

Red Cross and the Taliban

A 2010 document published by the International Committee of the Red Cross/ Red Crescent reported that the ICRC had provided free first aid training and medical kits to Taliban fighters in Afghanistan. Many were surprised to hear that the Red Cross worked with the Taliban; one unnamed Afghan official stated that nobody should help Taliban fighters by providing them with training or equipment of any kind because they do "not deserve to be treated like humans."

Others, like Center for Strategic and International Studies senior fellow Stephanie Sanok, worry that such actions may lead to further cooperation with the Taliban in the future. "Where do you draw the line?" Sanok asked. "What kind of assistance is it acceptable to provide the Taliban?" She noted that there are already hospitals run by independent non-governmental organizations which treat any patient—no questions asked—and thus ensure the physical well-being of the critically injured on both sides.

The ICRC remained unapologetic in the face of the largely negative feedback and stressed the importance of its historic neutrality. Spokesperson Christian Cardon said, "We treat and train people on the basis of medical necessity as an impartial organization, regardless of race or politics" and pointed out that "the ICRC is not a judge ... it is not a policeman. The role of the ICRC is to assist and protect victims of armed conflict."

Mr. Cardon also noted that the three-day workshop included not only first aid classes but also lessons on the Geneva Conventions and their importance. The ICRC has provided similar workshops to fighters in the Gaza Strip and Sudan during active conflicts; in Afghanistan, it trained 70 Taliban fighters as well as Afghan security forces, policemen and taxi drivers.

Widespread skepticism of the ICRC workshops in Afghanistan remains, especially in the US, where some have accused the ICRC of aiding the enemy and small donors are wondering if their money helped train Taliban fighters. Although the ICRC remains steadfast in its adherence to its well-established policy of impartiality, some are wondering if neutrality is always a valid option.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Should the ICRC be allowed to provide first aid training to armed insurgents?
2. Is neutrality in conflicts always a morally permissible option?