

## WHEN RAMBO MEETS THE RED CROSS

*Civil-Military Engagement  
in Fragile States*

STANISLAVA P. MLADENOVA  
FOREWORD BY GENERAL JOHN R. ALLEN,  
U.S. MARINE CORPS (RET.)



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### **About the Book**

Non-governmental organizations and militaries are notorious for their difficult relationship. The military is mostly understood through the prism of its lethality, and NGOs are perceived as idealistic do-gooders, ready to save the world. Stanislava P. Mladenova traces the changing character of interaction between both of these entities. She argues that the boundaries which once separated their functions are fading. Fragile, ungoverned, and insecure spaces need both of what these actors can provide. As a result, they have drawn closer together, and have everything at their disposal for a collaborative, efficient, and productive civil-military partnership, which is contrary to what many observers and leaders in the conflict and development space have long believed. Mladenova makes a convincing case that it is high time both sets of actors put aside their differences, bringing to light a fast-changing landscape of vicious poverty, insecurity, and climate change, where the conventional way of doing business will become the exception, not the rule.

### **About the Author**

**Dr. Stanislava P. Mladenova** is a Global Fellow at Brown University's Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies, and Fellow at the Irregular Warfare Initiative at the US Military Academy at West Point. Her work has brought her to Africa, Central and South Asia, South America, and the Balkans. She has held positions at various institutions, including the United States Institute of Peace, working in West Africa to establish dialogue between security actors and local communities. As a Political Advisor for NATO in Afghanistan, she helped shape policy on economic issues, governance, corruption, disaster management, humanitarian assistance, and the recruitment of child soldiers. Her research at the Department of War Studies at King's College London focused on the functional relationship between military and civilian entities in settings affected by low-intensity conflict and state fragility.

### **Praise for the Book**

"A superb examination of the critically important relationship between civil and military organizations in irregular warfare by an impressive practitioner of and scholar on this subject. Stanislava Mladenova provides a masterful description of how those in

uniform, especially civil affairs elements and other special operations forces, interact with their counterparts in civilian organizations, those in governmental and non-governmental organizations focused on various aspects of nation building at local levels. Importantly, she also lays out how these elements can work together more effectively and achieve synergistic effects in the conduct of their important missions. A very important book on a very important subject."

— **General David Petraeus, US Army (Ret.), former Commander of the Surge in Iraq, US Central Command, and Coalition Forces in Afghanistan; former Director of the CIA; co-author of the New York Times best-seller *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine***

"Stanislava P. Mladenova has written an exceptionally insightful and important book on the critical need to integrate the civil-military efforts to stabilize fragile societies. Her valuable experience, thorough research, and creative thinking are clearly evident throughout the book. This is a must-read for military and non-military leaders who will increasingly find themselves faced with these issues in the future."

— **General Anthony C. Zinni, USMC (Ret.)**

"A compelling argument, supported convincingly with data and Dr. Mladenova's extensive personal experience, for a better approach to better leveraging the combination of civilian and military efforts in the complex wars that characterize our times. An essential primer for policymakers, donors, and on-the-ground operators from both the military and non-governmental organizations."

— **General Stanley McChrystal, US Army (Ret.)**

"It's so refreshing to see a book that is focused on the interaction of people, not just of policies, when exploring civil-military interactions in complex environments. What sets this book apart is Mladenova's commitment to exploring the deeper questions. The dichotomy between preserving human dignity and combating terrorism is artfully examined, inviting readers to ponder the true differences between organizations that both believe they are forging a better future for affected populations. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding the intricate dance between military and

humanitarian efforts in conflict zones. Thought-provoking in its exploration of fundamental questions, it makes it a valuable contribution to the discourse on civil-military relations.”

— **Beth Eggleston, Co-Founder and Director, Humanitarian Advisory Group**

“As the current wars in both Ukraine and Gaza demonstrate - close collaboration between military forces and the humanitarian community is vital to accomplishing political objectives. Nowhere is this more pronounced than with Special Operations Forces, who often operate in and among the population. This excellent book is essential to the intellectual discussion that must accompany the decision to employ force in future conflicts. A foundational resource for practitioners and policymakers.”

— **General Joseph L. Votel (Ret.), former US Special Operations Command and Central Command commander**

“One of the tragic but real trends of our time is the growing number and severity of conflicts. These conflicts are the epicenter of humanitarian need and a primary cause of ongoing extreme poverty. They are also a place where the international humanitarian community comes into direct contact with international military forces, often coming from the same country. This important book elucidates the nexus in which humanitarian and military forces find themselves and helps practitioners from both sides of the divide consider how they might better cooperate to achieve shared objectives.”

