Recommendations paper

Community-level responses to harm: Lessons from Hawija

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When state military operations cause harm to civilians, there is a moral duty and strategic incentive to make amends to those who were negatively affected. Such actions – known as 'civilian harm response' – can take on several forms, including apologies, acknowledgement, ex gratia payments,[i] or other forms of assistance. They can be directed towards harmed individuals or entire communities. The latter practice is gaining traction among states but is underexplored in terms of its effectiveness and desirability from a survivors' perspective. Drawing on field research in Hawija, Iraq, PAX and Ashor here address that gap. We present key lessons learned and challenges related to community-level responses to civilian harm, concluding that such initiatives can only succeed when planned in close consultation with the affected communities.

In recent years, public reporting on high-profile civilian casualty events and continued advocacy by civil society have contributed to several states reviewing their civilian harm mitigation (CHM) policies and practices.[ii] A 2021 United States airstrike on Kabul, which resulted in ten civilian deaths, inspired an overhaul of US CHM policy. A similar process occurred in the Netherlands following reporting that a Dutch airstrike on Hawija, Iraq, had caused at least 85 civilian deaths. These are laudable processes, but accompanying policy documents and political communication also display a shift in the approach to civilian harm response: States appear more intent on making amends at the level of the community than the individual, citing concerns that the latter may not be "practicable" (US) or set an unrealistic and undesirable precedent (the Netherlands). It also reflects an increasing recognition that military operations indirectly harm civilians beyond direct casualties alone, for instance by contributing to displacement or through a loss of access to basic needs.

For instance, in response to the harm caused by the 2015 Hawija airstrike (see next page), the Netherlands disregarded the option of voluntary compensation payments for affected civilians. Instead, it chose to initiate two community reconstruction projects. Internationally, these are often regarded as examples of good practice and a blueprint for community-level civilian harm response. However, having interviewed affected civilians and local stakeholders in Hawija, **Ashor and PAX conclude that community-level responses may be practical and desirable from a state perspective, but are often likely to fall far short of survivors' needs and expectations.** This briefing discusses the main challenges associated with community-level responses to civilian harm, and offers a series of practical recommendations for policymakers and practitioners working on this topic.

The Hawija case

On 2-3 June 2015, Dutch fighter jets targeted an ISIS car bomb factory in Hawija, Iraq, as part of the Netherlands' involvement in the US-led Coalition against ISIS. Due to the large amount of explosives stored in the factory, the strike resulted in a large secondary explosion that caused widespread damage to the surrounding area. The Netherlands acknowledged responsibility in 2019, following reports in the media, but maintained that the exact number of civilian casualties could not be known and that the area was too unsafe to conduct an investigation. Not satisfied with this, PAX and partners in 2021 conducted field research in Iraq, interviewing over 100 survivors. We found that the airstrike had caused at least 85 civilian deaths, injured dozens of people – sometimes permanently – and damaged many residences and businesses upon which people depended for their livelihoods. Indirectly, the airstrike contributed to widespread displacement, reduced access to critical needs, and severe economic harm.

In response and under pressure from Parliament, the Dutch Ministry of Defence (MoD) set up voluntary compensation initiatives and selected IOM and UNDP to execute two community-level reconstruction projects. The Netherlands chose this approach over individual compensation, stating that the latter would have practical challenges and set an undesirable precedent. The projects ran between 2021-23 and cost over 4.5 million US dollars. Throughout, the MoD maintained that the local community and authorities in Hawija would be "closely involved in every step of the process in order to let the project meet the needs of the beneficiaries as best as possible."

IOM principally sought to contribute to economic recovery and the restoration of basic services by supporting the rehabilitation of 200 shops, a 'Cash for Work' program with 400 participants, and the completion of several agricultural infrastructure projects. UNDP undertook improvements to the electricity infrastructure, which got damaged by the airstrike, and installed a mobile substation, among other things.

