Humanitarian Challenges in the Global South Are the Unintended Face of U.S. Foreign Policy

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Yet for those countries in the Global South for which national security interests are a top U.S. concern, aid professionals are considered technical experts and urged to stay in their lane. Continuing to silo these experts is a missed opportunity for the United States.
blocks, at worst, must be reconsidered. This same structure rewards key U.S. allies and partners with special treatment, allowing them exceptional assistance and access to U.S. policymakers even in the face of the most egregious acts, such as the brutal murder by Saudi Arabia of U.S.-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi or the attempted assassination by India of an American activist on U.S. soil. While strong relationships with both countries serve critical strategic interests of the United States, compartmentalizing these issues rather than giving them the public condemnation and weight they deserve comes at a cost to the people around the world who look to the United States as a purveyor of democratic values. Keeping these discussions out of public view also signals insecurity rather than strength; as a nation that asserts the strategic advantage of its alliances and partnerships, the United States must have enough confidence to call out egregious behavior of a partner government in the short term in favor of ensuring that the long-term relationship with the country and its people is future-forward. This shows that the United States stands with a country’s people over the long term, and the relationship can withstand the shocks and stresses that will come with changes in government and leadership over time.

The U.S. federal government national security and foreign policy community comprises compassionate civil servants, service members, and politically appointed leaders who work unrelenting hours making policy decisions in real time whenever a crisis throws the apparatus into overdrive. Those same decisionmakers are subject to a funding structure that underfunds and devalues the functions of foreign policy meant to lead—in particular, diplomacy before military engagement. The oversized voice of defense in national security discussions has meant that the U.S. Department of Defense is often called upon to engage in humanitarian leadership outside its core expertise, simply based on capacity.

Preventative nondefense approaches to crisis escalation, such as building capacity of partner nations to respond to their own crises and efforts to anticipate and prevent atrocities, are less the focus of U.S. spending than crisis response. In 2022, the U.S. government spent nearly $12 billion on humanitarian assistance and remained by far the world’s leading humanitarian donor. And the United States continues to be among the world’s most generous nations, ranking fifth in the world in 2023, with private charitable donations passing $499 billion in 2022. Yet a fraction of the assistance the U.S. government provides is focused on prevention.

One argument explaining the lack of investment in prevention relates to the pressing need to address crises happening right now. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) anticipates that 300 million people will be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2024. Its own funding appeal—if fully funded, which has not happened in recent history—would serve only 181 million people, leaving a significant gap. Undoubtedly, a U.S. contribution to the $46 billion the United Nations and partner organizations have requested will be significant and yet a drop in the bucket of the overwhelming need.

The reality is the landscape of need is changing. Humanitarian needs are becoming increasingly concentrated in some of the most difficult places to access. The International Rescue Committee, in its watch list of the top countries whose humanitarian situation is expected to deteriorate in 2024, highlighted 20 countries that together represent 86 percent of all humanitarian need globally. Eleven of the 20 are in Africa, many sharing borders with each other. Humanitarian needs are also becoming more concentrated in countries facing multiple overlapping crises—entrenched poverty, food insecurity, protracted conflict, debt distress, and the intersection of climate change impacts.

This constellation of challenges demonstrates a level of complexity that humanitarian aid alone cannot address. It means that the tool kit the United States has to address these complex challenges may involve confronting uncomfortable truths about U.S. policies or the policies of allied or partner governments that sit outside the technical realm of assistance. Humanitarians are first to say this, famously decrying the limits of their approach when they describe that only political solutions will end protracted conflict and development approaches are needed to address the root causes of humanitarian suffering.
The Global South is home to the vast majority of countries facing humanitarian need. Yet for those countries in the Global South for which national security interests are a top U.S. concern, aid professionals are considered technical experts and urged to stay in their lane.

Continuing to silo these experts is a missed opportunity for the United States. United States Agency for International Development administrator Samantha Power is the most high-profile leader the U.S. aid agency has seen, with broad expertise in human rights and foreign policy. For the first time, her role has been included in the membership of the National Security Council. Yet her voice in foreign policy discussions is muffled. With 17 agencies in the U.S. government providing foreign assistance, it is time the United States reconsidered its approach to galvanizing their expertise. This could help usher in needed credibility in U.S. foreign policy that would appeal to a new generation and diminish the ugly face Americans see in images around the world of the effects of siloing the experts who understand best the human consequences of crises.

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