justice manages the National Response Framework’s Emergency Support Function #13 Public Safety and Protection that facilitates Federal public safety and security assistance to local, state, tribal, and territorial organizations overwhelmed by an actual or anticipated disaster or act of terrorism.25

Additional Efforts. Other departments make substantial contributions to civilian security. DHS identifies vulnerabilities to U.S. security and develops protective measures through coordinated responses to emergencies, Presidential direction, and critical infrastructure and key resource protection.26 Via its Federal Emergency Management Agency, DHS manages Federal assistance to help populations in state, local, tribal, territorial, and organizational entities.27 Through the Coast Guard, DHS facilitates legitimate usage of waterways subject to U.S. jurisdiction.28 Moreover, its Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement agencies monitor border crossing, immigration, and illegal entry issues.

DOD supports civilian security efforts primarily through its military workforce.29 Besides providing territorial and physical security, DOD assists governmental efforts to disrupt and prevent adversarial and competitor practices that negatively impact national interests such as stability, security, and democratic systems across the globe. Abroad, DOD defense institution-building efforts increase partner-nation abilities to meet security needs and contribute to regional and international security more effectively.30 At home, DOD leads homeland defense missions and supports civilian authorities.

Remaining Efforts. Outstanding departments also impact civilian security. Efforts include the Department of Energy’s role in nuclear safety, Labor’s enforcement of child labor laws and human-trafficking prevention, Interior’s focus on Native American safety, Treasury’s strategic threat disruption efforts to deter financial practices that threaten stability, and Health and Human Services management of refugee centers that assist in American society integration.31 As governmental entities continue to develop plans in support of national security policy objectives, the future is uncertain on how these entities will protect civilians during international systems disruption and complete collapse or from the effects of aggressive competitor measures and severe population displacement.

Military Campaign Activities

Civilians who are neither part of an armed group nor engaged in hostilities are protected under the law of war. Threats to civilian security that nations and state-like entities encounter or generate may involve a response from security institutions such as DOD. In support of governmental activities, combatant commanders and their staffs integrate force protection as well as civilian security considerations into plans, preparation, training, and missions. To socialize DOD’s role in the pursuit of civilian security, discussions and implications appear in joint doctrine, including traditional and irregular approaches that earn population support and the mitigation of civilian casualties in military operations.32 At the international level, DOD can provide support to peacekeeping, security-sector, and stabilization commitments through individual expertise and workforce contributions. At the regional level, DOD participates in security and stabilization efforts normally with contributions to a regional military workforce. At the national level, DOD conducts or supports activities to achieve national objectives and enable civilian authorities to build or strengthen institutional systems (police, justice, defense).

U.S. military resources used for civilian security may be independent conventional forces, conventional forces that leverage capabilities of U.S. special operations forces, or independent special operations forces. Depending on the rules of engagement and operational environment, campaign activities in support of civilian security may not always be feasible to implement due to competing operational interests that a commander must assess, such as the inherent right of self-defense and combat. For DOD, civilian security can decrease the threats that cause civilians and vulnerable populations
Coalition advisor plays game with child during tour of Manbij, Syria, June 21, 2018, to document how safe and prosperous it has become since Syrian Democratic Forces defeated so-called Islamic State (U.S. Army/Timothy R. Koster)

(identity-based groups, women, children) to relocate, thus mitigating the need for future U.S. military deployment. At home, DOD leads the homeland defense mission and provides defense support to civil authorities. The following sections articulate DOD contributions to civilian security efforts by, with, and through international stakeholders and host-nation partners.

**Effective Governance.** DOD conducts short- and long-term campaign activities in support or in place of civilian administration. Through a range of military operations, effective governance can result in protecting civilians against physical violence, crime, terrorism, and other harm in locations where security forces occupy or operate. For security recipients, ministry or security institution development is better conducted simultaneously and not under different time horizons. For nations and state-like entities, institutional development and reform may be conducted either through a transitional military authority to exercise executive, legislative, and judicial authority, or a transitional civilian authority to establish legitimate and effective governance. Both can transition to a viable national or state-like entity authority or institution. DOD campaign activities include instituting political reform and supporting elections, restoring basic essential services, and creating effective civil administrative frameworks to protect civilians.