Research aims and methodology

Despite a narrative focus on the *concept* of community-level response, there is limited practice so far. This explains international interest in Hawija, both from states and civil society organizations. The Dutch government, IOM, and UNDP have all reported positively on the projects' implementation and outcomes. From our contacts in the area, we often received different signals. This prompted an interest in researching the projects *from the perspective of survivors*. Did those affected by the airstrike regard the projects as an effective and meaningful form of amends? Were they and relevant local bodies meaningfully involved in their design and implementation? What should policymakers and practitioners working on this topic learn from this? To answer these questions, PAX and the Ashor Foundation conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with 28 civilians directly harmed by the 2015 airstrike, as well as 11 key informant interviews (KIIs) with representatives from relevant local bodies.[iii] The findings from these conversations, which took place in Hawija in January and February 2025, as well as our earlier research in Hawija in 2021, have informed our below recommendations.

"We do not consider these projects as real compensation. They were directed to serve government institutions [and] did not include any real compensation for the human and material losses we suffered. [...] Individual compensation is the only acceptable option."

Survivors of the 2015 airstrike, FGD on 5 February 2025

Lessons learned

Our overarching finding is that survivors and relevant local bodies do not consider the projects to be an effective, meaningful, or sufficient response to the harm caused by the 2015 airstrike. This mismatch in perceptions of the projects between those on the supply side (the Netherlands, IOM, UNDP) and those on the receiving end (airstrike victims and the local community) is largely due to a lack of (meaningful) involvement of the latter in the projects' design and implementation. As a result, the projects were not sufficiently informed by the needs and expectations of the survivors. These and further issues are explored below, in the form of actionable recommendations to help states avoid similar pitfalls in designing future responses to cases of civilian harm.[iv]

- **Ensure that those harmed by a military operation sufficiently benefit from the corresponding response.** Almost all interviewees in Hawija stated that the projects cannot be considered as compensation for the harm that was caused by the airstrike. Instead, they regarded the projects as having largely benefited the municipality, which owns the reconstructed shops, and because the projects restored general infrastructure. Several interviewees criticized this, not least because "the Iraqi government has the ability to compensate its institutions itself."[v] It further seems that the selection criteria used by IOM to choose the Cash for Work participants did not make an explicit link to the airstrike. In other words, being a victim of the 2015 airstrike was not made one of the selection criteria. In practice, this meant that the projects were open to everyone, including people *not* harmed by the 2015 airstrike. Key informants estimated the overlap between project beneficiaries and victims of the airstrike to have been a mere 5-15 percent.[vi]

  This limited overlap was exacerbated by the fact that many of those harmed by the airstrike no longer lived in Hawija by the time the infrastructure projects began, six years later. In 2015, when the airstrike occurred, many people in Hawija had been displaced from elsewhere in Iraq due to conflict. One of those was Abdullah Rashid Saleh, originally from Salah al Din, who lost seven direct family members in the airstrike and who has since returned there. Many others left Hawija in the years after the airstrike in search of better economic opportunities, in part because the airstrike caused extensive damage to the city's economic center. Through the very design of the Netherlands' chosen response, a large group of survivors were excluded from any benefits at the outset, causing great frustration.

  Displacement is a common characteristic of conflict, complicating approaches to community-level responses to harm. To help overcome such obstacles, states and

militaries should consider looking to related fields like transitional justice to support identifying good practices.

- **Ensure a timely response or, at the very least, take into account changed circumstances.** The limited benefit of the projects to survivors of the airstrike was exacerbated by the projects occurring six years after the incident, without properly taking into account the various changes that had occurred since then. This is evident in the displacement concern discussed above. It also manifested in other ways. For example, various owners of shops destroyed or damaged by the airstrike had – since 2015 – reconstructed those at their own expense. It was acknowledged that the compensation would have been more meaningful had the Netherlands also taken this into account by providing options to include retroactive reimbursements to this group.[vii] These challenges are not unique to Hawija and it occurs more often that civilian harm is acknowledged and responded to sometime after the original incident. It is important that states consider related challenges in other cases, for instance when dealing with medical costs that people have incurred due to injuries caused by military operations.

