

# The Food Question in the Middle East



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## CHAPTER 9

# Politics of Food Aid: From Politicization to Integration

*Khaled Mansour*

*At the beginning of the [1990s] . . . aid agencies tried to recruit states for their cause, by the beginning of the next decade they had discovered that states had already co-opted humanitarianism for their interests. (Barnett 2011:172)*

### Introduction

Several years before Barnett published *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* in 2011, it became painfully clear to many aid workers that humanitarian action had become more deeply and widely politicized over the previous ten years. This was painful, because it made humanitarian workers a direct target of attacks instead of only collateral damage caused by fighting among other parties. A terrorist attack on August 19, 2003 against the UN offices in Baghdad killed 22 people and injured nearly 150.<sup>1</sup> The building housed the UN political delegation, led by a special representative of the secretary general, and the large team of the World Food Programme (WFP), whose main task was to bring in half a million tons of food a month to maintain the country's subsidized food distribution system after the US war dismantled Saddam Hussein's regime. Two months later, another car bomb hit the Baghdad office of the International Committee of the Red Cross, killing at least ten people and injuring many others.

These two bombings were the most spectacular and direct attacks on the UN and the ICRC up until that time, with the largest loss of lives ever

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1 I worked for the UN World Food Program in Baghdad at the time and survived the attack.

suffered in one single politically motivated incident for either of the two organizations. There was criticism by independent investigators, as well as by the UN staff association, pointing out security lapses. But the politicization of humanitarian aid and the increasing proximity, or more precisely the increasing integration, of the two realms—the political and humanitarian realms of the UN as well as politicization of international humanitarian nongovernmental organizations—might have played a more important role than security gaps in causing these tragic attacks. The Iraq bombings were followed over the next 13 years by more numerous and bloodier attacks against aid workers or installations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, Yemen, and finally Syria.<sup>2</sup>

Still, the deteriorating security of aid workers is but a secondary (and probably unintended) consequence of the politicization of humanitarian aid. This politicization or instrumentalization became evident in the civil wars in the Balkans and Kosovo and in Rwanda's genocide in the 1990s, became institutionalized in Afghanistan in 2001, and then moved to deeper levels of integration in 2002 in the months of preparation for the US-led invasion of Iraq. This politicization is now par for the course in Syria (2012–2016), where the aid industry is addressing probably one of its most complex challenges and largest operations ever.<sup>3</sup> By instrumentalization (for political and other purposes), I mean that humanitarian action becomes engaged with multiple other actors (political, economic, military, etc.) to ensure funding, access, and institutional interests at the expense of the three most fundamental humanitarian principles: impartiality,

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2 About 3,250 aid workers have been killed, injured, or kidnapped in the period 2004–2015 inclusive. Sometimes they were collateral damage (or recklessly attacked by indiscriminating regular forces), but more often they were intentionally targeted by one or more of the warring parties because their role was suspected of directly or indirectly aiding an opponent. Aid workers no longer enjoyed the protection of their flags as neutral providers of aid on the basis of need and humanity and impartial to the conflict parties. They are now more often seen as political tools in the hands of opponents, such as doctors treating the wounded in militia-controlled territories or food aid agencies working only where it is said to be safe by another opponent. For more details on these attacks, patterns, and numbers, see the Aid Workers Security Database at <https://aidworkersecurity.org/incidents/report/summary>.

3 UN communication officers in the Middle East and South Asia have long reported to their headquarters on local media and public opinion trends, which became gradually more hostile to, or at least cynical about, the UN. I contributed to some of this reporting from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, and Lebanon when I was a communication adviser for UN humanitarian and peacekeeping operations.

neutrality, and independence. Over the past 25 years, humanitarian actors have indeed been increasingly working more closely with political and military institutions on operational, tactical, and strategic levels.

The global liberal peace project that began in the early 1990s after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the former Soviet Union rested on plans for more democratization, more penetration of free-market ideologies, wider respect for human rights, and more coordination in counterterrorism efforts. This global project accelerated and deepened the politicization of humanitarian aid. Corrupt and crumbling postcolonial states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with their kleptocratic security agencies and ruling socioeconomic elites, also helped shape the post-1990 humanitarian space.

Food aid, which is the focus of this chapter, has saved millions of lives since the late nineteenth century, but despite this great achievement and the best intentions of some in the aid community—donors, humanitarian agencies, and recipient governments or authorities—this undertaking is not (and probably could never have been) divorced from politics. Humanitarian organizations and aid workers operate in a hyper-political environment, where power relations are themselves contested in bloody conflicts or disrupted in the aftermath of natural disasters. After water, food is the priced commodity that is most indispensable for survival, but in the case of conflicts it has long served as a weapon to gain an edge over and pressure one's opponents. Aid agencies have long engaged in politics to raise funds, enable operations, and ensure safe access to the people who are meant to receive assistance.

Politicization is not merely the instrumentalization by one party or another of aid agencies, but rather a process in which aid actors also take part. The various actors influence each other. Donors, governments, multilateral aid agencies, NGOs, local communities, militias, and market actors (such as corporations, traders, and farmers) all interact in complex humanitarian crises. A diagram developed by Donini (2012:5) and reproduced in figure 1 depicts the complex network of relations in the realm of humanitarian action. The aid actors have to interact with military, political, market, and civil-society forces with their overlapping and clashing agendas. The original, narrow function of emergency-aid agencies was the saving of lives. Its framework of action has been rooted in international humanitarian law since the late nineteenth century, when Henri Dunant

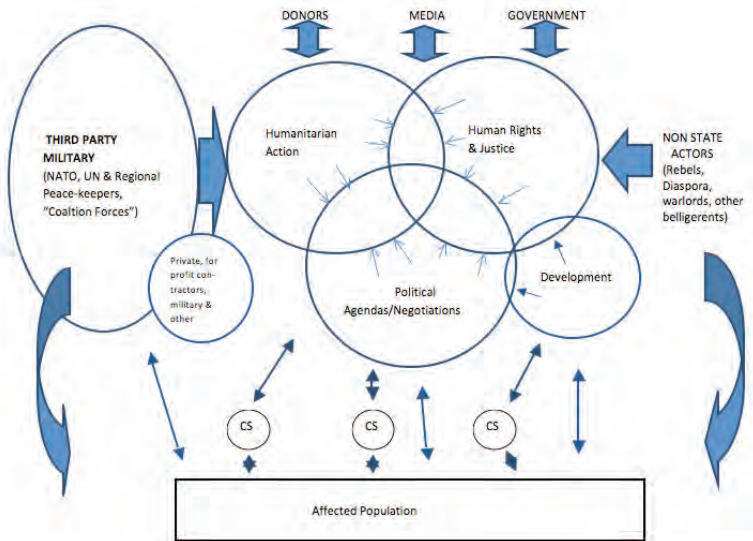


Figure 1. Instrumentalization: actors and agendas

established the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Now, however, as the diagram shows, emergency aid agencies have to deal with issues related to the root causes of the conflicts: stabilization and medium-term recovery and reconstruction. This means that humanitarian actors have moved from merely working in politically charged circumstances to being part of the political game in many instances.

