

# European Humanitarian Forum

## Forum humanitaire européen



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#### Engaging with Non-State Armed Groups: a necessity for access

21 March 2022, 10:30-12:15

**Moderator:** *Cathy Smith*

**Panelists:** *Michael Ryan (Executive Director, World Health Organisation Health Emergencies Programme), Alain Déléroz (Director General, Geneva Call), Patrick Youssef (Regional Director International Committee of the Red Cross), Mariam Touré (Advocacy Manager, Norwegian Refugee Council), Oussama Chourbagi (General Manager, AFAQ Organisation), Gloria Gaggioli (Director, Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law), Andreas Papaconstantinou (European Commission, DG ECHO, Director for Neighbourhood and Middle East).*

**Interventions from the floor:** *Kelly T. Clements (Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees at UNHCR); Kevin Goldberg (CEO Solidarités International); Meritxell Relano (UNICEF Deputy Director of Office of Emergency Programmes); Stephen Wilkinson (Manager, Diakonia IHL Centre)*

**Executive Summary:** Most contemporary armed conflicts include non-state armed groups (NSAGs). Often, the areas under the control of NSAGs are among the most fragile ones, with significant humanitarian needs. From a humanitarian point of view, engagement with NSAGs is necessary to secure safe access to affected populations living under the control of NSAGs. This became clear also with respect to delivering health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, engagement with NSAGs by organisations such as the ICRC or Geneva Call is also important for ensuring that all belligerents are familiar with the principles of International Humanitarian Law. At the same time, engaging with NSAGs remains challenging. Humanitarian actors have to navigate a sensitive political landscape, where their engagement with NSAGs cannot be seen in any way as legitimizing these actors. There is a high number of NSAGs, and there are major diversities between these groups, in terms of level of violence, motives, control on the territory, and engagement with humanitarian actors. In addition, anti-terrorism legislations and sanctions regimes threaten to limit humanitarian action by creating legal insecurity for humanitarian organizations.

The panel highlighted that engagement with NSAGs was a pre-condition for behaviour change and thus long-term engagement is an opportunity for enhancing the protection of civilians. In terms of engaging with NSAGs, NGOs stated that the more humanitarian actors link IHL with moral and social culture and values, the more fighters' behaviour will change. Regarding anti-terrorism measures and sanctions regimes, panellists reminded that unless impartial humanitarian action is excluded from their scope through well-framed humanitarian exemptions, the regular activities of impartial humanitarian organizations would risk serious legal and operational obstacles. NGOs mentioned the need for local actors for clarity and information-sharing from donors on red lines in operations, communication and access negotiations with NSAGs. They also called for States and donors to use their influence and funding to ensure that the humanitarian system is more efficient on access and on dialogue

with ANSAs. Finally, all panellists agreed there were a need for more training programmes for humanitarian workers, including local actors, on enabling humanitarian programmes. There were also a need to increase collaboration between humanitarian actors in sharing best practices.