From Security to Resilience:
New Vistas for International Responses to Protracted Crises

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Keywords: Resilience, crisis, security, practice, international

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Resilience: A response to protracted crises

International institutions and organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have started to embrace the notion of 'resilience' as a way of thinking to guide international responses to international security – in particular with regards to governing protracted crises. Protracted crises are "fragile contexts characterized by long-term political instability, (episodes of) violent conflict, and vulnerability of the lives and livelihoods of the population" (Macrae & Harmer, 2004, p. 15) – like those across central and east Africa, and the Middle East. The concept of resilience is not new to crisis governance. International frameworks for responding to natural disasters, such as the Hyogo Framework for Action (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk [UNISDR], 2005) and the follow-up Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR, 2015), have long placed the idea of resilience central. With regards to insecurity due to political violence and armed conflict however, the concept is relatively new (Bourbeau, 2013; 2015; Brasset & Vaughan-Williams, 2015; see also Anderson & Wallace, 2013). Nevertheless, it features prominently across a range of policies, including for example the European Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (Wagner & Anholt, 2016), the EU's Action Plan for Resilience in Crisis Prone Countries (European Commission [EC], 2013), or programmes such as the Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan (3RP), a consortium co-led by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP), with the participation of the governments of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt, and some 270 partners, including UN agencies and international and local NGOs (Gonzalez, 2016; 3RP, 2018).

As with many policy buzzwords, there is a lack of a clear, agreed-upon definition of resilience. The 2011 Humanitarian Emergency Response Review (HERR) of the UK Department for International Development (DFID), which was one of the first organizations to use the concept in the context of protracted crises, argues that "the impact of a disaster depends on how well prepared a country is to cope with it" (2011, p. 15), and that "being prepared, and being able to recover is what makes nations *resilient* [emphasis in original]" (2011, p. 15). The EU defines resilience as "the ability of an

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individual, a household, a community, a country or a region to withstand, to adapt, and to quickly recover from stresses and shocks" (European Commission [EC], 2012, p. 5). According to an influential position paper by the United Nations Development Group (UNDG), resilience means "the ability of households, communities and societies to cope with shocks and stresses, to recover from those stresses, and to work with households, communities and national and local government institutions to *achieve sustained, positive and transformative change* [emphasis added]" (UNDG, 2014, p.13). The different existing definitions emphasise various aspects of resilience, such as preparation and recovery, or coping, adaptation and transformation. From the academic literature, three characteristics of a resilient response become apparent: the ability or capacity to *absorb* the shock, *adapt* to the new reality, and *transform* in order to function either as before the crisis, or in a superior manner (see Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Lorenz, 2013). Moreover, rather than an outcome, resilience is a process of "continual adaptive cycles of growth, accumulation, restructuring and renewal" (Welsh, 2014, p. 15).

From security to resilience-based approaches to protracted crises

The section above illustrates the ubiquity of resilience in the various policy domains dealing with protracted crises, including those of (international) security, and humanitarian and development assistance – despite its conceptual ambiguity. This section elaborates on the profound change in the understanding of, and approaches to, contemporary risks and crises underlying this new paradigm, as opposed to more traditional understandings of security.

After the Cold War, ideas around security expanded from being primarily about conflicts between states, to being about many types of threats to the security of individuals, communities and societies (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998) – including issues of poverty, social exclusion and natural hazards. In contrast to earlier, state-centric conceptions of security, 'human security' is about "how people live and breathe in a society, how freely they exercise their many choices, how much access they have to market and social opportunities – and whether they live in conflict or in peace" (UNDP, 1994, p. 23). With risks being defined in almost every domain of life (the so-called 'risk society', see Beck, 1992), governments set out to make ever-better "objective, standardised and exact predictions" to minimize harms and increase security (O'Malley, 2004, p. 1). In particular, western states portrayed democracy and trade "as almost magical formulas for peace" in contexts affected by political violence and armed conflict (Paris, 2010, p. 338; see also Duffield, 2014).