As they became more bureaucratized and professionalized, aid agencies themselves acquired their own interests, including institutional preservation and growth in a competitive marketplace. Most senior aid managers, with the exceptions of Dunanist organizations like the ICRC or Doctors without Borders, increasingly adopted pragmatic programmatic interventions in conflict situations, a position that often clashed with and undermined the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence. These compromises become more problematic when they cause suffering to the very people that the humanitarian enterprise is supposed to be helping. In these circumstances, aid agencies can end up not only with mud on their faces but possibly also with blood on their hands. This is what has happened in Somalia, DRC, Sri Lanka, and, as will be shown, is continuing to happen in Syria in 2016.

Such overlapping and convergence of political/security concerns and crisis response can be traced as far back as Biafra and Indochina in the 1950s and 1960s. The process of politicization of the humanitarian enterprise accelerated after the end of the Cold War, beginning in 1990, when many western countries shifted away from multilateral modes of interaction in humanitarian assistance to approaches more blatantly subservient to national-security, business, and political interests. Donini, Minear, and Walker (2004) outline various ways in which the political and the humanitarian interact, converge, or overlap. Donini and Walker have even argued that there has never been a “golden age when core humanitarian values took precedence over political or other considerations” (Donini and Walker 2012:244). They outline the structural limitations within the humanitarian enterprise that made the endeavor always politicized in one form or another depending on historical context.

The Iraq bombing in 2003, however, marked a transition from increasing convergence between political and security objectives on the one hand and aid operations on the other hand to an outright integration approach, in which the aid operations become part of the tool box, or “the benevolent side of globalization” (Donini 2012:193). Not only governments but also international aid agencies, NGOs, community organizations, and beneficiaries in conflict areas have political interests and participate in this integration with varying influences—beneficiaries being the weakest in these networks of interdependence.

Multiple pressures are exerted on big aid agencies like the WFP, which operates under political, security, and financial constraints and constrains others in turn. The WFP, however, occupies a prestigious position in a complex network of donors, governments, international NGOs, private-sector suppliers, local civil-society organizations, and other actors in a multi-billion-dollar enterprise. With 15,000 staff members and a budget of US \$4.8 billion in 2015, the WFP is the largest aid organization in the world. It assisted 78 million people around the globe in 2015, about 24 percent of whom were in emergency situations in the Middle East (WFP 2016:20).<sup>4</sup> In almost all these Middle East emergencies, major powers such as the US, the UK,

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4 WFP provided food assistance to Yemen (nine million people), Syria (five million inside the country and two million in neighboring Lebanon and Jordan), Iraq (two million), and Palestine (600,000) (WFP 2016:20).



Russia, and France were implicated in one form or another, including direct bombing, deployment of troops, and arms sales. These are also countries that have permanent seats on the UN Security Council and/or are among the WFP's largest donors. The US, which is involved in Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen,<sup>5</sup> provided 40 percent, or two billion dollars, of the WFP's budget in 2015. The UK provided about 10 percent (US \$456 million), the European Commission provided 5 percent (US \$259 million), and Canada 5.4 percent (US \$261 million) (WFP 2016:27).

The US has been no stranger to politicized engagement in international humanitarian aid since Herbert Hoover, who later became the US president, established the American Committee for Relief in Belgium during the First World War and went on to lead relief programs in Poland and the Soviet Union during the famines of 1919–1923. The US was behind the creation of the League of Red Cross Societies, which is now the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), one of the largest humanitarian organizations in the world. The US helped create and still strongly influences leading humanitarian organizations such as UNICEF and the WFP. The fact that UNICEF, for many years, focused on relief and avoided active advocacy for children's rights in sensitive situations, such as the Palestine conflict or international adoption, are but two examples of the remarkable American influence on the organization. The WFP, on the other hand, has distanced itself from the 'right to food' debate, largely due to a strong, Protestant-influenced American preference for philanthropy based on human solidarity rather than on human rights in issues such as basic food needs. The operations of these organizations, as well as American humanitarian NGOs (such as World Vision International, CARE, and the International Rescue Committee), reveal the way in which they are increasingly aligned with US global projects anchored in stability, expanding free markets, democratization, and rule of law. It is no wonder that one secretary of state after

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5 The US is the largest seller of arms to Saudi Arabia and other members of the coalition fighting in Yemen. The WFP's largest donors are also among the largest arms sellers to countries in the Middle East where the WFP is involved in providing humanitarian aid. See the IHS 2015 report for arms sales at <http://news.ihsmarket.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/record-breaking-65-billion-global-defence-trade-2015-fueled>

another since the 1990s has described these organizations as “tools” or “force multipliers” in terms of US foreign policy.

The focus on the US does not mean that other major western countries did not adopt a similar manipulative position, especially those with political interests in areas of conflict or the permanent members of the Security Council such as the UK and France. The northern/western roots of the humanitarian aid system (as distinct from ‘humanitarianism,’ which can be found in many cultures and faiths around the world) are still very evident and can be seen in the preponderance of western senior managers and leaders in large aid organizations.

