The Unintended Consequences of Emergency Food Aid: Neutrality, Sovereignty and Politics in the Syrian Civil War (2012-2015)

Abstract

This paper dissects the role of emergency food aid during the current Syrian conflict. Drawing on Autesserre's concept of frames and Agamben's theory of sovereignty, we argue that the neutrality frame, which undergirds the majority of humanitarian relief efforts in Syria, obfuscates emergency food aid's impact, both on sovereign power relations and local political dynamics. Through close scrutiny of various case studies, we trace how humanitarian efforts reinforce the bases of sovereign politics while contributing to a host of what Pandolfi (1998) terms "mobile sovereignties." We then analyze how and why ostensibly neutral emergency food aid has unintentionally assisted the Assad regime by facilitating its control over food, which it uses to buttress support and foster compliance. The article concludes by examining the political and military impact of emergency food aid during Syria's war before discussing possible implications for the humanitarian enterprise more broadly.

Emergency food aid is most often depicted as the compassionate response of the international community to natural disasters and 'complex emergencies.' In popular discourse, humanitarian relief efforts are regarded as benevolent and benign practices that seek to improve the lot of the distressed. Scholars and students of humanitarian aid during wartime have problematized this narrative, as well as the alleged outcomes that help legitimize its manifestations. Some have argued that humanitarian assistance, through its diversion, larceny or misallocation, can strengthen the position of warring parties.[1] Others have described how the strategic inter-linking of aid and external intervention can serve foreign policy objectives or neoliberal agendas.[2] In situations deemed less geopolitically significant, aid distribution is said to have encouraged—even legitimized—international political inaction.[3] During the Syrian conflict, emergency food distributions have had an array of unintended consequences. Paradoxically, aid has accomplished exactly the opposite of what its proponents and distributors, at least in public, claim. Despite pretensions to neutrality, our observations and analysis suggest that foodstuffs distributed by UN agencies and most humanitarian organizations have contributed to iterations of sovereignty and political outcomes at odds with their own neutral aspirations.

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[1] Mary B Anderson, *Do no harm: how aid can support peace--or war* (New York: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999); Alexander De Waal, *Famine crimes: politics & the disaster relief industry in Africa* (Indiana University Press, 1997); Sarah Kenyon Lischer, 'Collateral damage: humanitarian assistance as a cause of conflict', *International Security* 28.1, 2003, pp. 79-109; Neil Narang, 'Assisting uncertainty: how humanitarian aid can inadvertently prolong civil war', *International Studies Quarterly* 59.1, March 2015, pp. 184-195.

[2] Mark Duffield, *Development, security and unending war: governing the world of peoples* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 42-51; Nils Gilman, 'Preface: militarism and humanitarianism', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 3.2, 2012, pp. 173-178.

[3] David Keen, *Complex emergencies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 117-118; Ngaire Woods, 'The shifting politics of foreign aid', *International Affairs* 81.2 (2005): 393-409.

Why has this been the case? How has humanitarian aid become enmeshed in sovereignty and politics when it seeks to avoid these arenas categorically? Aspirations to neutrality and practices claiming to uphold this principle help explain much of the story.[4] Although ostensibly non-governmental, humanitarian organizations came to be perceived as extensions of Western agendas while working in conjunction with occupation forces in Afghanistan and Iraq.[5] Many groups became absorbed in a web of mutual interests and overlapping objectives with donor states, recipient governments and military forces.[6] Partially as a result of these negative experiences, UN aid agencies and various humanitarian groups have re-embraced the language of neutrality that predominated during the Cold War period and early 1990s. Organizational interests are also critical to neutrality's re-emergence. The need to appeal to donors and secure funding is a permanent concern.[7] What was initially perceived to be a weakness in humanitarian operations—the lack of engagement with local political processes as well as their inability to address the fundamental concerns undergirding conflict—has become a

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[4] The debate over humanitarian assistance in times of conflict is far from new. The **1864 Geneva,** 1899 Hague, 1907 **Hague**, 1949 **Geneva** and 1977 **Additional Protocols to 1949 Geneva** Conventions all wrestled with the issue of neutral **or impartial** relief, **or some version of the concept** , for civilians in times of conflict. Our analysis focuses on the most recent iteration of this debate, and its potential implications for the Syrian conflict.

