

HICHEM KHADHRAOUI

Humanity is at the heart of dialogue

Hichem Khadhraoui is the Director of Operations at Geneva Call, an independent NGO which promotes International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law among the non-State armed groups. As an impartial actor, this organization aims to protect civilians in conflict-affected areas.

With an Algerian mother and Tunisian father, Hichem grew up in areas surrounded by conflict. He remembers how as a child in the 90s, when numerous conflicts in Rwanda, Bosnia, West Africa and other parts of the world were broadcast, he was reading a lot and trying to understand the causes. “I wanted to make sure that it wouldn’t happen again and I was looking for ways to help.”

Interested in global issues and wanting to contribute to their resolution, Hichem chose to study International Humanitarian Law, Human Rights Law, Refugee Law and International Justice in Aix-en-Provence, France, and then in Maastricht, the Netherlands, before completing his LLM in Cape Town, South Africa. Thereafter, he spent 11 years with the ICRC, with more than 9 years in the field in countries like Somalia, Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq and Chad among others.

At Geneva Call, the Director of Operations and his team are promoting International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law among non-state armed groups all over the world. “We realized that instead of blaming the armed groups, we should try to approach them and ensure they understood that there are laws and limits to be respected in order to protect civilians.” The team goes in the field in Asia, the Middle



East, Africa and Latin America to discuss with the leaders directly, making sure that there is a code of conduct and policies which are being respected. The aim is to increase the accountability of the armed groups by making them publicly commit to humanitarian norms, using innovative tools developed by Geneva Call such as the Deed of Commitment or mobile apps on the respect of humanitarian norms. “If we don’t do this, we don’t have the minimum conditions for peace”, explains Hichem. Additionally, they meet local communities, groups of women, minority groups and empower them by informing them about their rights during conflicts. “During conflicts, the ones who suffer the most are the civilians - the children, the women and the elderly because they are trapped between two sides. My aim is to get them out of the trap.” For instance, Hichem’s team visited Myanmar and spoke directly to armed groups members and affected women, in order to strengthen their knowledge about humanitarian norms.

Correspondingly, education is essential and should continue during conflicts.

Humanity as a priority

A moment in particular that marked Hichem, was during an operation in Libya at the beginning of the war, when Gaddafi's troops were fighting against the rebels. Heading to one of the besieged towns to bring oxygen to a hospital where many families were trapped in the basement, Hichem had to negotiate with the armed forces to access the town. When he arrived, he saw many injured people who couldn't get treatment because there were no specialists. He decided to take the victims who needed the most urgent care: a little girl injured by a missile, a pregnant woman and an old woman. However, they could only be treated in an establishment controlled by the rebels. Although they were in the midst of conflict, the members of the rebel side accepted that the victims be treated because they understood "there was humanity at stake" and that was a priority.

During another mission, Hichem had access to a detainee in Baghdad, who had left Sweden to visit his father in Iraq. Arrested three weeks earlier, he was unable to get any news to his mother in Sweden about his condition and whereabouts. He asked Hichem to call her and let her know that he was alive. On the phone, the woman didn't stop crying for a long time. Knowing that her son was alive was "the biggest news since his birth." Stories like this convince Hichem that beyond every conflict, there is humanity. And it needs to be put at the center of the dialogue.

Building dialogue towards a fertile ground for peace

According to Hichem, what is important in peacebuilding is to keep an open mind and to start the dialogue without any prejudice

and be ready to listen. Since everyone has their own understanding and perception of the conflict, what is important for Geneva Call, as Hichem says, is that they come to the field "as a neutral and impartial actor", without taking sides.

They also pay great attention to preparation. Thus, the field missions are only dispatched after extensive research which helps to understand the local culture. When building dialogue, one should not be in a hurry. It is all about being patient and choosing the right approach, explains Hichem. "If they see that you're in a hurry, they won't cooperate." The armed groups are often dominated by anger and violence. It is a difficult task to reach them and convince them to respect rules. The format of the message is also essential and it needs to be adapted accordingly. He recalls moments when he had to talk to members of radical groups. "When you are alone, surrounded by 50 people with guns, and you have to transmit the message that there are rules they need to respect, you have to make sure they understand why they need to respect them." The fact of listening to them without judging makes the members of armed groups more open to dialogue. In his discourse, he always refers to the families and communities, that's why it is important to know what matters to them. "The less you violate, the better your community is protected", is always part of the phrasing.

With Geneva Call, Hichem wants to make a difference in the long term, by "addressing the root-causes of the conflicts and preventing further violations." Today, the statistics show progress - there are less civilian casualties. Hichem believes in repeated and constant dialogue, and his positive mindset and perseverance help him continue.

Cristina Agrigoroae