This broad framework will guide the rest of the chapter, which analyzes the humanitarian operations in Syria (2014–2016) and in Iraq (2002–2003).<sup>6</sup>

### **The Syria Case**

For many years, food assistance has been by far the largest component of any emergency aid operation. This has certainly been the case in Syria, where a civil uprising was exacerbated by the reactions of the ruling regime into a civil war in late 2011 and early 2012. This escalation quickly made the country the theater for a large humanitarian disaster in the same league as Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s or Darfur in the mid 2000s. By mid 2016, at least 250,000 Syrians had been killed and over one million injured; one of every two Syrians had to leave home (about 4.8 million left the country altogether, while another 6.5 million were internally displaced). The country’s educational and health infrastructure has been decimated.<sup>7</sup>

The total funding for humanitarian action in Syria in the four years from 2012 to 2015 totaled US \$6.8 billion. In 2015 alone it was US

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6 In addition to relying on publicly available resources, I was the WFP spokesperson in Jordan and Iraq for most of 2003 and have intimate knowledge of the operation there. For the Syria case, I spoke with several UN and NGO workers who run the operation in Syria or from Turkey, including during a visit in April 2016 to the Turkish border area of Gaziantep, where cross-border operations are organized. However, I use no confidential information or documents I had access to during my work for the purpose of this study.

7 For an overview of the most credible, and rather conservative, figures for the destructive impact of the civil war in Syria, see OCHA’s report at <http://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/syria-country-profile/about-crisis>.

\$2.4 billion, or 11.7 percent of the global humanitarian expenditure. About 64 percent of the humanitarian funding for Syria in 2015 came from the US and the UK combined. A third of the 2015 funds went to food assistance, more than half of which, about US \$442 million, went to the WFP. The WFP alone received nearly 19 percent of all funding that went to Syria's humanitarian operations in 2015.<sup>8</sup>

The untold humanitarian suffering of people in Syria is not merely a byproduct of the civil war, but part and parcel of the war effort itself. Targeting civilians and their basic educational, health, and road infrastructure has been used as a war tactic, largely by the government, but also by the opposing militias. Starvation, denial of medical and other basic humanitarian supplies, destruction of schools and hospitals, and killing of medical staff have all become regular weapons in conducting the war in Syria.<sup>9</sup>

On the ground, aid agencies like the WFP have come under intense political pressure from the government of Bashar al-Assad, which controls most of the Syrian territory, and to a lesser extent from the armed factions. Pressure was also exerted by the main donors and permanent members of the Security Council, who have complex agendas in Syria. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) of the UN, in an evaluation in late 2015, summarized these multiple pressures.

*With Syria still maintaining its seat at the United Nations, and backed by Russia and China, UN agencies did not consider it possible that they could violate sovereignty. On the other side of this equation, the other three permanent members of the Security Council—France, the US and the UK—were openly backing the opposition to Assad and covertly financing aid across the borders into opposition areas. With the US, the UK and the EU accounting for over half of the official aid flows into the UN humanitarian system, the political pressures were intense. (Sida, Trombetta, and Panero 2016:11)*

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8 For details on humanitarian funding, donors, recipients, and programs, see OCHA Financial Tracking Services at <https://ftsbeta.unocha.org/countries/206/summary/2015>.

9 For general description and analysis, see reports issued by the OCHA, the ICRC, HRW, and Syrian NGOs such as the Violations Documentation Center and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

This evaluation concluded that “UN agencies were simply not willing to jeopardize their operations in Syria by taking a tougher stance with the Government . . . [a position that] will surely be scrutinized unfavorably at a later point.” Even after the Security Council decided to allow cross-border operation in July 2014, “Damascus-based UN humanitarian agencies have been slow to take advantage of . . . Resolution 2165, and throughout they have been protective of their relationship” with the government of Syria (Sida, Trombetta, and Panero 2016:15).

In Syria, the WFP claimed that through working with the Arab Red Crescent (SARC), which is largely controlled by the government in Damascus, it had distributed food to more than four million people inside Syria every month in 2015. But how much of that aid furthered government interests? Who received aid and who could not? How was this selective operation conducted? In general, most of the food aid in the period 2012–2016 has disproportionately gone into government-controlled areas, while opposition-held areas were largely denied aid and some of them were tightly besieged. The conditions in these besieged areas marginally improved in late 2014, but the partiality of the aid operation persisted.

The most disturbing conditions, including reported starvation to death, existed in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, where 4.6 million people live. As of mid 2016, about 590,000 lived in 18 UN-designated besieged locations, of whom

- nearly 450,000 people were besieged by the government, mainly in rural Damascus;
- about 10,000 were besieged by the government and allied militias in Damascus;
- some 110,000 people in government-controlled parts of Deir al-Zour City were besieged by Islamic State or ISIS;
- some 20,000 people were besieged by armed opposition groups and the Nusra Front in Fuaa and Kafraya, in Idlib province (UN Secretary General 2016:9).

In April 2016, 88 percent of food aid delivered from inside Syria went into government-controlled areas, while 12 percent went into territories outside its control. Some months provide an “even starker illustration of

the government's use of UN aid to further its own agenda." In August 2015, the government directed over 99 percent of UN aid from inside the country to its territories. In 2015, less than 1 percent of people in besieged areas received UN food assistance each month (Syria Campaign 2016:4).

Food assistance reached only 8.7 percent of the people in the besieged, hard-to-reach, and priority cross-line areas<sup>10</sup> in May 2016 (UN Secretary General 2016:9). These numbers jump dramatically up and down from one month to another but they are generally low. Moreover, NGOs and the UN differ on their definitions of what constitutes a besieged area and how many people are in them. While the monthly reports by the UN secretary general put the number of besieged areas at 18, some NGOs make it as high as 46, and while the secretary general's report estimates about 590,000 people in besieged areas, the NGOs raise that number to one million. All the areas unacknowledged by the UN lie in Homs and rural Damascus provinces and are surrounded by the Syrian regime's military and its allied militia (Syria Institute and PAX 2016:9).

NGOs admit the relative improvement of humanitarian access to besieged areas in early 2016, but claim that aid deliveries to non-government controlled areas were "inconsistent, insufficient, and unbalanced due to continuing access restrictions, limiting their effectiveness. Even in communities like Moadamiya and Madaya, which received multiple aid deliveries during the reporting period, siege-related deaths continued to be reported" (Syria Institute and PAX 2016:9).