[5] Michael Barnett, 'Humanitarianism transformed', *Perspectives on Politics* 3.04, 2005, p. 724; Antonio Donini, 'Principles, politics and pragmatism in the international response to the Afghan crisis', in Donini, A., N. Niland, and K. Wermester, ed. , *Nation-building unraveled?: aid, peace and justice in Afghanistan* (Bloomfield CT: Kumarian Press, 2004); Fatima Ayub and Sari Kouvo. 'Righting the course? Humanitarian intervention, the war on terror and the future of Afghanistan', *International Affairs* 84.4 (2008): 641-657.

[6] The targeted killing of aid workers in Afghanistan and Iraq is a poignant and tragic demonstration of these developments. Didier Fassin, 'Heart of humanness: the moral economy of humanitarian intervention', in Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, ed., *Contemporary states of emergency: the politics of military and humanitarian interventions* (New York: Zone Book, 2010); Duffield, Development, security and unending war*, p. 28.

[7] Alexander Cooley and James Ron, 'The NGO scramble: organizational insecurity and the political economy of transnational action', International Security 27.1, 2002, pp. 5-39.

strength for many foreign patrons.[8] Emergency food aid is increasingly seen as a less forceful—or more benevolent—form of intervention, one that tacitly avoids the complexities of military and diplomatic engagement. **Given the geopolitical disagreements surrounding the Syrian conflict, most donors fund food aid only if aid groups present themselves as working outside the political sphere.** With the exception of ICRC and the few others who never abandoned their Dunantist principles and aspirations,[9] the renewed embrace of the language of neutrality **by the UN and the largest humanitarian organizations operating in Syria[10]** has been as enthusiastic as the previous accommodation with military interventions and the reconstruction of 'failed states.'[11] The results in Syria have been less controversial but equally significant.

We use the term humanitarian organization or group to denote collectively those bodies and agencies that claim to operate according to the tenets of international humanitarian law from which they derive universal principles of humanitarian action so as to assist beneficiaries. Although most humanitarian actors consider themselves to be neutral, their understandings of the term vary considerably.[12] To counter the profusion of

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[8] De Waal, Famine crimes, p. 158; Zoe Marriage, 'Ambiguous agreements: aid in negotiating processes: introduction', *Conflict, Security & Development* 8.1, 2008, pp. 1-13.

[9] For more on how the ICRC distinguishes between neutrality in its day-to-day operations and 'absolute neutrality' in regards to aid's political impact, see Jean Pictet, 'The fundamental principles of the Red Cross', *International Review of the Red Cross* 19.210, 1979, pp. 130-149' and David P. Forsythe, *The humanitarians: the International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[10] There is a robust internal debate in the humanitarian community with regard to the position of neutrality and its role in the Syrian war. Some organizations, such as Doctors Without Borders (MSF), interpret neutrality and the humanitarian imperative far differently than some of their counterparts, going so as far as to take partisan stances. We have chosen to focus on the UN, ICRC and their implementing partners because they provide the vast bulk of the food aid delivered in Syria and receive the majority of donor funds.

[11]. Barnett, 'Humanitarianism transformed', p. 724; Mark Duffield, 'Governing the borderlands: decoding the power of aid', *Disasters* 25.4, 2001, pp. 308-320.

[12] Charlotte Ku and Joaquin Caceres Brun, 'Neutrality and the ICRC contribution to contemporary humanitarian operations', *International Peacekeeping* 10.1, 2003, pp. 56-72;

these differences, the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

compiled a set of "Principles of Humanitarian Action" in 2010 to guide the work of relief

agencies in conflict situations.[13] Along with humanity, impartiality and independence,

neutrality stands as one of the four key principles underpinning humanitarian action. For

OCHA, neutrality entails that "humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or

engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature."[14] OCHA

conceptualizes neutrality as both as an incontrovertible moral principle and a pragmatic

operational posture—which ostensibly allows humanitarian actors to gain access to

vulnerable individuals without undue interference in their operations. Although working

under separate **legal** mandates, the ICRC and Syrian Red Crescent (SARC), two of the

largest international and local humanitarian organizations operating in Syria, have

espoused positions similar to OCHA's precepts during the conflict.[15] Notwithstanding the

