

WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY!

From the frontlines, Will Holden has seen first-hand the human impact of war. Having spent 20 years working in logistics for private sector companies, the Dubliner has now turned his attention to applying his skills in a humanitarian setting in some of the world's most war-torn regions. He talks to Michael McHale.

Having spent time on supply-chain logistics projects in both Afghanistan and Iraq, Will Holden recently spent three months on the Turkish-Syrian border, where he helped co-ordinate supplies of essential provisions to migrants fleeing the crisis currently gripping Syria.

"Afghanistan was actually my last private sector job," Holden says of his first experience of working in a country impacted by war – a year-long assignment as senior logistics advisor on the Afghan disposal project for the UK Ministry of Defence.

His work involved the disposal of all non-military items which the armed forces used in their camps across the country – from off-road vehicles to porta cabins which housed makeshift hospitals. "Basically, anything that went into Afghanistan had to stay there – there was nowhere for it to go," he recalls.

"It wasn't a huge team working on the project. It was more of a management team, and we were working closely with the British military. Obviously a huge amount of security elements went into it. We had to do security checks on the trucks and the drivers before they even arrived at the gate of their camp, for obvious reasons. So there was a huge amount of security involved in that one."

PROFESSIONAL LOGISTICIANS

When Holden returned from Afghanistan in 2013, he established the Irish Emergency Logistics Team (IELT). The principal aim of IELT is to put together a team of professional logisticians who are equipped with the leading-edge knowledge and core competencies to provide a suite of logistics and supply chain management support to NGOs.

However, plans for the IELT were put on hold when, six months after Afghanistan, Holden was offered a posting with the Danish Refugee Council in Iraq, in areas directly affected by terrorist group ISIS.

"At the time I was working for the Danish Refugee Council directly, but while out there



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Holden set up water distribution outlets to the people of Mosul in August 2014.

we did a couple of small projects under the Emergency Logistics Team banner. So when there was a large influx of riots after ISIS hit Mosul, 100,000 Christians ended up living in the area where we were based.

"They were just everywhere, to be honest with you. I never saw anything like it in my life. We delivered a few pallets of water, we did small collections, small deliveries – but we tried to make a little bit of a difference."

RESOURCE DISTRIBUTION

Holden returned from Iraq in March 2015, but it wasn't long before he found himself back in the Middle East – this time based on the Turkish-Syrian border with an Irish NGO.

By the time he arrived at the base the main border point had already been closed off to Syrian refugees. The UN refugee agency UNHCR has predicted that 1.7 million Syrians will have come to Turkey seeking refuge, by the end of 2015.

"We were based on the Turkish side of the border in Antakya," Holden says of his experience. It was only a half an hour drive to the border. The main border point is Bab Al Hawa, so huge amounts of stock come and go through that point."

Comparing this project to his work in Iraq, Holden notes that they were "the same but different, insofar as it's a much bigger supply chain, with tens of thousands of food kits, thousands of tonnes of flour, nearly 100 vehicles, drivers, security elements, cross border issues between Turkey and Syria, and so on".

The decision to co-ordinate the distribution of many of the available resources brings with it ethical questions, but in a time of crisis, Holden explains that such considerations weigh lightly on the mind.

"Pretty much all fuel in northern Syria comes from ISIS-controlled areas. It's not an existential discussion of whether it's right to use this fuel or not – it's a case of, if you don't use it, you've no fuel. So, everybody uses it.

FUEL FOR THOUGHT

"Then you must have discussions – 'are you okay with this?' The fact that you're purchasing fuel, not necessarily directly from ISIS, but the suppliers or petrol stations that you're picking this up from, they get it from suppliers who get it from ISIS. Nothing comes into Syria from Turkey so there's only one place to get it from."

Having returned to Ireland in October 2015, Holden has resumed his work with the IELT. In order to build its cohort of skilled logisticians ready for large-scale humanitarian missions, IELT is providing a number of Emergency Logistics and Humanitarian Aid training packages in conjunction with the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT) Ireland.

As a self-sustaining 'not for profit' entity dedicated to full-time humanitarian support, Holden aims to fund the IELT through these training programmes. For example, November 2015 saw the roll out of two six-week 'Introduction to Humanitarian Logistics' courses.

"When we develop the training we'll build a team. We're also working on different side project proposals... I'm trying



Holden aims to fund the IELT through humanitarian logistics training programmes, two most recent courses were held in November 2015.

to partner with local NGOs, so we've put in proposals for supporting Syrians in Turkey, Iraq and Jordan. And I've also put in a proposal to support refugees in Kenya.

"Looking at it from an Irish context, there's an appetite for people to learn about humanitarian emergency logistics, given the nature of it – it's on the news everywhere.

"So we're trying to fill the gap of education and advocacy in Ireland, and explain to people what the refugees are really going through as opposed to the 60 seconds you're going to hear on the news, and give people a broader overview of what it's really like to work there as well."

SPREADING SKILLS

While working in Ireland, Holden also plans to provide training for those people living in the areas most affected by logistical crises. Once trained in Ireland and monitored over one year, members of the IELT will spread their skills and knowledge to locals in these regions, so they can eventually set up their own businesses, co-ordinate supply chain logistics with NGOs on the ground.

According to Holden, it is this private sector thinking that is sorely lacking from the work of not-for-profit agencies in this area.

"It's a cultural difference between the private sector and the humanitarian work. For example, when it comes to the humanitarian response to the crisis in Syria NGOs need supply chain experts.

"They don't need humanitarian logistics people, because the scale of the project is huge. Humanitarian logistics people would, by and large, work on smaller projects. There's a lot of changes going on, but they're struggling. It's an impossible task, in fairness, to anyone working out there."

For further information about the IELT and upcoming training courses visit www.emergencylogisticsteam.com