Part of the noticeable improvement after February 2016 was attributed to the decision of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) to air-drop food aid in besieged areas. However, the implementation of that decision was severely unbalanced. Western parts of Deir al-Zour, which is government-controlled but surrounded by ISIS troops, stood out "as the only besieged area that has experienced a significant improvement in humanitarian conditions as a result of international efforts shepherded by the ISSG," with as many as 50 drops by the WFP. Other besieged areas did not receive the same treatment, prompting the WFP to appeal to the government to grant permission for airdrops in

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<sup>10</sup> Cross-line areas are those areas that are reached by crossing hostile territories, such as bringing supplies from government-ruled territories into opposition-controlled areas.

the other 17 or 18 areas it besieged, and where 80 percent of the total besieged population in the country lives in dire conditions. Four months after it started air drops to the pro-government areas of Deir al-Zour, the WFP had still not been given permission by the government to make air drops in these other areas.<sup>11</sup>

The UN bureaucracy, probably for political expediency, prefers to use sanitized diplomatic language, blaming “parties” of the conflict for hampering access, when in reality blame can rarely be equally apportioned. The UN knows that with the exception of four areas (Kafraya, Fuaa, Nobbol, and al-Zahraa), it is the government which has been responsible for the rest of the 18 to 46 effectively besieged communities.<sup>12</sup> By controlling permits and denying access to humanitarian shipments or free movement to civilians, the government is effectively using food as a weapon. The Syrian government has more often than not denied the humanitarian agencies approval to work in certain locations, including the three besieged areas of Duma, East Harasta, and Darayya, which are “mere minutes” drive away from UN warehouses in Damascus, and where “some people are forced to eat grass to subsist.”<sup>13</sup> Not that other actors did not do the same thing. The militias that besieged Fuaa and Kafraya in Idelb province did just the same. But the government is by far the biggest violator of international humanitarian law. In addition to rejecting requests on the pretext of security conditions, the Syrian government used the explicit threat of removing the UN’s permission to operate within Syria and withdrawing visas for its non-Syrian staff members to keep humanitarians from delivering aid to Daraa. The Syrian government has used this threat consistently since then to manipulate where, how, and to whom the UN has been able to deliver humanitarian aid (Syria Campaign 2016:4). The Syrian government permissions could even be rescinded by government troops on the ground, as happened with an aid convoy to Darayya, in rural Damascus, on May 12, 2016: the last army checkpoint before the village denied

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11 “WFP to Pursue Damascus Permission for Air Drops in Syria,” Associated Press, June 3, 2016. Available at <http://www.businessinsider.com/ap-wfp-to-pursue-damascus-permission-for-air-drops-in-syria-2016-6>

12 For an updated map of besieged areas, see <http://siegewatch.org/#7/35.111/38.540>.

13 UN News Center 2016, quoting Stephen O’Brien, Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

passage, stating that the convoy should not transport “medical items and baby milk.” The UN secretary general complained that “conditions imposed by government security personnel are excessive and contrary to earlier guarantees and approvals obtained from the Government” (UN Secretary General 2016:9).

On June 14, 2016, a full four weeks after a formal request by the UN to send aid to 1.1 million people in 34 locations, the government refused access to a third of those people in areas it besieges or controls and agreed to partial delivery in another third of these locations (UN Secretary General 2016:11). Credible Syrian NGOs allege that diversion took place in favor of Syrian military and pro-government merchants in Deir al-Zour (Syria Institute and PAX 2016:36).

Besieging civilian areas in Syria is a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law and of four consecutive and relevant Security Council resolutions.<sup>14</sup> The uneven food aid delivery, including the biased airdrops to government areas, threatens to make the WFP’s assistance effectively a part of the Syrian government’s war strategy.

### **Where Islamic State and Kurds Have Control**

The dynamics are markedly different in territories controlled by the forces of the Islamic State or the Kurds. Other organizations opted not to work in areas controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (whose Kurdish acronym is PYD), fearing a backlash from the Turkish government, as the PYD is allied with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has long waged a violent campaign against the Turkish government.

In 2015, Kurdish fighters in Sheikh Maksoud in Aleppo were accused by a credible NGO of seizing a food shipment. The Kurdish group denied responsibility, but the NGO nonetheless avoided working in this area for two months until they were reassured the incident would not happen again. One organization, operating from across the Turkish border in Gaziantep to feed about 100,000 people a month, decided to work only in areas that are away from cross-lines and that have been stable for a predetermined period of time.

Almost all aid organizations opted not to work in ISIS-controlled areas after they rejected the radical and violent group’s attempts in 2014

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14 Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), and 2258 (2015) can all be accessed at <http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/>.

and 2015 to control their operations. Ceasing work in al-Raqqa province, most of Deir al-Zour province, and certain areas in northern rural Aleppo and elsewhere because of “their inability to work independently” (UN Secretary General 2016:10) stands in stark contrast to the way in which many of these same agencies continue to operate in the areas controlled by the Syrian government, albeit with a heavy dose of interference. These interventions at times included the removal of certain supplies, such as anesthetic drugs and other medicines, from aid trucks that were approaching their destinations in government-besieged areas. It is doubtful that it was only concerns about independence and impartiality that motivated the WFP not to work in ISIS areas.

Most aid organizations, in fact, avoid ISIS areas, fearing draconian US and European regulations about ensuring that no aid falls into the hands of terrorists.<sup>15</sup> One NGO director confirmed that they use international NGOs’ access to lists of terrorist organizations and individuals suspected of terrorism to vet job candidates and companies that they might work with. This is not necessarily a foolproof method, simply because these lists are not the result of a credible process and people have gotten on and off them for spurious reasons. As one NGO director confirmed to me, “A supplier may have links to terrorist organizations or pay them money to get the stuff through, but we do not know this and we do not want to know it.”