ICRC's unique legal standing and its emphasis on neutrality as an operational imperative

rather than a political norm, the group's food relief efforts in Syria have not aligned with

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Dietrich Schindler, 'Transformation in the law of neutrality since 1945' in A.J.M. Delissen and
G.J. Tanja, ed., *Humanitarian law of armed conflict – challenges ahead* (Dordrecht: Martinus
Nijhoff, 1991).
[13] 'OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles', UN OCHA, April 2010,
https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM_HumPrinciple_English.pdf, accessed 23
June 2015.
[14]'OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles', UN OCHA, May 2012,
https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf,
accessed 23 June 2015. **This definition is modelled on the Fundamental Principles of the Red
Cross, established in 1986 at the 25th International Conference of the Red Cross, Geneva.**
[15] 'Neutrality', International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies,
https://www.ifrc.org/en/who-we-are/vision-and-mission/the-seven-fundamental-
principles/neutrality/, accessed 23 June 2015; 'Mabādā al-ḥaraka' [Principles of the movement],
Syrian Red Crescent, http://sarc.sy/ar/%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A6-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9/, accessed 23 June 2015; 'Even
wars have limits', International Committee of the Red Cross,
https://www.icrc.org/en/document/syria-even-wars-have-limits, accessed 23 June 2015; Pierre
Krähenbühl, 'The ICRC's approach to contemporary security challenges: a future for independent
and neutral humanitarian action', *International Review of the Red Cross* 86:855, 2004, pp. 505-
514.

this distinction. Similar to other humanitarian groups, the organization presents itself as external to politics, bereft of power, and ethically chaste.

The vast majority of food aid distributed in Syria between 2012 and 2015 has been undergirded by what we call the 'frame' of neutrality. While seemingly benign, this 'frame'—defined as the collective, intersubjective understandings "people 'draw on' to construct roles and interpret objects"—has had a tangible impact.[16] It defines and maps social reality in powerful ways. Shared by key international and local humanitarian organizations as well as UN aid agencies, neutrality has shaped not only their understanding of the Syrian conflict, but also structured their interventions through the constraints, interests and approaches it constructs and promotes. This frame allows humanitarian practices to stand above and beyond the debates of ordinary politics. Aid workers we interviewed distinguished political intent, which they criticized, from political impact, which they hesitatingly, if at all, recognized. While advocates of neutrality as an operational principle claim that the concept is a crucial part of humanitarian aid's effectiveness, our observations suggest that proceeding as if emergency food aid had no impact on a war's outcome has far graver consequences. At the very least, it obscures aid's political-military impact and conceals involvement in the exercise of power.[17]

We begin by outlining the history and development of food-related welfare programs in Syria before describing how emergency food aid has become politicized through its intersection with these practices. We then discuss the concept of frames,

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[16] Karl E Weick, *Sensemaking in organizations* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 109; Séverine Autesserre, 'Hobbes and the Congo: frames, local violence, and international intervention', *International Organization* 63.02, 2009, pp. 250-51.

[17] David Campbell, 'Why fight: humanitarianism, principles and post-structuralism', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 27:3, 1998, pp. 497–521.

before applying it to the principle of neutrality that underpins most relief efforts. Following a brief discussion of Agamben's conception of sovereignty, we go on to assess the role food aid has played in sovereign power relations during the Syrian war. We theorize sovereignty as a necessarily tentative, always emergent and continually (re)produced political order, before illustrating how emergency food assistance has produced what Pandolfi terms "mobile sovereignties."[18] The article then analyzes the political and military impact of emergency food aid on the country's war through various cases-studies. We argue that the neutrality frame obfuscates its impact, both on sovereignty and on politics. Pretending otherwise has aided the Assad regime by giving it increased control over food, which it uses to buttress support and foster compliance. We conclude with a brief summary of our arguments before contemplating the potential implications of the neutrality frame, and the practices it legitimizes, for emergency food aid and the Syrian conflict. Our analysis draws on more than 100 in-depth interviews with aid workers, local volunteers and Syrian stakeholders conducted during a twenty-four month period between 2013 and 2015. Almost all our contacts inside the country asked to remain anonymous in view of the personal and professional risks involved in providing information on the sensitive topics we discussed. Due to these constraints, we use pseudonyms and only fully reference data obtained through public sources and on-the-record interviews. Information and anonymous quotes that are not fully referenced come from confidential interviews and participant observation. To bolster our claims, we