- **Design responses in close consultation with (representatives of) those affected, as well as local bodies where relevant.** While IOM, UNDP, and the Dutch MoD repeatedly purported to consult and involve the local community and authorities in the projects, a different picture emerged from our interviews. Most crucially: no survivors were consulted.[viii] Additionally, the key informants all mentioned not having been consulted in the projects' design or implementation in any meaningful way, with the exception of the municipality – widely recognized as the projects' primary beneficiary. This is problematic for several reasons. Various key informants argued that by not involving them, IOM and UNDP missed important technical and local expertise, for instance about the most pressing and distinct needs of different groups in the community, which would have made the projects more inclusive and effective.[ix] It also exacerbated various issues, which could otherwise have been avoided. This includes the Dutch MoD selecting implementing organizations that enjoyed little legitimacy and popularity among the local community (see next page), and the mismatch between project beneficiaries and those harmed by the airstrike.

The target area in Hawija, with one of the destroyed factory in the background. ©Ayman al-Amiri/PAX, February 2022.

- **Clearly communicate to those affected about the link between the civilian harm incident and the chosen response, for instance by explicitly accompanying such responses with an acknowledgement of, and apology for, the harm caused.** An important lesson from Hawija lies in how the Dutch government communicated about the reconstruction projects, particularly to those it had harmed. None of the survivors participating in our FGDs indicated that they were aware that these projects were (1) funded by the Dutch government and (2) that the Netherlands did this as a form of voluntary compensation for the harm caused in 2015. They only became aware of this link once Dutch journalists visited Hawija in 2023 to report on the projects' progress. Even those local bodies that had been in contact with IOM and UNDP regarding these projects, such as the NGO coordinator, were not aware of the link with the airstrike before the media visit. Through this lack of communication, any reparative function of the projects was lost at the outset. According to the Mayor of Hawija, "The lack of awareness among the community about [the projects] has led to the absence of any sense that they are part of compensation for the airstrike."[x] Rather, it contributed to increased frustration and resentment towards the Netherlands among survivors.[xi] This underlines the importance of not just communicating about such projects to domestic audiences – as the Dutch MoD had done through letters to Parliament – but, foremost, to those who have been harmed and in a culturally appropriate manner. What this looks like may differ per context and is best decided in consultation with local stakeholders.

- **Ensure that a response is informed by the (most urgent) needs of those affected.** A key concern in the case of Hawija has been the perceived mismatch between the harm that the airstrike caused and the scope of the Netherlands' voluntary compensation initiatives. The airstrike caused at least 85 civilian deaths, injured dozens of people, damaged approximately 6,000 houses and 1,200 shops and businesses, and contributed to widespread psychological trauma. It displaced entire families as people lost their homes, and it forced children to drop out of school to supplement the family income as breadwinners had died or become disabled. Seen from this perspective, it perhaps is not surprising that the Dutch response, which mainly focused on rebuilding and repairing a select number of shops, as well as restoring damaged electricity infrastructure, was not seen as at all sufficient or proportionate to the harm that had occurred. Instead, survivors expressed a clear desire for individual responses, commensurate with the damage that had occurred to each individual or family.[xii] It is also telling that key informants, while positive about the practical benefits of UNDP's restoration of the electricity infrastructure, nonetheless stressed that this cannot be considered compensation for the victims.[xiii]

- **Choose project implementation partners that have access to the affected community and that enjoy local legitimacy and credibility.** When selecting implementing partners for community-level response initiatives, it is important to choose partners that are accepted and appreciated by those who have been harmed. The Dutch government did not sufficiently take this into account. Back in 2021, the then-mayor warned Dutch officials that IOM and UNDP enjoy little legitimacy in the area, and urged them to take a different approach to voluntary

compensation.[xiv] The Netherlands proceeded with these organizations anyway. Survivors identified the disregard for the mayor's opinion in these matters as one of the main gaps in the Dutch approach.[xv]