One UN aid worker scoffed at the question about the reasons for not operating in ISIS-controlled areas: “Ask the donors.” Donors claim that aid agencies pulled out from ISIS-controlled areas because the extremist group wanted to control operations, but in essence this attempt at control is not radically different from what the Damascus government has been doing for years. One medical aid worker said they had to fold operations in ISIS-controlled areas after the Islamists’ health ministry insisted on controlling the budget and salaries for medical workers. One aid worker whose organization ceased to operate in ISIS areas in early 2014 claimed ISIS demanded 25 to 30 percent cuts of all aid resources brought into their areas. He stressed that the politicization of aid is a twofold issue: militias like ISIS trying to control aid to gain credibility, and international NGOs and donors frantically questioning the respondent’s organization constantly to make sure their work is not

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15 Interviews with several aid workers in Gaziantep, April 2016.



benefiting ISIS in any way—even by making conditions for civilians living under their control more tolerable.<sup>16</sup> Organizations working in non-government controlled territories usually begin work after reaching agreements with local councils and security assurances, which are typically obtained through these councils from the dominant militias in the area. They sometimes transfer the risk to local trucking companies.

As one aid worker summed it up: every side “wants political gains out of aid operations.” This complex situation (veiled and not-so-veiled security threats, donors’ conditionality, and manipulation and threats from militias and the government) pushes organizations who work in ISIS-controlled or in Kurdish areas to either withdraw or keep a very low profile, which is at odds with their need for publicity and fundraising. Working in these areas also involves huge risks to the lives and safety of aid workers.

On the other hand, NGOs that are operating in the north cannot break the siege imposed by various militias on pro-government areas. One NGO manager summarily dismissed the possibility of working there.

*These besieging groups which provide security assurances for our work in all other areas under their control would label us as traitors if we only dare to raise the possibility of providing for these . . . [pro-government] villages. . . . If I dare take a convoy there, it means Jibhat al-Nusra would bar my organization from working in any area under their control.*<sup>17</sup>

Another aid worker pointed out that his organization was challenged by its own staff members, who did not want to help Shabiha or pro-government paramilitary thugs in Kafraya and Fuaa.<sup>18</sup>

According to one seasoned Syrian medical aid manager, humanitarian organizations have had to face security threats; negotiate with armed militias, the government, and local councils; and grapple with donor restrictions on where and with whom they can operate in Syria since 2012.

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16 Interviews in Gaziantep, April 19, 2016.

17 Interviews with an NGO manager in Gaziantep, April 18, 2016.

18 Interview with an NGO manager in Gaziantep, April 19, 2016.

*In every operation I have 15 various parties to worry about as both donors and militias question aid workers on the ground why they are assisting one side or the other and would not let them provide assistance easily to enemy groups or the other camp.<sup>19</sup>*

### **Food as a Weapon**

What is the result of this government policy and these militia tactics, with which aid agencies on the ground are often forced to play along? Access to basic necessities, most importantly food, becomes severely limited and exorbitantly expensive, especially in government-besieged areas. Traders and smugglers also exploit the situation all the time. A few kilometers away from Damascus, the average food prices are many times more expensive than in the capital, whose army and allied militias impose the siege. According to the WFP's regular vulnerability assessment maps:

*In May, Darayya continued to record the highest cost for a standard food basket: SYP 575,700—5.6 percent higher than in April and over twenty times the cost in Damascus. . . . In Madamiyet Elsham, fresh bread is only available when it could be smuggled in, costing more than SYP 1600/bundle (32 times higher than in Damascus). This price has increased by 13 percent since April and by 71 percent compared with six months ago. (WFP VAM 2016:5–6)*

In this way, the aid operations inadvertently turn the government-controlled areas into the only relatively viable governing order capable of ruling the country, while undermining the opposition-controlled areas. This disregards the principles of impartiality and neutrality by which the aid agencies are supposed to work. This unwilling collusion of the aid agencies is taking place because the third pillar of their work, independence, has been severely compromised.

### **The Dilemma of Aid Managers?**

Setting aside higher politics and manipulation by big donors and Security Council permanent members, how do middle-level aid managers on the ground reach and justify their everyday decisions? Their logic is simple and betrays the fact that aid workers on the ground are aware of

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19 Interview in Gaziantep, April 19, 2016.

the intricacies of instrumentalization and join the game of manipulation in a pragmatic way more often than not. They do not necessarily do this out of expediency and opportunism; sometimes it seems to be the best way to help as many needy people as possible and to save lives, regardless of the damaging medium- to long-term effects or harmful, even if unintended, consequences.

Syrian aid managers interviewed for this chapter argued that the government controlled the majority of the population in need and that this government can, as it has abundantly proven, curtail access. The field managers and their superiors in New York, Geneva, and Rome are then faced with the tough choice of whether to stand fast and refuse to be manipulated for political ends but risk jeopardizing aid shipments to hundreds of thousands of people in areas under government control. Without government permission to access besieged areas, the safety of shipments and aid workers will be at grave risk, they say. In its own evaluation of operations in Syria, the WFP management there said: “As a United Nations agency, WFP’s role in delivering food to the maximum number of people in need was best served by maintaining relations with the Syrian Government and negotiating access” (Drummond et al. 2015:viii).

What aid managers have done is, in their opinion, the best under the circumstances, even if it unintentionally allows the Syrian government to use food aid as a weapon. This ‘pragmatic’ UN approach was rejected by over a hundred Syrian doctors and aid workers who sent a scathing letter to the UN humanitarian coordinator on January 13, 2016. They concluded:

*For many of us in Syria, the UN has turned from a symbol of hope into a symbol of complicity. Two decades ago, in Srebrenica, we saw what happens when UN peacekeepers get dictated to by war criminals. Today in Syria, it seems to be the turn of UN humanitarians.<sup>20</sup>*

### **The Case of Iraq: From Convergence to Subservience**

The WFP started preparing for a war in Iraq in late 2002, months before Washington launched it. When the massive humanitarian operation took place in the spring of 2003, the WFP consumed 75 percent of the total humanitarian resources for this year.