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[18] Mariella Pandolfi , 'L'industrie humanitaire: une souveraineté mouvante et supracoloniale. Réflexion sur l'expérience des Balkans', *Multitudes* 3, November 2000, pp. 97-105; Mariella Pandolfi, 'Contract of mutual (in)difference: governance and the humanitarian apparatus in contemporary Albania and Kosovo', *Indiana Journal of Global. Legal Studies.* 10, 2003, pp. 369–81.

complement our findings with those of various reputable news sources. Undoubtedly, several lacunae remain and further research is urgently needed.

Welfare and the Politics of Food

Provision of subsidized food to Syrians was the result of tacit socio-political agreements between ruling authorities and civilians. Government intervention in food distribution expanded with the British-led establishment of the Middle East Supply Centre (MESC) in 1940. Allied forces could ill afford an expansion of food riots seen in Cairo, Beirut and Damascus after the onset of conflict in Europe. Within a year, the MESC's reach extended into almost every facet of Middle Eastern life.[19] Under the auspices of the Spears Mission,[20] an agency known as the Wheat and Cereals Office created an integrated system of grain collection, transport and distribution that prefigured the apparatus of food distribution instituted by leaders of post-war Syria.[21] After the conflict, consumers became co-producers in systems of welfare provision, demanding from political authorities similar forms of support to those that had been provided during World War II. These included subsidies on basic foodstuffs to assist urban consumers and on agricultural inputs to help rural producers, many of which were adopted and expanded by subsequent Ba'thist governments (1963-).[22] Despite the gradual and largely failed

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[19] Robert Vitalis and Steven Heydemann, 'War, Keynesianism, and colonialism: explaining state-market relations in the postwar Middle East', pp. 100-147 in Steven Heydemann, ed., *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000).
[20] In Syria and Lebanon, the MESC operated under the auspices of the Spears Mission, an organization established by Britain to administer the country's wartime relationship with the French mandates in the Levant.
[21] Vitalis and Heydemann, 'War, Keynesianism, and colonialism**'**, pp. 142-147.
[22] For more on Syria's post-war social pact, see Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria*, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1999).

liberalization of Syria's economy over the past two decades,[23] the legacies of the Ba'th Party's state-led development model persisted through various welfare policies aimed at ensuring food security. The most prominent and long-lasting example was the government's subsidy of *khubz 'arabi* (Arabic bread). This and other welfare programs helped ensure modest levels of sustenance and proved crucial to minimizing public unrest and fostering loyalty to the Assad-led regime throughout the last forty years. Why so? Welfare—defined as the direct distribution or indirect facilitation of services, programs and infrastructure intended to promote the wellbeing and security of recipients— can foster good will, establish a reputation of reliability and signal a desire and capacity to govern successfully.[24] Providing services helps build community, signals membership in a polity while offering material security and psychological comfort to beneficiaries. In brief, welfare provision is political. If this is true during peacetime, welfare's importance is heightened during war, when the contingent nature of state authority and its corollaries become increasingly overt.

Unsurprisingly, Syria's conflict has dramatically altered peacetime welfare arrangements. For example, the General Establishment for Cereal Processing and Trade (HOBOOB)—an agency of the Syrian Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade responsible for wheat procurement, flour milling and timely bread distribution—has had to alter its strategies in response to damaged wheat silos, destroyed flourmills, poor harvests,

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[23] Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: from 'authoritarian upgrading' to revolution?' *International Affairs* 88.1 (2012), pp. 95-113.
[24] Melani Cammett and Lauren M. Maclean, 'Introduction: the political consequences of non-state social welfare in the Global South', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 46:1, 2011, pp. 1-21.

transportation impediments and military operations.[25] Flourmills and bakeries throughout the country are either closed or operating far below capacity.[26] Notwithstanding these pressures, the Syrian government has done its best to maintain food supplies and the bread subsidy in areas it controls. In addition, countless rebel groups—each with their own agenda—have established informal social pacts with the people they govern, offering an array of welfare services to generate popular support or acquiescence. Humanitarian assistance, due to its overlap with welfare practices, is closely imbricated in these processes.

