



FROM ASPIRATION TO ACTION

LESSONS TO REDUCE CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

CNA analysis of military operations over the past two decades, including Mosul and Raqqa, has identified practical steps for military forces to reduce risks to civilians. Whether the conflict is state-on-state or involves non-state actors, these lessons are applicable.

CASE STUDY: RECAPTURING MOSUL AND RAQQA FROM DAESH/ISIS

Liberating the urban populations of Mosul and Raqqa from a siege of terror by an irregular and unprincipled force was a measure of effective warfare by a multinational force working with partners on the ground. Nonetheless, the toll on civilians was severe, including human casualties, damage to infrastructure, and disruption of essential services and medical care. Some international observers noted afterward that they had not seen major cities so devastated by combat since World War II. Two years after liberation, public source images still document the extant effects of protracted bombing campaigns.

When conflict erupts, civilians too often bear the brunt.

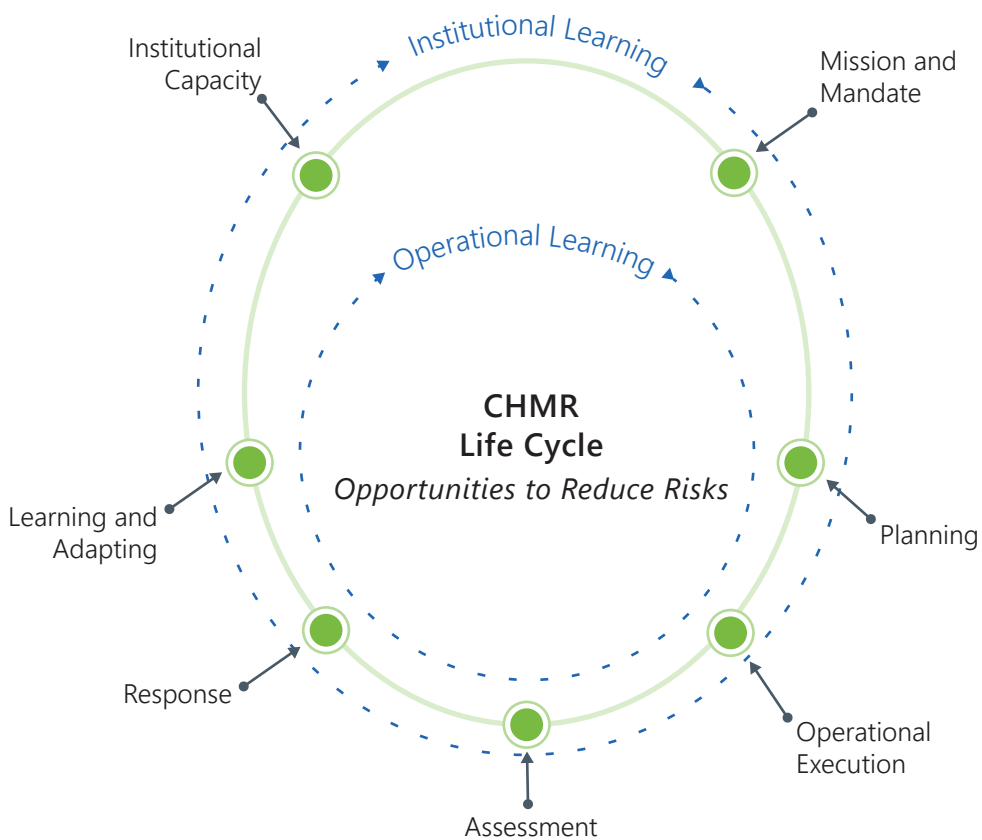
OUTCOMES IN MOSUL AND RAQQA SUGGEST A SERIES OF QUESTIONS FOR ALL GOVERNMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS REGARDING CIVILIAN PROTECTION IN URBAN WARFARE:

In mission planning, are forces adequately considering the potential cost to civilians living in areas of conflict?
For example, before Mosul, could other options for operational design have been considered to reduce either the number of civilians present or the risk to civilians during operations?

Do forces understand the actual cost to civilians, and if not, what is needed to characterize that cost with accuracy?
Perhaps the most openly debated aspect of the civilian toll in Mosul and Raqqa has been the number of civilian casualties. The official coalition estimate is about 1,300 civilian deaths between 2014 and 2019 for Iraq and Syria, whereas Airwars, working independently, estimates that between 8,000 and 13,000 civilians were killed in the conflict.