<sup>20</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4Tij54YuM0qeHFZWWhfYTI1cUZzZGREbkd6VmZXXNjhPSXY4/view>

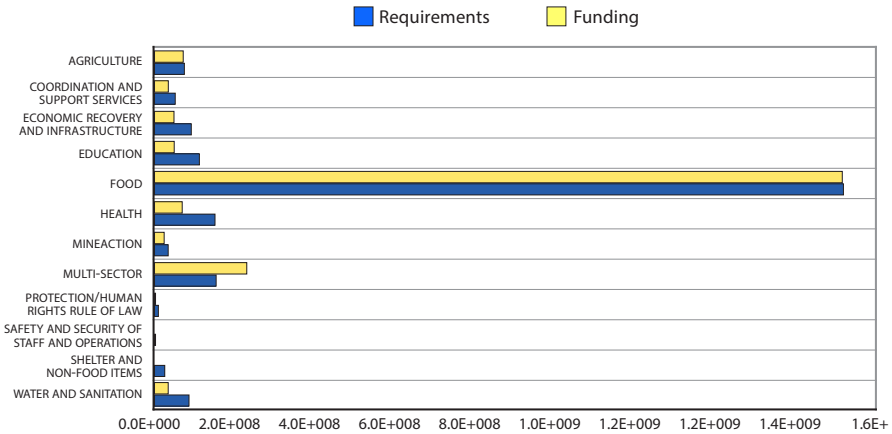
Only two years earlier, in 2001, the WFP had worked closely with the US government to coordinate with the US-led military on a massive aid operation in Afghanistan. Many humanitarian aid agencies in Afghanistan had worked closely with the U.S.-led coalition through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which comprised military forces working with civilians, including private contractors, to implement humanitarian and development aid operations (Walker and Maxwell 2008:75).

Like the massive WFP undertaking in Afghanistan, the Iraq operation was also largely funded by the US through USAID and by the UK through DfID (Department for International Development).<sup>21</sup> The Iraq operation, even more than the Afghanistan one, was a culmination of what British secretary of state for international development Clare Short described in 1997 as the ‘New Humanitarianism,’ which “recognized that all aid is political and that some of the ideals of the classical humanitarianism were a little old fashioned (none more so than the cherished classical ideal of neutrality)” (Walker and Maxwell 2008:73). In 2001, US Secretary of State Colin Powell called the humanitarian operations by US NGOs in Afghanistan a “force multiplier” in the fight against terrorism. These NGOs were under political and legal pressure to ensure continued funding from western donors that were involved in the war on terror. The independence of these NGOs became severely undermined in the process (Walker and Maxwell 2008:74).

Humanitarian aid to Iraq in 2003 totaled US \$2 billion, 85 percent of which came from the US, the UK, and unobligated funds for the Security Council’s Oil for Food (OFF) program that the Security Council decided to allocate to the humanitarian operation (UN OCHA Financial Tracking Services, n.d.). About 75 percent of all this money simply went to food aid—over US \$1.5 billion—while protection and human rights received 0.2 percent, or US \$4.7 million. The sheer size of the Iraq appeal and the massive media campaigns by aid agencies to raise funds (to make the operation look more multilateral rather than merely funded by the aggressors) lost these agencies even more credibility, especially in a region

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21 As a WFP staff member in both operations I was privy to several meetings and exchanges with the two organizations. USAID kept an office for its staff within the WFP’s office for a while in Islamabad. All donor figures for the WFP can be accessed at [www.wfp.org](http://www.wfp.org).



NOTE: "Funding" means Contributions + Commitments

*Pledge: a non-binding announcement of an intended contribution or allocation by the donor. ("Uncommitted pledge" on these tables indicates the balance of original pledges not yet committed.)*

*Commitment: creation of a legal, contractual obligation between the donor and recipient entity, specifying the amount to be contributed.*

*Contribution: the actual payment of funds or transfer of in-kind goods from the donor to the recipient entity.*

Figure 2. Consolidated appeal: Iraq crisis 2003. Requirements, contributions, and pledges by sector  
(Source: UN OCHA Financial Tracking Services, as of February 7, 2017, at [https://ftsarchive.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha\\_R3sum\\_A605\\_\\_19\\_January\\_2017\\_\(02\\_30\).pdf](https://ftsarchive.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha_R3sum_A605__19_January_2017_(02_30).pdf))

that had always viewed Iraq as a rich country thrown into poverty, not only because of the follies of its leaders, but even more because of the US-led sanctions and blockade since 1991.

The WFP involvement in Iraq goes back to the mid 1990s with the establishment of the Oil for Food (OFF) program, under which Iraq, suffering from the devastating impact of five years of draconian sanctions after it invaded Kuwait in 1990, was allowed to sell a certain amount of its oil production to procure basic humanitarian supplies, including food and medicine, under UN supervision.<sup>22</sup> The WFP was responsible for food distribution on behalf of the government of Iraq

<sup>22</sup> The official UN information on the OFF can be accessed at <https://www.un.org/depts/oip/background/index.html>.

in the three semi-autonomous, predominantly Kurdish northern provinces through a chain of some 11,000 food agents, while WFP staff members observed the government distribution of food in the center and south through some 44,358 food agents. The role of the nearly 40 WFP observers was to provide data on the movement of commodities from warehouses and silos to beneficiaries and information on household food security.<sup>23</sup>

When the war became almost certain in the winter of 2002–2003, especially after Washington started negotiations within the Security Council in a failed attempt to obtain international legitimacy for invading Iraq to dismantle its alleged arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, aid agencies approached the U.S.-led coalition in contingency meetings through diplomatic channels to plan the humanitarian response. One of the leading humanitarian aid agencies operating in Iraq prepared a US \$800 million contingency plan and shared it with the US administration.<sup>24</sup>

A few days after the US invasion on March 20, 2003, the first food commodities procured by the WFP arrived in Iraq. The first distributions of wheat flour started in April. In May, the distributions included rations of wheat flour, rice, pulses, oil, and detergents. The WFP was simply reproducing the monthly rations the government used to distribute.<sup>25</sup>

The WFP's role in the OFF program gave many Iraqis the impression that the UN humanitarian observers were responsible for the sanctions as well as for the occasional poor quality of the food rations, about which they regularly complained. These grievances ignored the facts that it was the Iraqi government that procured the food, and that the sanctions were imposed by the Security Council. The general public, justifiably, does not differentiate between the political and the humanitarian arms of the UN, while the WFP observers have never publicly pointed out the low food quality. The WFP agreed to play this OFF role

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23 The WFP issued regular reports on its work in Iraq under the OFF program. The information in this paragraph comes from a 1997 report which can be accessed at <http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/wfp-emergency-report-no-23-1997-iraq>.

24 Two separate UN officials confirmed to me that the WFP proposal was shared with the US government. The plan was shelved after objections within the WFP senior management team out of concern for appearing publicly as a part of the overall US strategy.