Emergency food aid's impact lies not only in these intangible dimensions, but also in the very real resources it provides in a context characterized by scarcity. When compared to the Assad regime's expenditures on subsidies, the amount of food distributed by humanitarian organizations is noteworthy (see Tables 1 and 2).[27] In 2014, donor-pooled funds managed by OCHA provided food assistance to an average of 4.43 million people each month.[28] In 2015, the UN, ICRC and Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) expect to support 8.7 million civilians in Syria with food assistance.[29] Given the

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[25] Michael Westlake, 'The Economics of Strategic Crops,' FAO, http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/y4890e/y4890e0e.htm, accessed 23 June 2015; 'Syria Faces Looming Draught', *Syria Relief and Development*, 29 April 2014, http://syriareliefanddevelopment.org/syria-faces-looming-drought/ accessed 23 June 2015.

[26] 'Syria allows UN to step up food aid', *Al Jazeera*, 16 January 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/2013116141212963604.html, accessed 23 June 2015.

[27] Nearly $7 billion dollars have been spent on food, shelter and emergency aid for Syrians inside and outside the country since 2012, 'Total funding to the Syrian crisis 2014', *UN OCHA*, http://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=special-syriancrisis&year=2014, accessed 23 June 2015.

[28] 'Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan: 2014', UN OCHA, http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/SHARP%20Sector%20Achievements%202014%20.pdf, accessed 23 June 2015.

[29] 'Syria 2015 Strategic Response Plan', UN OCHA, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2015_SRP_Syria_EN_AdvanceCopy_171214.pdf, accessed 23 June 2015.

size and scope of this intervention, how food distributions are organized and allocated

becomes a crucial question. Although some independent aid organizations operate in

Syria on their own accord, the largest international organizations involved in relief efforts

rely almost exclusively on Syrian partner agencies to deliver food aid. The WFP, the

largest UN operational agency organizing aid inside of Syria, and the ICRC, depend

heavily on SARC and 27 government-approved NGOs to reach areas they cannot access

due to security concerns and restrictions most often placed on them by the Syrian

government. Oversight on these distributions has been limited.[30] Since the dramatic

escalation of humanitarian aid efforts in September 2012 [from 540,000 people a month

in July to 1.5 million[31]] and again in early 2013 [to 2.5 million],[32] most food distributions

have been conducted through government-approved channels. Despite the political

preferences of the largest country donors and neutral aspirations of humanitarian

organizations, emergency food aid—organized through UN agencies and distributed by

local partners—has consistently benefitted the Assad regime.[33]

The UN has repeatedly documented how the Syrian government blocks the

delivery of food aid to civilians. It does so through bureaucratic restrictions that seek to

ensure that external resources assist the regime rather than opposition forces or those

[30] 'An Evaluation of WFP's Regional Response to the Syrian Crisis, 2011-2014', WFP, April 2015, http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/reports/wfp274337.pdf, accessed 23 June 2015.

[31] 'Syria: WFP scales up food distributions as humanitarian needs rise', WFP, 15 November 2012, http://www.wfp.org/stories/syria-wfp-scaling-food-distributions-humanitarian-needs-rise, accessed 23 June 2015.

[32] The latter increase occurred after an agreement between the Syrian government and the UN, which allowed the UN to partner with forty-four additional local NGOs, 'UN agency plans to scale up food assistance inside Syria', UN, 16 January 2013, http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43935#.VIrirvmSxB0, accessed 23 June 2015.