— **Raj Kumar, President of Devex, former humanitarian council chair for the World Economic Forum and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations**

“As the aid community struggles to promote a nexus approach between humanitarian, peace, and development actors, Mladenova’s work superbly traces the quiet, dynamic, and even transformational engagements already underway between these actors in the gray spaces of fragile states. This book is required reading for military and aid practitioners who want to better understand each other’s boundaries, mandates, and opportunities for principled and constructive engagement, while holding up the primacy of local voices and communities that too often have been simply instrumentalized in complex mission environments.”

— **Jonathan Papoulidis, Director for Fragility and Resilience at Food for the Hungry**

“As the fate of fragile states continues to rise in importance across the global security landscape, Mladenova clearly articulates the importance and opportunities for collective understanding and action between military and civilian actors. The world’s citizens are frequently in the middle of conflict and efforts to mitigate civilian harm must be comprehensive and complimentary. This is a must read for all practitioners, military and civilian, operating in gray spaces.”

— **Colonel Susan M. Gannon, U.S. Army**

“Having worked in many countries around the world, I witnessed firsthand how critical the collaboration—analyzed so expertly here in this volume—between NGOs and the military becomes in addressing complex humanitarian needs, particularly in crisis zones and areas affected by natural disasters. While we need to respect each other’s mandates and principles, we are entering a time where increasingly the lines that used to separate us are disappearing. We must find ways to work meaningfully and constructively interact, if

not for anything else, at least out of necessity and in the best interests of the communities that we serve.”

— **Rabih Torbay, President and Chief Executive Officer, Project Hope**

“This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to work successfully across civilian and military lines, or who wants to do truly responsible and meaningful non-governmental work. To move beyond personality-dependent success, Mladenova’s recommendations of institutionalizing a community of practice, measuring relationship durability, and creating practical skills through training and learning are vital. This book should be mandatory reading at the Foreign Service Institute, the National Defense University, across the U.S. and partner nation war colleges, and in private sector universities for those who want to be effective partners and implementers of programs in fragile states.”

— **Ambassador Greta C. Holtz (Ret.), President and CEO, Amideast; Director, PRT program in Iraq (2009-10); Senior USG Coordinator, Operation Allies Refuge in Doha (2021)**

“Dr. Mladenova demonstrates that special operations forces, particularly civil affairs units, as well as humanitarian and development NGO workers, can and do make a vital difference for civilians impacted by violent conflict. They can achieve tactical and strategic effects for stability and peace together in the gray zone. NGOs and military forces should capitalize on this book to develop new practices and doctrine. Scholars and practitioners of peace and security, counterinsurgency, stabilization, and state fragility will benefit from this book.”

— **Anthony Wanis-St. John, School of International Service, American University; consultant to the Department of Defense and the United States Institute of Peace**

“Armed conflict zones are areas where local, national, and international complexities are intertwined. In such situations, ensuring the protection of civilians is crucial. Both defense and security actors, as well as non-governmental organizations, are working towards this goal. Although their approaches may differ, there is a gray area where they can collaborate. Dr. Mladenova’s book boldly reflects on the possibility of a partnership between security actors and non-governmental organizations that play significant roles in conflict zones. Although their roles are perceived as different, they can be complementary and work together towards a common goal.”

— **Vianney Bisimwa, Africa and Middle East Director for the Center for Civilians in Conflict**

“Dr. Mladenova’s extensively documented research makes a significant contribution on addressing contemporary challenges in the field of conflict transformation and peace-building. The potential for overlap between military responses and NGO peace-building interventions poses a risk, where groups targeted for lethal response may be the same ones that NGOs aim to involve in mediation or transform into peace agents. This book underscores the crucial need for communication between civilian and military entities to ensure their collaborative efforts enhance community security in a more cohesive and enduring manner.”

— **Laurent Kasindi, Senior Program quality Specialist, Search For Common Ground**

“This book is essential reading for policymakers, practitioners, and military operators working at the nexus of humanitarian and security crises across the globe today. The author deftly demonstrates that despite cultural differences, NGOs and special forces are well-suited

to work collaboratively to improve conditions in war-torn countries and fragile regions. With demands for security cooperation and humanitarian assistance increasing as climate acts as a threat multiplier, we all need the type of rigorous analysis Dr. Mladenova provides.”

— **Sherri Goodman, Secretary General, International Military Council on Climate & Security**

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