HUMAN SECURITY: PEOPLE NOT GOVERNMENTS

By Sarah Dawn Petrin and Jacqueline E. Whitt, September 7, 2021
https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/podcasts/human-sec/

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Jacqueline Whitt: Hello, and welcome to War Room. I'm Jacqueline Whitt, associate professor of strategies here at the U.S. Army War College and editor-in-chief of War Room.

One of the constants of war is that it doesn't affect only militaries and military personnel. Civilians are deeply affected, and these considerations are as important and complex in the 21st century as they ever have been. I'm here in the virtual studio today with Sarah Petrin, who is a subject matter expert on topics such as the protection of civilians; women, peace and security; sexual exploitation and abuse; human rights; and peace operations.

She has published widely for a number of national and international organizations and has significant experience in humanitarian initiatives in over 20 countries all over the world. She is the author of a recent white paper published by the Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, or PKSOI, which is part of the U.S. Army War College. The white paper is titled *Humanity Security in U.S. Military Operations, A Primer for DoD*, so that's what I've asked her to come and talk with us about today. Sarah, welcome to War Room.

Sarah Petrin: Thank you, Jackie, I'm happy to be here.

JW: So often I find myself in podcasts starting with a question about definitions, so this one is going to be no different. Can you give us a brief rundown on the definition of the phrase human security?

SP: Yes. Human security has a lot of different definitions, but it is not a term that we find in international law. It was first coined by the United Nations Development Program as an approach to assist governments in addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people.

This was the definition adopted by the General Assembly of the UN in 2012. But there was also a groundbreaking report on human development that outlined seven different types of securities

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that keep people safe from harm. These included things like food security and environmental security, health security, as well as economic personal and community considerations. This framework has been used to try to address the different vulnerabilities to human beings in any given environment.

JW: One of the things that comes to mind is human security as a phrase or idea is probably meant to contrast with national security. So if we think about national security as the realm that most of our listeners are operating in as military professionals or as, quote/unquote, national security professionals, how is the human security framework... How does it compare, how does it line up with that idea of national or international security?

SP: If we think about the different factors that make up national security, we think about the sovereignty of national governments, we think about territorial control of the states, domestic stability, the administration, the infrastructure, the critical assets, the political influence and military power, as well as financial infrastructure of the states, such as taxation for example.

But human security is really centered around the individual. It's about things like personal property and shelter, access to work and income, access to school and education, and access to basic services that sustain human life, like energy and water and communications, as well as health services.

So this is a different approach, where instead of putting the state and the government at the center of what makes a place secure, we shift our framework to thinking about population centric approaches and what makes human beings safe or unsafe in any particular place.

JW: I think that's a really helpful way to think about the question and to contrast it with the other frameworks that we so often use. I'm interested to know more about whether some of the drivers of insecurity, especially in the 21st century... Maybe what are some of the trends or some of the things that are threatening human security as we think about the contemporary global environment?

SP: Yeah, thank you for asking about that. One thing I wanted to mention also is why is the term human security of interest to the United States. I think we have to look to our allies and how they're using the term. This is something that... The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense is using the term human security and has recently developed human security units that are deployed to various missions. These units are addressing complex social and economic issues affecting populations within the mission.

Then NATO is also using the term human security, and in the recent summit defined this as risks and threats to the population in conflict or crisis and how to mitigate and respond to them. I think

this is really important, because all of our frameworks about the protection of civilians are based on international humanitarian law and the law of armed conflict. The law of armed conflict looks at armed actors as being the primary source of insecurity.

Armed conflict is not the only thing that makes people unsafe. Now we see challenges like cybersecurity and disinformation, disruptions in access to financial capital that can lead to human deprivation, food insecurity that leads to famine and conflict, and the pandemic has also show us how global health challenges can have a devastating impact on society without a shot ever being fired.