CNA has analyzed estimates of civilian casualties in these and other campaigns, finding that military estimates tend to be too low and independent estimates tend to be too high. Military underestimates of civilian tolls suggest a bigger problem: the low reported numbers may indicate a systemic difficulty in anticipating the likelihood and magnitude of civilian casualties when planning and conducting attacks.

Finally, what are ways to reduce risk to civilians in current and future operations? How do we ensure that identified lessons are learned and incorporated into policy and action? Risks to civilians are best reduced through a comprehensive approach we refer to as a civilian harm mitigation “life cycle.” This life cycle reflects care in civilian protection being taken at all points in the planning and use of military force and includes learning loops so that militaries can adapt and improve to overcome challenges. This life cycle is illustrated on the following page.



Source: CNA.

For decades, CNA has worked in operational environments directly with security forces. Our work on civilian casualty mitigation, using a data-based approach as its foundation, has spanned policy development, changes in operational practices, and international engagement. Our distinct experience base can support turning aspirations for reducing civilian casualties into meaningful action.


First, CNA methodologies can bolster capabilities to more accurately estimate civilian casualties. With more comprehensive information and more robust processes and policies, developed military forces will be better able to evaluate the effects of their operations. Better fidelity on the likelihood and magnitude of civilian casualties also helps calibrate risk, enabling forces to improve tactical planning and the conduct of attacks in the context of whether civilians are or may be present.

Second, CNA works with partner nation security forces to improve practices and build safeguards. Giving forces a weapon and a law of armed conflict brief is not sufficient

When forces fail to protect civilians, the cycle of human misery and violence persists.

for managing operational outcomes. CNA can build in additional safeguards to help partners sufficiently consider risks to civilians.

Third, CNA understands the distinct challenges of conflict in urban settings, including explosive weapons with reverberating effects that affect essential services such as water and power. Evidence shows that these second-order effects in Mosul and Raqqa were not fully considered, negatively affecting the welfare of the population. We can help develop ways to leverage the collective strengths of technologically advanced and proficient militaries and their local partners.



Fourth, CNA works directly with governments regarding lessons learned from the monitoring of civilian casualty trends to make operational adjustments in stride. In Afghanistan, where both the ISAF civilian casualty tracking cell and US lessons-learned personnel monitored trends, CNA found several types of operations had an increased risk for civilian casualties. After this finding was forwarded to ISAF, international forces adjusted those types of operations to address those concerns. As a result, civilian casualty trends were quickly reversed. In contrast, the rate of civilian casualties in Raqqa and especially in Mosul rose over time with no monitoring efforts informing operational adjustments to address them.

Fifth, CNA understands the importance of policy formulation for national partners to reflect best practices in civilian casualty mitigation. The UN, in its recent annual report of the Secretary General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, urged all nations to develop such a national policy.

BETTER PROTECTIONS FOR CIVILIANS CAN REAP LONG-TERM BENEFITS

States have a legal obligation to protect civilians. There are also strategic imperatives for doing so. These include the protection of national reputation and legitimacy, the pursuit of greater tactical effectiveness (because avoiding civilian casualties can promote targeting effectiveness), and the avoidance of second-order effects of civilian casualties (e.g., fueling continuing conflict and bolstering terrorist recruiting). CNA can support a comprehensive approach to protecting civilians, integrating strategic, tactical, and policy considerations to reduce the risk to civilians in conflict. Such an approach will allow states to mitigate civilian harm's corrosive effects on international peace and security, prosperity, and sustainability.

The law regarding conflict has evolved. To develop a comprehensive approach to protecting civilian populations, policy and practice must do the same.

ABOUT CNA

CNA is a nonprofit research and analysis organization dedicated to the safety and security of the nation. It operates the Center for Naval Analyses—the federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) of the Department of the Navy—as well as the Institute for Public Research. CNA develops actionable solutions to complex problems of national importance. With nearly 700 scientists, analysts, and professional staff, CNA takes a real-world approach to gathering data. Its unique Field Program places analysts on aircraft carriers and military bases, in squad rooms and crisis centers, working side by side with operators and decision-makers around the world. CNA supports naval operations, fleet readiness, and strategic competition. Its non-defense research portfolio includes criminal justice, homeland security, and data management.

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