Police force and institution development strengthens law and order efforts and is usually conducted by the United States or by, with, and through a ministry of interior. When a central authority is weak or ceases to exist, perpetrators of violence can target civilians to pursue power. Campaign activities can ensure basic law enforcement, public order, training and education, and counter perpetrator violence. When the rule of law has broken down or is nonexistent, DOD can provide transitional public security to enforce the rule of law until efforts are transitioned to competent, viable, and responsible forces and institutions. Campaign activities include persistent efforts in areas secured and held usually through intensive patrolling and checkpoints, targeted search or strike operations against adversaries, population control measures such as curfews and vehicle restrictions, biometrics collection and vetting, and integration of indigenous ex-combatants into newly formed host-nation police forces. In Iraq in 2003, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) supported international efforts to create a competent and responsible Iraqi police service that could maintain law and order, enforce the rule of law, and build confidence in the population that effective governance would protect them. DOD’s continued involvement includes training, advising, and assisting recruits and police forces in areas
including integration of former fighters into the force and forensic science development. In 2009 in Afghanistan, USCENTCOM assumed responsibility from the State Department to train, advise, and mentor members of the Afghan National Police and, in 3 years, led 8 of 23 NATO training program sites. Judicial frameworks strengthen the rule of law most likely under a ministry of justice. With central authority turnover and subsequent governance challenges, perpetrators of violence can target civilians to undermine effective governance and the rule of law. Beyond providing security, DOD can protect administrators of justice such as judges and their families as well as build courts and jails. In support of building or upholding an effective judicial system, a military governing authority may operate military commissions and provost courts, establish and provide security to courts and tribunals, support investigations, and arrest war criminals. During 2007 in Iraq, USCENTCOM personnel assisted Iraqi authorities to create and operate the Baghdad Rule of Law Complex that combined courts, jails, and an academy where personnel and faculties were protected from harassment and threats. Subsequent complexes were built in other cities across Iraq, sending the signal that administering the rule of law was foundational in rebuilding civil administration and providing civilian security. In Afghanistan from 2002, DOD assisted efforts to build or renovate courthouses and facilities and established the Rule of Law Field Force Afghanistan to improve judicial infrastructure in provinces, train on evidence-based operations for judicial actors and law enforcement, and public outreach efforts on Afghan law and trials. Defense or security support can strengthen a ministry of defense system and force capacity. With central authority turnover and subsequent security challenges, perpetrators of violence can challenge national sovereignty, civil administration, and governmental institutions and target civilians to undermine effective governance in pursuit of power and influence. In support of defending a nation’s sovereignty, a competent, viable, and responsible defense or security force can deny access or safe havens to individuals or groups that present a threat to civilian security. In Iraq, USCENTCOM personnel trained Iraqi Security Forces to include the Iraqi army and assisted in counterterrorism, civilian protection, and border security missions. Targeted action was brought against violent extremist organizations such as the so-called Islamic State and its ability to hold onto Iraqi territory. In Afghanistan, USCENTCOM leads efforts to train and equip the Afghan National Security Forces, including the Afghan National Army, to combat threats from the Taliban and al Qaeda and continues to provide support to the NATO International Security Assistance Force in the capital region of Bagram. At home, U.S. Northern Command and U.S. Pacific Command provide support to civil authorities that can augment existing capacity and assist in the restoration of essential basic services.