DoD also has a new framework for irregular warfare that looks at these types of hybrid challenges. One thing that I address in my paper is that we see risk to human beings in the environment and in the infrastructure that are not necessarily coming from armed actors that are beyond the scope of some of the frameworks we have for how we deal with conflict.

JW: So if we think about the relationship between war on conflict and sort of like non-conflict driven things, do you think there are specific areas in which military professionals need to be particularly sort of tuned into questions about human security or the challenges and topics that you've talked about, or are there other places where certain parts of the challenge, because it's quite a big problem... Where military professionals can sort of leave it to other organizations or other actors in the system?

SP: Yeah. I think that human security can be a helpful planning tool for militaries, because if you look at all the vulnerabilities of the population in a given environment, then you can see different risk factors that might be drivers of conflict, but also opportunities for conflict resolution.

In the U.S. we have some relatively newer laws that I outline in my paper that are hinting at what a human security planning framework might look like for the U.S. military. We have a lot on women, peace and security that says that we should be analyzing gender dynamics and conflict and integrating gender analysis into or operational frameworks, and also empowering women in conflict zones.

We also have a law on how soldiers, and addressing... Reporting on the use of children in armed conflict. We have laws on vetting partner forces for human rights violations, analyzing atrocity prevention indicators, and now there's a global fragility act that has renewed emphasis on conflict prevention.

I think all these laws and all this analysis doesn't just live in the State Department in terms of analyzing both the drivers for conflict prevention and resolution, but if we look at what is going

on with all these factors in operations we can see where there might be holistic opportunities to end conflict.

Rather than looking at the population in a silo such as whether or not there are human rights violations going on, and whether or not children are part of the conflict, or whether women are involved in peace negotiations, a human security framework would give us a more comprehensive picture of how the military can engage with the population to achieve the desired end state.

JW: What do you think are the things that a military professional would need to either reframe their thinking or shift their focus, or if they were interested in sort of using human security as a framework for planning and thinking about military operations, what are some of the questions that they might ask or the resources that they might go to think about this problem?

SP: Some of this is a functional issue, Jackie, in the way our military is structured. Right now the people who most commonly deal with human security issues are in the J9, who deal with civil/military coordination, or in some countries it's called the CIMIC function, that manages relationships with international partners and local contacts.

But if we also have a human security framework in the J2, in the intelligence, where we're constantly analyzing the way that conflict is impacting the population or the way a disaster is affecting a given population, we would quickly identify the risks and vulnerabilities and make filling gaps part of the plans and the operation position.

I think there needs to be a perspective that goes across the J1 to J9 and impacts all of the functions of military operations in a way that benefits the population as a whole.

JW: So this idea of an integrated, coordinated effort I guess is really important? That it's not just the responsibility of a single person or a small cell of people or planners, but it really is something that spans the totality of the military enterprise? If we think about... Go ahead.

SP: I was also going to say that a lot of the planning and analysis for operations is focused on a given enemy, is focused on an armed actor, is focused on a specific target, and if we think of the population as being part of the center of gravity of the response and as being critical to achieving the desired end state, then we would include them in that analysis as one of the critical factors for our success.

JW: That actually makes me wonder if there are places where a human security framework or mindset... Are there tensions with this idea of national or international security that require

military leaders in particular to sort of make difficult choices, or do you see these as working together, or are there places where you think that they pull in maybe opposite directions?

SP: I think they can be complementary. One example of this right now is within NATO LANDCOM. They have a Human Security Unit with advisors on different aspects of the population that are looking at issues of women, peace and security, and children in armed conflict, and a number of cross-cutting topics.

Of course, you know, we're talking quite theoretically here, but when you are looking at a specific operation such as the Ukraine or Syria or Iraq you see the way that the population has been used by negative influences to prolong the conflict or to create instability. Reversing that trend is very important, and everything that you could do to influence the outcome would be very specific to that particular country context.