[33] 'Syria: defying security council on aid access', Human Rights Watch, 28 March 2014, http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/28/syria-defying-security-council-aid-access, accessed 23 June 2015; Najib Ghadbian, Syrian National Coalition letter to UNSC, 24 November 2014, http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/548545cc4.pdf, accessed 24 June 2015.

under their control.[34] UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's March 2014 report to the

UNSC noted how the regime's "lack of internal communication…result[s] in denial of

access or delays," which impede the entrance of aid into opposition-controlled areas.[35]

UN efforts to mitigate the Syrian government's influence over such distributions

eventually prompted the UNSC to bypass it. In July 2014, citing the fact that "previous

demands for aid access had not been heeded," the UNSC passed Resolution 2165

authorizing cross-border aid deliveries from Turkey and Jordan without the consent of the

Syrian government.[36] This suggests that access was previously being withheld for less

than genuine security concerns. Despite UNSC Resolution 2165, the WFP's fear that the

regime will cut off access to the civilians it already reaches—mainly in regime-held

territories but also in areas besieged by government forces—has limited the scale of its

cross-border deliveries.[37] As one external evaluation of the WFP put it, "management

confirmed that they judged that its interests in delivering food to the maximum number of

people in need are best served by maintaining close relations with the Syrian government

and negotiating behind the scenes over access."[38] As a result, assistance has been

concentrated in government-held areas, while other parts of the country are deemed

'inaccessible' or 'hard to reach' so as not to compromise claims to neutrality. Of the two

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[34] Colum Lynch, 'Syria's U.N. aid jam', *Foreign Policy,* 23 March 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/23/exclusive-syrias-u-n-aid-jam/, accessed 23 June 2015;
[35] UN SG Report to UNSC on implementation of Resolution 2139; Somini Sengupta, 'U.N. seeking more ways to distribute aid in Syria', *New York Times*, 17 May 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/world/middleeast/un-seeking-more-ways-to-distribute-aid-in-syria.html, accessed 8 March 2015.
[36] Of course, cross-border deliveries pre-dated the resolution, but they were not carried out or funded by UN agencies or others organizations espousing neutral humanitarianism. 'UNSC Resolution 2165', press release, UN, 14 July 2014, http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11473.doc.htm, accessed 29 August 2014.
[37] Colum Lynch, 'U.N.'s fear of angering Assad leaves gap in Syria aid effort', *Foreign Policy*, 30 December 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/30/u-n-s-fear-of-angering-assad-leaves-gap-in-syria-aid-effort/, accessed 23 June 2015.
[38] 'An Evaluation of WFP's Regional Response to the Syrian Crisis, 2011-2014', WFP.

million civilians in rebel-controlled areas the UN estimated it could assist after passing of UNSC Resolution 2165, food aid reached only 200,000 by the end of 2014.[39] Throughout the conflict, the regime has succeeded in pressuring humanitarian organizations to funnel food through its preferred channels. For Nigel Pont, Mercy Corps Regional Director for the Middle East, "The unmet needs remain huge—between the UN and NGO efforts, tens of thousands of civilians inside Syria are still not being reached."[40] Unsurprisingly, emergency food aid has had tangible consequences on military developments and the lives of civilians. Many of these are linked to the frame that underpins aid distribution.

The Frame of Neutrality: Obfuscations and Repercussions

Principles and practices of neutrality lie at the heart of the vast majority of humanitarian relief efforts in Syria. We dissect the principle of neutrality and its repercussions through the concept of 'frames.' Following Auteserre, we understand frames as a mechanism by which individuals and organizations categorize knowledge and interpret it.[41] They are social objects that are embedded in routines, practices, discourses and technologies, as well as institutions. They can include ideologies, paradigms and shared definitions of particular environments.[42] Frames neither pre-exist action nor respond solely to practice. Instead, they emerge from a dialectic relationship between discourse and experience, which are irreducible and fundamentally interconnected. One of the most relevant characteristics of frames is their ability to mold views of what is considered a problem, or a solution, by organizing and interpreting information in

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[39] Lynch, 'U.N.'s fear of angering Assad'.
[40] Lynch, 'U.N.'s fear of angering Assad'.
[41] Autesserre, 'Hobbes and the Congo', p. 250.
[42] Martha Finnemore, 'Norms, culture, and world politics: insights from sociology's institutionalism', *International Organization* 50:2, 1999, pp. 325-47.

specific ways.[43] For example, if the neutrality frame underlies humanitarian aid efforts, distributions will be considered apolitical and their engrossment in political processes avoidable.