- **Consider community-level responses to harm mostly *in addition to* an individual response.** It is crucial to note that victims of the 2015 airstrike and/or their remaining loved ones remain adamant that – even had the community-level response initiatives better addressed their needs – this approach could never replace the need for individual responses "because the extent of the damage varies from person to person, and not everyone can be compensated in the same way or amount."[xvi] In fact, our interviewers observed that the suggestion of a response consisting *only* of projects directed towards the benefit of the community visibly upset those harmed by the airstrike. This is not unique to Hawija: available evidence indicates that civilians harmed by military operations are often skeptical of the benefits of community-level responses. This should be a lesson for states that while community-level responses may seem useful and practical from their point of view, it likely will not match the expectations and needs of those who were harmed, and thus require careful consultation.

  When asked what would be meaningful and appropriate, those harmed who we interviewed were largely unanimous in their demands, which consists of: an apology, provided in person by an official delegation; individual financial compensation, commensurate with the harm suffered by each individual or family; and medical and psychological support. The latter is interesting because survivors acknowledged that psychosocial support services and healing initiatives could potentially be given shape at the community level. They further proposed that a committee consisting of representatives of the Dutch government and local authorities in Hawija like the mayor, should oversee civilian harm response projects.[xvii]

Conclusion

It is clear that addressing civilian harm through community-level projects is not without its challenges. Affected civilians appear to have a strong preference for individual responses, challenging the notion of this as a viable and above all meaningful concept for people who have suffered losses at the hands of military operations. Based on one case study, we cannot, however, fully exclude the possibility of successful community-level responses to harm. More research on this is needed. The interviews with stakeholders and affected civilians in Hawija, however, offer important guidelines as to how such initiatives could potentially be given shape in a more appropriate and meaningful manner. Most importantly, they need to be designed and executed in close consultation with those who were harmed and, where relevant, local bodies. Had this approach been taken in Hawija from the start, many of the other pitfalls of the projects would likely have been avoided as well.

Endnotes

[i] A voluntary payment for harm, provided without acknowledging legal liability.
[ii] Efforts to monitor, prevent, reduce, and address the harm resulting from own military operations. Sometimes also referred to as Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response (CHMR).
[iii] We interviewed the former and current mayors of Hawija, the Hawija NGO Coordinator, municipality representatives, the local Workers' Union, Civil Defense, and representatives from the Department of Electricity, Labor and Social Affairs, and Mine Action.
[iv] For further reading: In 2023, PAX published a recommendations paper on civilian-centered approaches to civilian harm more generally. This paper can be found here.
[v] Interview with the Mayor of Hawija, 2 February 2025.
[vi] Interview with the NGO Coordinator, 1 February 2025; interview with the Head of the Workers' Union, 4 February 2025.
[vii] Interview with the Director of the Hawija municipality, 3 February 2025.
[viii] Focus group discussions with 28 survivors on 5 and 6 February 2025.
[ix] Interview with (former) representatives of the Civil Defence for Hawija, 7 February 2025; interview with members of the Department of Electricity, 28 January 2025.
[x] Interview on 2 February 2025.
[xi] Interview with the former Mayor of Hawija, 25 January 2025.
[xii] Focus group discussions with 28 survivors on 5 and 6 February 2025.
[xiii] Interview with members of the Department of Electricity, 28 January 2025.
[xiv] Interview with the former Mayor of Hawija, 25 January 2025.
[xv] Focus group discussions with 28 survivors on 5 and 6 February 2025.
[xvi] Focus group discussions with 28 survivors on 5 and 6 February 2025.
[xvii] Focus group discussions with 28 survivors on 5 and 6 February 2025.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This briefing is the result of a collaboration between PAX and the Iraqi Ashor Foundation for Relief and Development. The research in Hawija was led and coordinated by researchers Basma Mahmood, Moataz Hussein, Ahmed Ali Al-Jabori and executive director Mohammed Abdulkareem (Ashor). Saba Azeem and Erin Bijl (PAX) set up the research: Saba coordinated the collaboration with Ashor; Erin analysed the interview findings and wrote the briefing. **We thank all interviewees for sharing their valuable time and insights with us.**

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