Liberal approaches to peace-building, emergency relief and development assistance however, failed to fulfil their promises of a safer, better world (Paris, 1997). Moreover, they have been criticized not only for being ineffective, but also for having harmful unintended consequences (Paris, 2010) – Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya being cases in point. With systems and policies ill-equipped to face them, the frequency, duration and complexity of contemporary instances of political violence and armed conflict have engendered the idea that "the world is entering its most dangerous chapter in decades" (Guéhenno, 2017, para. 1). Syria serves as an exemplary case of a complex crisis with no end in sight and significant spill over effects. Violence among the many state and non-state actors involved caused 5.6 million people to seek refuge abroad, with many neighbouring countries ill-prepared to accommodate such large influxes of people, and others, like some European Union Member States, unwilling to do so.

The attacks of 9/11 in particular, shattered the modernist belief that predicting, identifying, and responding to risks and crises was a matter of accumulating ever more scientific knowledge

(Chandler, 2017). The resilience paradigm instead moves beyond a utopia of safety, by proposing "the impossibility and folly of thinking we might resist danger, and instead accept living a life of permanent exposure to endemic dangers" (Evans & Reid, 2013, p. 95). A policy memo of the European Council on Foreign Relations explicitly suggests this, to accept "that crisis and conflict ... is the new normal" (Witney & Dennison, 2015, p. 1). This makes resilience not so much about prevention and solutions to crises, as about accepting that emergencies happen – exactly because it is impossible to prevent them all (Bulley, 2013). Rather, resilience focuses on enhancing a system's response to crisis rather than the crisis and its causes.

Resilience: Drawbacks and challenges

The above section illustrates that the emergence of the resilience paradigm is a response to two interrelated challenges. On the one hand, resilience signals a recognition of the fallibility of previous crisis governance approaches and systems, and on the other, a faltering belief in the possibility of controlling our world and preventing crises from happening. This section will elaborate on some of the drawbacks and challenges of using resilience-based approaches to insecurity.

One challenge is that employing resilience-based responses shifts the responsibility for security away from states, and instead to societies themselves. Within traditional security approaches, the state is considered the primary provider of security. Yet to the extent that governments are unable to control or direct a complex world riddled with crises, they are incapable of fulfilling that role (Chandler, 2014). Instead, responsibility for security is transferred to the affected individuals and communities themselves (Chandler, 2014; Coaffee & Fussey, 2015; Coaffee & Wood, 2006), decentralizing power and inverting traditional top-down structures with bottom-up ones (Howell, 2015a). This makes resilience a conveniently cost-effective strategy in a time where many states are faced with a depletion of funds. The EU Approach to Resilience for example, explicitly states that resilience is not only better for the people involved, but also *cheaper* (EC, 2012). Unsurprisingly, resilience has been critiqued for its neoliberal character (Chandler 2013a; 2013b; Duffield, 2012; Joseph, 2013; Reid, 2012; Rogers, 2013), the potential hazard being that resilience strategies are advocated in order to justify the avoidance of responsibility, the limits to intervention, or budget cuts.

Another challenge concerns the ways in which resilience-based approaches impact on subjects of governance. First, resilience is often understood as a set of coping strategies and skills that can be learned and taught, rather than it being a natural characteristic (Duffield, 2012). The US military, for example, employs resilience training to prevent soldiers from developing post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues following deployment (Howell, 2015a; 2015b; O'Malley, 2010; Walklate, McGarry, & Mythen, 2014). This may imply that the development of PTSD symptoms is understood as having less to do with the trigger, i.e. deployment to a warzone, than with how well someone has *learned to be resilient*. Indeed, if resilience can be learned, it can also be failed to be learned. This de facto makes crisis-affected communities responsible for their own well-being, ergo, their vulnerabilities (Bulley, 2013; Chandler 2013b) – regardless of whether these are products of their own inherent weaknesses, or of structural socio-economic and political inequalities.