25 Regular WFP reports during the 1990s and 2000s, including 2003, can be found at <http://www.un.org/Depts/oip/sector-food.html>.

for operational interests and to maintain good relations with its largest donors (the US contributed more than half of WFP resources in the 1990s). The WFP operation in Iraq also created a lot of jobs and earned the organization a handsome overhead charge. The WFP teams withdrew just before the bombing started in March 2003, and then returned in April after the intense military operations were over to closely cooperate with the invading powers, without even bothering to explain to Iraqis the circumstances and the reasons for their withdrawal and the purpose of their redeployment.<sup>26</sup> This raised more suspicions about their allegiance and cast doubts on their neutrality and independence.

Before the US invasion it was difficult but not impossible to communicate with the Iraqi people through the BBC Radio's Arabic Service or the increasingly available regional Arab TV stations such as Al Jazeera, but UN agencies never really bothered to seriously invest in such efforts. After the invasion, it was even easier to communicate with the Iraqi people as local media platforms mushroomed. But the UN communication plans systematically ignored local audiences or relegated them to a very low priority. Of the four spokespersons who were active on behalf of UN humanitarian agencies (OCHA, WFP, UNICEF, and UNHCR), I was the only one who spoke Arabic, and I was often under pressure from headquarters to pay more attention to the international media for fundraising purposes or to send messages back to major donors or political allies in the west.

The US invasion of Iraq was not sanctioned by the UN, and it was seen as illegitimate by many Iraqis and Arabs in the wider region. The 'short leash' on which various aid agencies were held by donor governments who were party to the conflict were obvious to regional observers (Donini, Minear, and Walker 2004:192).

The WFP's work in Iraq under the OFF program, especially after the US invasion, could not unequivocally be categorized as a principled humanitarian undertaking. Even before the full disintegration of the Saddam regime in April 2003, the WFP had started plans to become the procurement and logistics consultant to the occupying power, the US-dominated Coalition Provisional Authority, to ensure the continuation of the massive public distribution system and avoid widespread

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<sup>26</sup> Most of the information in this section is gleaned from conversations with WFP colleagues in the early 2000s.

public discontent. This cast a long shadow on the alleged humanitarian nature of the WFP's work. There was practically no humanitarian crisis in large parts of the country. Even if the agency had not been there, there could have been some hardship but a for-profit contractor could probably have done most of the job. This 'fictional' humanitarianism was motivated by the WFP's operational and political priorities, but it exposed the widening gap between its work and the humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence even further.<sup>27</sup>

Humanitarian assistance in Iraq became a "central tenet of the hearts and minds component of current western counter-insurgency warfare doctrine. . . . It presents both an opportunity and a risk for humanitarians—it has led to vastly bigger budgets for humanitarian work but the money comes at a high risk to the independence and credibility of the agency that accepts it" (Walker and Maxwell 2008:75).

### **Depoliticized Professionalism**

In 2003, the WFP had amazing logisticians and planners, who were able to move half a million tons of food from overseas and distribute them throughout Iraq every month. However, it lacked any nuanced reading of their context: the dominant local perceptions, the expectations, and the fast-shifting political sands. Such a reading would not have necessarily prevented terrorist attacks, but it might have permitted better decision making on communications, security, and programming. An aid worker needs technical expertise (nutrition, logistics, etc.), but also needs to be part anthropologist, economist, and security specialist, and to understand the local context culturally, linguistically, and above all, politically. But such well-rounded, informed, and knowledgeable aid workers do not come in abundance—to state it mildly. Technical professionalism is indispensable for the humanitarian effort but never sufficient. Ignoring other skills and the local knowledge can be worse than counterproductive.

Political compliance, donor pressure, organizational inertia, and the obsession about growth all contributed to the instrumentalization of the WFP's operation in Iraq. Aid agencies often do things because they have done them before the same way or because it would

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<sup>27</sup> For a thorough discussion of UN agencies implicated in the Iraq operation, see Donini, Minear, and Walker (2004).



help grow their budgets and footprint. “The budget of single agencies began to rival the entire global spending on humanitarian action a mere decade or two earlier and in many cases exceed the annual budgets of many least developed countries” (Walker and Maxwell 2008:73). The WFP raised US \$1.7 billion in 2000, US \$1.9 billion in 2001 (the year of its Afghanistan operation), and US \$3.6 billion in 2003 (the year of the Iraq operation; in this year over 40 percent of the WFP budget went to Iraq).<sup>28</sup> This means the organization doubled its size in only three years. It took another 12 years for WFP to almost double its budget again.

## Conclusion

The consequences of aid politicization can be approached from two different perspectives. It can be seen as a blessing, whereby governments are integrating more humanitarian concerns into their foreign policies, culminating with the principle of humanitarian intervention or the Responsibility to Protect, as was the case with Libya in 2011 and the Balkans in the 1990s. On the other hand, politicization can lead to extreme instrumentalization, as we have seen in the cases of Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Syria.

Instrumentalization of food aid, and of aid operations in general, is in fact an old phenomenon.

*Manipulation is in the DNA of humanitarian action. Politicization and manipulation go with the territory. . . . Humanitarian assistance has prolonged wars (Biafra) and provided a lifeline for genocidal or abusive regimes (Cambodia, North Korea); from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, by way of Vietnam, Central America and Somalia, it has been used as a tool to advance Western agendas, as a band-aid to contain festering (political) sores, as a way of “doing something” other than handwringing or looking the other way. . . . Aid actors themselves have not been immune from using their presence and power to advance their own (or their sponsors’) political agendas or to jostle for position and funds in the increasingly competitive political economy of the humanitarian enterprise. (Donini 2012:246)*

<sup>28</sup> WFP annual reports can be found at [http://www.wfp.org/policy-resources/corporate?type=38&ctid\\_2=all&ctid\\_4=all](http://www.wfp.org/policy-resources/corporate?type=38&ctid_2=all&ctid_4=all).