The WFP has been adamant in its adherence to the principle of neutrality during the Syria conflict. "Our work with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and over a dozen local partners inside Syria is strictly humanitarian and beyond any political considerations," stated Mathew Hollingworth, the WFP's country director in Syria.[44] "As a neutral party to any conflict our goal is simple: to deliver food assistance to the whole of Syria, reaching anyone who needs it, regardless of where they are located," he said. The ICRC **in Damascus** espouses a similar stance: "Our core principles are impartiality, neutrality and independence, which means we want to help anyone who is vulnerable, in need or directly affected by the fighting."[45] When pressed on the possible co-optation of aid by the Syrian government, spokespeople and volunteers refused to countenance neutrality's inadvertent corollaries. None of the SARC or ICRC interviewees wished to respond to accusations of SARC's close relationship with the Assad regime.[46] The personal relations between state elites, SARC President Abdur Rahman Attar and other members of senior management were consistently denied or downplayed by 'neutral' aid workers. In contrast, a number of activist groups and members of Syrian civil society contest the neutrality frame's impact on aid efforts. For Abdulrahman Omar, a pediatrician from Hama who oversees primary health care centers for the Union of Syrian Medical Relief

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[43] Autesserre, 'Hobbes and the Congo', p. 254.

[44] Authors' interview with Matthew Hollingworth, WFP Syria country director, Amman, 9 November 2014.

[45] Authors' Skype interview with Ralph Hage, ICRC Damascus spokesperson, Amman, 29 October 2014.

[46] **In reality, the national societies that form part of the ICRC have varying amounts of independence from domestic governments, which differs from country to country.**

Organizations, "The world is either ignorant or ignoring the issue that the Red Crescent

in our country is political and has an agenda." He stated explicitly what most relief

workers interviewed preferred not to admit, "The Red Crescent in Syria is the

government."[47] This may not reflect the political preferences of SARC volunteers, who

predominantly come from the local communities in which they work; yet at the level of

executives who make sensitive funding and distribution decisions, the ties are well

documented.[48] One recently returned WFP employee, who requested anonymity, outlined

some of the compromises made 'on the ground': "Most aid is still subject to strict control

measures by the government, who also requests that it be distributed through state-

approved bodies such as SARC. I believe the government closely oversees if not

completely controls these organizations."[49]

Opposition activists, critical NGOs and prominent members of Syrian civil

society have similarly described how aid supplies are vetted and controlled by

administrative and military networks linked to the Assad regime. Islam Halabi, a Mercy

Corps employee based in Aleppo, described what he saw when visiting an IDP-camp in

government-controlled shelters near the University of Aleppo, "Unfortunately, the aid

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[47] Raja Abdulrahim, 'Humanitarian aid beyond the reach of many Syrians', *Los Angeles Times*, 29 March 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/2013/mar/29/world/la-fg-syria-new-aid-20130330, accessed 23 June 2015.

[48] Tam Hussein, 'UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent: a UN-holy alliance', *Huffington Post*, 28 March 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/tam-hussein/syria-united-nations_b_2947607.html, accessed 23 June 2015; Tam Hussein, 'Why is Britain using a suspect charity to deliver aid to Syria?', *New Internationalist*, 12 August 2014, http://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2014/06/12/syria-aid/, accessed 23 June 2015; David Kenner, 'Assad's war on the Red Crescent', *Foreign Policy*, 12 December 2012, http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/12/assads-war-ron-the-red-crescent/, accessed 12 April 2015; 'An Evaluation of WFP's Regional Response to the Syrian Crisis, 2011-2014', WFP.

[49] Authors' interview with anonymous WFP worker, London, 28 January 2015; For a similar assessment, see 'Letter to the Member States of the High Level Group on Syria', Doctors Without Borders, 18 December 2013, http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/news-stories/speechopen-letter/letter-member-states-high-level-group-syria, accessed 18 December 2014.

supplies going to regime areas are distributed to army members, Shabiha [pro-regime militias] and their followers. The aid does not reach those in need, other than young women."[50] In another interview, a pro-opposition activist in the western town of Al-Qusayr stated that, "Following the attacks of June 2013 when the Syrian army regained control of the city, I saw various soldiers distributing World Food Programme packages to local residents."[51] When rebel forces won control of government headquarters in Idlib province in 2015, they found Red Cross, Red Crescent and UN food packages in the offices of pro-regime forces.[52] "Look at how the UN helps the regime. These aid containers are inside the [regime base] and the UN's name is written on them," said a civilian in Jisr a-Shagour city. "Our children are dying from starvation and the regime forces destroy the bread [while keeping food aid for themselves]."[53] For Najib Ghadbian, the representative of the opposition Syrian National Coalition at the UN, the international

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[50] 'Syrian relief worker: regime siphons off humanitarian aid for fighters', *Syria Direct*, 28 April 2015, http://syriadirect.org/news/syrian-relief-worker-regime-siphons-off-humanitarian-aid-for-fighters/, accessed 23 June 2015.

