

Book Review

When Rambo Meets the Red Cross: Civil–Military Engagement in Fragile States

Stanislava P Mladenova

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When Rambo Meets the Red Cross: Civil–Military Engagement in Fragile States, written by Stanislava Mladenova, is a must-read for anyone working in the civil–military space, particularly those working with the United States (US) military. Mladenova’s analysis offers an in-depth analysis on whether US special operations forces (USSOFs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can be effective partners in low-intensity conflict.¹ The work comes as the result of Mladenova’s professional experience and is the result of her academic studies at King’s College London. The book expertly straddles the pragmatic and academic line to provide a first of its kind review of the shared interests between USSOFs and NGOs.

The intent of the book is to focus on how USSOFs and NGOs may collaborate when working in the same areas.² The book accomplishes its intent through semi-structured interviews with US military, NGO staff, local populations, and a host-nation government official. In total, Mladenova interviewed 42 US military personnel, 28 NGO staff, 16 population respondents, and one host-nation government official.³

The book has four main strengths. First, the book is easily readable while maintaining academic rigour. It effectively communicates complex concepts in a clear, concise manner. The book is divided into six substantive chapters with clear purpose and audience for each chapter that builds into the next. The military chapter is written as a way for an NGO worker to “meet” Rambo, unravelling the complex mission and nature of the warrior. The NGO chapter helps readers “meet” the Red Cross, helping military staff understand the complexity and diversity of NGOs and their staff. Yet, the book is suitable for both of these audiences, as its themes analyse the role and organisation of USSOF Civil Affairs (CA), the role and organisational structure of NGOs (showing where USSOFs and NGOs have opportunities towards collaborating with one another) as well as effective interactions between USSOFs and NGOs, and local perceptions of each. Second, the book provides a global perspective. The interviews are not limited to one continent or area. While focused predominately on the US military, it pulls in US military efforts and experiences from across the globe. Third, the book provides a detailed perspective from USSOF. The focus is primarily civil–military engagement, which is conducted by USSOF CA; however, it includes perspectives from special forces and psychological operations forces. Fourth,

within this group of USSOFs, the number of interviews provides for nuance while allowing common themes across the interviews. Mladenova expertly highlights the threads between interviews to show where commonalities exist.

The main argument in *When Rambo Meets the Red Cross* is that the USSOFs and NGOs can be effective partners, and there is momentum for them to partner. Mladenova dispels the myth that the military is always the hard power while NGOs are soft power. Each side has much to teach the other, and has a growing role in the hard and soft power divide. When USSOFs and NGOs collaborate, local communities see a “softening” of USSOFs and a “hardening” of NGOs. Further, Mladenova finds that local communities care more about the utility of what is provided than about who is providing the assistance. Interpersonal skills, respect for local culture, the ability to listen, and understanding local context are key for both USSOFs and NGOs to engage local communities effectively. The ability of actors to incorporate these key items is determinative in whether communities see USSOFs or NGOs in a positive or negative light.

No book is perfect, and this book is no exception, despite its numerous strengths. There are four main shortcomings of this book that could be the subject for future analysis. First, the book focuses almost entirely at the tactical, or implementation side of both the military and NGO efforts. It does not address the policies that lead to USSOFs and NGOs being in the same area, or the strategic implications of any collaboration. Second, the book focuses most heavily on the military side. The majority of the interviews conducted were with USSOF personnel, with fewer interviews involving NGOs respondents. Third, the book is exclusive to the United States and does not refer to other countries that may be involved in the same communities or elsewhere. Lastly, the book focuses on USSOF CA even though the overwhelming majority of US CA forces are outside the special operations umbrella, and in the US Army Reserves.

The implications from this book are for professionals engaged in the civil–military space. Maldenova demonstrates that USSOFs and NGOs can be effective partners in low-intensity conflict. The onus is now on practitioners to capitalise on this finding. Each actor has relative strengths and weaknesses, as Maldenova identifies. Practitioners from the military, development and humanitarian sides should apply the findings from this work to identify how their organisation could adapt to the changing space in which they are all operating.

This book is intended for practitioners. Anyone engaged in the civil–military space, particularly when the “military” is the US military, could benefit from this book. The book will inform and challenge readers from both the military and humanitarian sides. There are noteworthy lessons for non-US readers, and the book offers valuable insights for other militaries, multinational coalitions, and international organisations. While not a primary target audience for the book, policy advisors and academics could benefit from its insights. Policy advisors and programme officers may have preconceived notions or assumptions challenged. This book may therefore help them devise new policies or programmes that would achieve their goals better. Academics could benefit from the book by helping to fill the unaddressed gaps.

In summary, *When Rambo Meets the Red Cross* offers quality insights into how USSOFs and NGOs work together in low-intensity conflict spaces. Mladenova achieved her objective of displaying effectively and persuasively how USSOFs and NGOs could collaborate in low-intensity conflict. It should be read by those working in areas where military and humanitarian actors may work together. I found the book to be insightful, approachable, thorough, and clear.⁴

J David Thompson 
King's College London

Endnotes

- ¹ SP Mladenova, *When Rambo Meets the Red Cross: Civil–military Engagement in Fragile States* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), 5.
 - ² Mladenova, *When Rambo Meets the Red Cross*, 11.
 - ³ Mladenova, *When Rambo Meets the Red Cross*, 176.
 - ⁴ The opinions expressed in this review are solely those of the author and do not represent the US Army or Department of Defense.
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