So if we look at what's going on in the Sahel right now, the needs of the population and the human security challenges are just quite different than what we see in the Middle East or the Asia-Pacific for example. I think that human security becomes more real when you apply it to a specific place. Then you can see where you need to shift operations.

JW: Do you have in your mind a sort of set of questions or frames... You know, does it make sense to use the inputs of human security? How many military professionals sort of organize their thinking... If this is sort of new to them what might they do to put some of this into immediate practice in those concrete, specific ways?

SP: One tool I really like that's not a U.S. tool is something that the Peacekeeping Center helped NATO with, which is a [Protection of Civilians](#) handbook for the operation command. It outlines all of the tools that can be used to analyze a conflict or a crisis operation and look across the entire population to address specific risks and vulnerabilities to their safety.

That is under a protection of civilians framework, but it does integrate some of these other human dynamics into it. We see now some working groups within DoD trying to address human security and environmental factors. I would say that's an area where we may not have all the tools that we need to understand environmental risks, but I feel that those are coming down the pike in the near future.

JW: In a couple of your answers we've talked about protection of civilian framework, we've talked about or mentioned women, peace and security. There's all sorts of other agendas and frameworks and ways of thinking that sort of influence or come into these discussions.

I'd like to ask you to talk maybe a little more specifically about the women, peace and security, or WPS agenda, and how you see it relating to questions about human security.

SP: The unique thing about the women, peace and security agenda and human security or protection of civilians is so often human security is looking at the risks and the vulnerabilities within a population. The great thing about women, peace and security is it's also looking at women as change agents in society who can help us bring about better conflict prevention tools, better conflict resolution, and mitigation tools.

It's really interesting, looking at Afghanistan as an example, even though perhaps in the news we see the difficult context with the Taliban gaining strength, currently in the last 20 years we've seen a lot of incredible women come into positions of power, elected positions of power at the municipal level, at the regional level, and these women have had a voice in peace negotiations.

I think that this is a sign of progress that we have to watch very carefully now, how these women can influence the Taliban as there were ongoing negotiations for how the government will be formed.

In many other contexts we see women having a powerful voice, whether it's a public voice or a private voice within their families and communities, that can lead to more sustainable conflict resolution. So I think we still haven't seen everything that Afghan women can do, and I still have hope that they will continue to influence and shape the government of Afghanistan.

JW: I think that example of Afghanistan is a really interesting and complex one that so many Americans who have long experience and personal connections and all sorts of ties to that country are going to be keeping an eye on so closely.

It strikes me that there are similar conversations that are still happening in Colombia and in places all over the world where the role of women in negotiating conflict settlements and resolutions to conflicts has been really critical to the work of peace activists and peacemakers all over.

When we think about the military's role vis-a-vis human security or vis-a-vis the WPS agenda, when we talk about all of the complex issues that come into play, what are some of the ways that you see allies and partners sort of improving their capacity to address human security concerns? What are some of maybe the gaps that need to be filled and the questions that need to be asked?

SP: That's such a good question. Of course the U.S. has global partnerships and every COCOM has its own campaign plan and strategy on working on women, peace and security. I think in every region it's a little bit different, right? In the Asia-Pacific we see a lot of work on disaster

risk reduction and engaging women in relief response to make sure that the needs of women and girls are addressed in emergency relief operations with our partners. That's really important.

When it comes to conflict zones, I often say just recognizing that gender is a factor is really something that we need to improve. If we look at our African partners, we don't have a lot of females in military uniform that are working in the security sector. We need to engage more women in peacekeeping, and that's some that is also part of the WPS agenda, is recognizing that women can play and important role in the safety and security of their countries and in international missions.

We should be supporting more women going into these missions, and not just as gender advisors, but as logisticians and as intelligence analysts and as key leaders in the missions themselves.

So there's a lot of work to do just in recognizing the women who are willing and able and have the talent to contribute in the missions that are already underway.