**Oppressive Governing and Perpetrators of Violence.** DOD campaign activities can support the coercion of uncooperative governing authorities and other entities into protecting citizens. Campaign activities include a range of military operations from armed conflict to competition that may improve conditions for populations and prevail against threats generated by a central authority, its security forces, or perpetrators of violence that operate autonomously within a country’s borders. Through campaign activities, U.S. forces can assist in enforcing and upholding societal norms in the face of regime repression, human rights abuses, improper detention and imprisonment, torture, mass atrocities, corruption, human-trafficking, and child labor. This includes the protection of cultural, ethnic, and religious identity; religious locations and shrines; family systems; women and children; personal values; static protection of key sites (market places or refugee camps); and human rights. Offensive efforts to protect civilians are normally authorized by an international political body such as the UN to target a central authority or perpetrators of violence within a country’s borders. One element is regime change where a central authority is removed in order to deter or neutralize negative treatment such as mass atrocity, political or state repression, or other harm to civilians. In 2011, U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) provided air strikes under UN authority that was followed up by NATO operations against an oppressive Libyan regime. In this action the central governing authority was removed. More recently, campaign activities with Iraqi and Afghan forces were able to counter sectarian and other forms of violence. Other campaign activities include safe area designations that can marginalize advisories or threats to civilians. However, armed conflict also involves unintended consequences such as civilian casualties and key site vulnerabilities during and after military operations. Civilian deaths caused by U.S. military operations often fuel narratives that support resistance to U.S. influence and even energize the targeting of Americans. Additionally, key sites such as the National Museum of Baghdad, libraries, or religious properties make “no target” lists, but the buildings’ security may not be immediately provided to prevent looting. Nevertheless, recent emphasis on civilian casualty mitigation and key site vulnerability practices confirm the importance of civilian security to the chain of command from the top down.

Other defensive and stabilization efforts support civilian security and can increase confidence in a state’s ability to protect daily life. Campaign activities include a variety of human security elements captured in this five-part series (health, food, environmental, economic, civilian) that protect individuals and populations from negative treatment such as torture, ill treatment, unlawful detention and imprisonment, human rights abuses, and free election disruption. International security providers can establish a safe area to provide direct protection to civilians within a nation’s borders in a temporary and designated geographic area. Normally authorized through UNSCRs, safe areas involve safe zones (large areas that physically protect civilians where they normally live) and safe havens (protecting...
displaced or dislocated civilians in specific places) where civilians are protected by denying belligerents access through the threat or use of military force. In safe areas, organizations such as the UN and nongovernmental organizations usually authorize no-fly zones, build and administer camps, and provide basic assistance and services.

Recent campaign activities include USCENTCOM’s support of northern and southern Iraq no-fly zones and USAFRICOM’s no-fly zone efforts in Libya. DOD built and administered camps in northern Iraq to feed ethnic Kurds and in Albania to protect Kosovo refugees in the 1990s.44 Today, campaign activities support displaced civilians through the transportation of supplies from one stop to another en route to a final camp destination.45 Safe havens are also un governed, under governed, or ill governed physical and virtual areas where U.S. adversaries believe they can operate without harassment. Whether most recently in southeastern Afghanistan or northern Iraq and eastern Syria, extremist organization safe havens are used to terrorize civilian populations into submission but can be removed with active offensive measures. At home, DOD can support civilian authorities through an Active-duty base commander’s immediate response authority or command over federalized National Guard forces for emergency response. Presently, federalized National Guard forces are deployed to the southern borders for defensive purposes, however, Federal military personnel are prevented from enforcing domestic policies at home per the Posse Comitatus Act.

Campaign activities can enhance efforts to improve conditions for effective governance, alleviate population concerns that cause displacement or counterproductive activity, and prevent the need for future or extended employment of U.S. forces. Still, aggressive competitors and perpetrators of violence find opportunities to impose their own version of civilian security when confidence in government erodes or disappears. Therefore, it is critical to keep viable security institution establishment and reinforcement central to government efforts in the pursuit of productive civilian stabilization practices and civilian security. JFQ

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**Notes**


18 Slaughter-House Cases, 83 U.S. (16 Wall.) 36 (1872), which prevented rights guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment’s privileges or immunities clause from being extended to rights under state law; and Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), which originated the phrase “separate but equal” and gave Federal approval to Jim Crow laws.


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