To be resilient means to:

> "accept ... an understanding of life as a permanent process of continual adaptation to threats and dangers that are said to be outside its control. As such the resilient subject ...

must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world: not a subject that can conceive of changing the world" (Chandler & Reid, 2016, p. 53).

If our only choice is to adapt to the conditions of our suffering (Reid, 2012), resilience advocates for adaptation within existing structures rather than structural change. In the context of protracted crises, this means that rather than interrogating the existing structures that directly or indirectly generate crises, the resilient subject must prepare for, adapt to, and live with (protracted) instances of political violence and armed conflict.

Resilience-building in practice

The above section discusses the moral hazards and potential drawbacks of using resilience, particularly within the context of governing protracted crises. Whereas these critiques seem rather grim for policymakers and practitioners, resilience also has very positive connotations (Anholt, 2017). This section considers how resilience-based approaches to protracted crises are put into practice, and what aspects form the core of what resilience means in practical terms.

For policymakers and practitioners, the shift from traditional top-down approaches to bottom-up responses has less to do with avoiding responsibility as with recognizing the need for local ownership of crisis responses. This is reminiscent of resilience applications in disaster risk reduction frameworks, where the concept rather refers to the capacity of local communities against the slow, reluctant or top-down approaches of the government that quash improvised community responses (Dynes, 1994). The 3RP programme for example, rather than being led by international organizations unfamiliar with the intricacies of the context, employs nationally-led country plans that address not only the protection and assistance needs of Syrian refugees, but also the resilience and stabilization needs of impacted and vulnerable communities in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq (3RP, 2018). For the EU, in its implementation of the Global Strategy, it means "accepting different recipes to build resilient states and societies [and] supporting locally owned pathways to peace" (Tocci, 2017, p. 65). The EU in particular builds its understanding of resilience in practice upon the idea of 'principled pragmatism'; although international law and its underlying norms remain the principal guide for EU external action (hence 'principled'), it also demands "a rejection of universal truths, an emphasis on the practical consequences of acts, and a focus on local practices and dynamics" (hence 'pragmatism') (Tocci, 2017, p. 65; see also Joseph, 2016; Juncos, 2016). Resilience-building is as much about "a realistic assessment of the strategic environment", as about the EU's "idealistic aspiration to advance a better world" (Tocci, 2017, p. 64).

Also, resilience in practice seems to be not so much about affected persons' responsibility for their well-being, ergo, their vulnerabilities, but rather about understanding context-specific vulnerabilities and strengthening existing capacities (Bankoff, Frerks, & Hilhorst, 2004; Levine & Mosel, 2014). In its Action Plan for Resilience in Crisis Prone Countries, the EU for example explicitly commits to "more consistently [addressing] underlying causes of vulnerability" (EU, 2013, p 4). This implies that in practice, vulnerabilities are seen as determinants of the magnitude of the impact of a crisis and building resilience as a strategy to limiting that impact. Consistent with ideas around local ownership and context-specificity, this then requires the reinforcement – rather than replacement – of national and local systems, and investment in local capacities (UN, 2016).

To achieve resilience-building in fragile contexts of protracted crises, international institutions and organizations, governments and NGOs recognize that doing different things requires doing things

differently. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (OCHA) New Way of Working articulates this need for different actors, including governments, NGOs, humanitarian and development actors, and the private sector to meaningfully work together towards collective outcomes (UNOCHA, 2017). In particular, it stresses the need for humanitarian and development actors to overcome their long-standing attitudinal, institutional and funding divides (UNOCHA, 2017). In a similar vein, the EU recognises that "achieving resilience objectives requires all EU actors (humanitarian, development, political) to work differently and more effectively together. Current practice and methods should be challenged, improved and new approaches adopted that are appropriate to different contexts" (EU, 2013, p. 4). Although these are commendable developments, whether resilience can really lead to sustained positive change on the ground remains to be seen.

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