There has never been a golden age for humanitarianism. States are not the only ventriloquists. In the late 1980s, the UNHCR started to lose support and funding, entering the 1990s with people questioning its very existence. Then UNHCR chief Sadako Ogata said that the organization “should not give up on a project just because it does not fit into traditional schemes. . . . In order to be financed in a highly competitive environment, UNHCR must develop new, interesting approaches to fulfill its core mandate” (Barnett 2011:208). And this indeed took place as the UNHCR started to work on preventive and in-country protection under pressure from countries that no longer wanted to receive refugees. This was a gigantic change for an organization whose mandate had previously been to care for refugees once they crossed borders, not to help them when they were displaced within their own country. But by moving to work inside countries in which people were fleeing the persecution of authorities or militias, the UNHCR often had to work with these very authorities, or at least gain their permission. It also had to start working on other aspects of prevention, including human rights, democratization, and even market stabilization in terms of program planning. The WFP’s trajectory is not much different.

Aid work has always been politicized to one degree or another, if we take this to mean the influence of factors beyond the narrowly defined needs of the assisted, but this politicization has deepened and broadened since the end of the Cold War as governments increasingly and selectively embraced human rights and humanitarian intervention as part of the driving principles of their foreign policy. This provides the humanitarian industry with opportunities to influence decisions that would have been impossible in the past, such as the intervention in Libya in 2011, but also puts them at the mercy of much larger powers that can use them in wars of choice, such as the invasion of Iraq in 2003 or the Syrian civil war since 2012.

*Such humanitarianism, tagged along with western strategy, or playing along with one or more parties to the conflict will lose credibility in those parts of the world where the west is least impartial and will be seen as a tool of western interests and culture. . . . Aid will become a tool of self interest. (Vaux 2001:204)*

This is a very fitting description of what happened in Iraq in 2003 and is being repeated in Syria, notwithstanding the exaggerated focus on the west. Figure 1 shows the complexity and multiple interactions among all relevant actors, each of which is part of the processes of manipulation.

This chapter has shown that instrumentalization was not crudely imposed on the WFP, but sometimes actively sought by the organization for the purpose of institutional preservation. This is why, over the past 20 years, in complex ways and forms, the organization has moved away from general food distribution for the needy, now only used in the early phase of an emergency, into using food as a tool for ‘development,’ especially in protracted emergency situations. Food for work, food for education, food for training, and food for asset creation all became fashionable interventions to make the WFP look like an organization that is interested in the root causes of conflict and in intervening to address them, rather than only dealing with the symptoms. But this apparently simple move ultimately means also entering the political fray in full force and adopting positions on governance, political reform, reconstruction, and peacebuilding. This means the WFP and other organizations that have taken a similar route had to be involved in programs such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of militias, return of refugees and displaced people, recovery of decimated communities, rebuilding basic agricultural infrastructure, supporting land reform, and many other thoroughly political endeavors. More often than not, they would have to take sides in complex issues where donors, recipient governments, and affected communities never have one and the same view. Taking sides in such issues is much more a political than a technical decision.

The UN’s credibility as a humanitarian actor has suffered a series of grievous blows since the early 1990s, and specifically in Somalia. But it continued to bleed and become less and less impartial from then on. Bosnia (1991–1995), Rwanda (1994), Kosovo (1996–1998), and Afghanistan (2001) are all stark cases of the evolution of the integration of humanitarian aid into political and military plans. This increasing integration was carried out by both design and interest by all parties involved, including a majority of aid agencies.

Iraq in 2003 is blatant case of the integration of humanitarian action into the political plans of a warring party to ensure stability in the transition period, while Syria is the ultimate case in which the aid actors,

especially on the food-aid front, have become effectively integrated in the military strategies of the regime as well as its external opponents (primarily the US and other western donors). The beneficiaries themselves and the local opposition militias occupy an insignificant position at the decision-making table. In both cases, institutional preservation and maintaining a seat at the table with the big boys were major drivers for some aid agencies. From that perspective, it was always more important to see to donors' needs and maintain a relationship with the governments and authorities on the ground rather than stick to the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence.

In order to properly analyze the humanitarian enterprise, we must always look at its multiple, crisscrossing relationships with the liberal states, dominant market forces, and rule-of-law institutions (Barnett 2011:162). This also means looking at donors (largely northern and western), corporations, local non-governmental organizations, recipient states and communities, and aid bureaucracies. This viewpoint will help us understand how humanitarian actors are influenced, by what tools, under what pressures, and how they and other actors from other quarters all take part in the instrumentalization of humanitarian aid.

A major barrier between humanitarian actors and political instrumentalization cracked and then fell down in the 1990s due to major global political and economic shifts. Relief or emergency aid was reconstrued as part of a continuum on which peacebuilding, peacekeeping, conflict prevention, human rights, democratization, and emergency aid coexist and must harmonize their efforts. This forced aid actors to pay attention to highly political considerations, especially those of their donors and regulators, as they designed and implemented their relief programs.

Humanitarianism is made up of "ethics and politics, of solidarity and diversity, of emancipation and domination," and its history reflects "much about the changing global order in which we live" (Barnett 2011:18). What is happening in Syria now is yet another example of the articulation of power politics and humanitarian aid in such a way that the effort has sometimes hurt the very people it is meant to help.

Despite all of these trends, instrumentalization is not an inexorable force. A large number of aid workers, researchers, media, and members of the vulnerable groups themselves are now far more aware of the politics of humanitarian aid, thanks to more established transparency projects

(the Sphere Project and the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership are good examples). The disclosure of information by donors to the media and to receiving communities, the increasing scrutiny from the media, and the access of vulnerable groups to social media all reinforce this trend. These innovations, brought about by several humanitarian actors who are well aware of the shortcomings of the systems and the pitfalls of wild politicization and integration, are probably the main hope for a progressive reform of the humanitarian aid system. Even when new normative frameworks for humanitarian aid do not decrease the instrumentalization, they document and expose it.

As Barnett hoped, humanitarians and all those involved in this gigantic system would indeed learn their lessons well if the ensuing evaluation reports, new codes of conduct, and impact assessment lead to new systems of accountability (Barnett 2011:217). This will happen when aid workers and agencies more openly defend humanitarian principles in their own right and not because they would serve this or that political agenda; when the recipients exercise more leverage; when financing systems become less western-dominated; and when influential donors are more effectively firewalled from governance in the aid system. There is no certainty that these developments will take place soon, but there are enough signs to indicate that humanitarianism as we know it now is not sustainable.

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