I mentioned UN peacekeeping because it's really important. If we look at the situation in Haiti for example, the peacekeeping mission there was winding down a few years before the president was assassinated, and this just created a security gap in which gangs and militias started having more control in the country and it led to a total breakdown.

I think sometimes in the U.S. we fail to appreciate how strategic peacekeeping missions can be and whether those involve more military or police personnel, but certainly having more women involved in these missions is just a great plus for the population as a whole in feeling both represented and to be able to work with women and girls to address their security concerns.

JW: I think one of the things that I think about when relating human security and WPS is this idea that... It sounds so simple, but women and children are in fact people and they're part of the humanity that we are trying to serve, that peacekeeping operations are trying to protect the societies that we're trying to build.

So the idea of whether it's in national security or in human security, it sort of frameworks the idea of excluding large swaths of people for gender, age, or other characteristics. There's a certain level at which it just doesn't make rational sense, so adding these back into the conversations is part of what we can do to make them more holistic, to make them more responsive to conditions as they change on the ground.

SP: Yeah. It's amazing, Jackie, how when we fail to appreciate women and the positive role, they can play we also fail to acknowledge how women can be conscripted into armed services and forcible become part of the conflict. It's just incredible, where you see that in Somalia, for

example, women and children are the number one target for new recruits into al-Shabab. Children are recruited to be spies. They're taken out of school. They're taught to be suicide bombers.

Also in Iraq and Syria Isis was just merciless in developing these Sons of the Caliphate and children laced with explosives that were part of the battle in Mosul and other places such as Roca.

When we fail to recognize that there will be women and children on the battlefield we are also not preparing our own soldiers to deal with these dilemmas, to come face-to-face with people that they thought might not have been a threat to them who actually are a threat to them.

So I think it's not just for the positive benefit of including the human dynamic. We also have to see how human beings are being used to prolong the conflict or to gain some type of strategic advantage over western forces by putting minors on the battlefield for example.

It's a very complicated situation, and as I said it's different for every country, but I can't think of any conflict where we can't apply a gender analysis or a human security analysis and come up both with risks and opportunities that would help us achieve our broader goals for that particular country to achieve stability.

JW: I like the idea of expanding our aperture to think about more complex and more issues. I'm looking at our time and I'm wondering with just a few minutes left if there is any other sort of last word or parting thoughts that you'd like to share with our War Room listeners today on these really complex and interesting topics that you've brought forward for us?

SP: I would just say that human security is a framework that is an evolving one and it is not set in stone in terms of how the U.S. will conceive of human security, whether we will look at it in the same way that our allies and partners in NATO or the European Union look at it.

But in my white paper I really try to lay out the different U.S. laws and different types of guidance that exist already so that we can be prepared to better understand where we fit into this broader picture about where the international community is bringing what was really a civilian governance concept into the security sector and into a framework for operations.

If some of this sounded not as concrete to you as you might like to see, then I think the white paper just lays it out in more detail and it's just something to watch as we look to future conflicts and see challenges come from non-state actors, see challenges within the environment and within structures that don't necessarily have an origin in an armed actor, as well as technology, which is

not always clear in terms of the origin of a particular technological threat. I think this can be applied in a number of contexts and it is a challenge that we will continue to address.

JW: Fantastic. So complex challenges, opportunities, risks, rewards, all of that. Thank you so much for giving us many, many things to think about, many different ways to make connections between important ideas.

I'd really like to thank you, Sarah, for coming to War Room today to talk about human security and a real call for military professionals to pay attention. It's been a pleasure to have you.

SP: Thank you so much, Jackie.

JW: As we wrap up this episode, please send us your comments on this one, or any other future episodes that you'd like to hear. We're always interested in hearing from you. We hope you'll subscribe to A Better Peace, and after you've subscribed, we hope that you will rate and review the program and tell other people about it, because that's how we will grow our community so they can join in these discussions as well. We'll look forward to having you all join us again soon. Until next time, for War Room I'm Jackie Whitt.