[51] Authors' Skype interview with anonymous pro-opposition activist, Amman, 20 February 2014.

[52] 'Musā'adāt al-umum al-mutaḥada wa a-ṣalīb al-aḥmar al-mukhaṣaṣa lisūriyyīn fi thiknāt jaīsh al-naẓām bijisr a-shaghūr' [UN and Red Crescent aid allocated for Syrians found in regime army barracks in Jisr a-Shagour], *Souria Net*, 27 April 2015, https://www.alsouria.net/content/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B5%D8%B5%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AB%D9%83%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%BA%D9%88%D8%B1, accessed 23 June 2015; 'Humanitarian aid supplies once again found to be used to sustain Assad's war effort', press release, Syrian National Coalition, 22 May 2015, http://en.etilaf.org/press/humanitarian-aid-supplies-once-again-found-to-be-used-to-sustain-assad-s-war-effort.html, accessed 23 June 2015.

[53] Ibid.

body's failure to increase assistance to opposition-controlled territories "amounts to preferential treatment for regime-held areas and perpetuates the regime's starvation tactics and empowers the regime to continue to use food and medicine as a weapon of war."[54]

These dynamics are hardly unique to Syria—the history of food aid during 'complex emergencies' is littered with cases in which opposition forces and state authorities co-opt humanitarian aid for their own benefit.[55] Yet the neutrality frame preempts discussion of these developments. In their responses to our queries, aid workers reiterated the (non)political attitudes we encountered in the official statements and documents of the largest humanitarian organizations operating in Syria. Although critiques of relief efforts varied and off-the-record comments displayed interesting discrepancies, all the aid workers that we interviewed shared similar ideas regarding the role of emergency food aid. Their neutral intentions precluded the politicization of assistance. Political disputes, combat operations and misappropriation of supplies by military forces were described as part and parcel of everyday concerns. Navigating these obstacles tactfully was deemed important, yet the role of aid itself in these arenas was never explicitly recognized or deemed problematic. Relief efforts were restricted to saving lives according to the principal of neutrality that individual aid workers espoused, and their organizations defended. Even the passage of UNSC Resolution 2165 and its successor UNSC Resolution 2191 did not lead to lasting changes to the neutrality frame guiding relief efforts. Rather, they contributed to a few high-profile projects and minor

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[54] Ghadbian, Syrian National Coalition letter, 24 November 2014.
[55] Lischer, 'Collateral damage', pp. 79-109; David Keen, *The benefits of famine: a political economy of famine and relief in southwestern Sudan, 1983-1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, *Rebel rulers: insurgent governance and civilian life during war* (USA: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 85.

adjustments in techniques of distribution. UN agencies and international aid organizations carefully adapted their efforts to accommodate constraints 'from above' and exigencies 'on the ground.' In the process, emergency food aid's power lies obscured.

Bare Life and the Exception: Sovereign Assemblages in Wartime Syria

"Syria is not only a killing field...it is also a testing ground for competing types of state sovereignty"[56]

The neutrality frame reinforces the bases of sovereign politics while obscuring emergency food aid's impact on sovereign power relations. We conceive of sovereignty not as a container concept but as a specific "political order produced by an assemblage of administrative strategies,"[57] performed and planned to generate allegiance, fear and legitimacy from the household to the highest echelons of institutional power.[58] By abandoning sovereignty as an ontological ground of power or order and instead theorizing it as always and necessarily tentative—emergent and constantly shifting—we can more fully grasp its iterations during the Syrian conflict. During the war, sovereign power relations have been contested, re-arranged and transformed on a daily basis. In practice, sovereignty is often shared or contested between an array of humanitarian organizations, the Assad regime and its various rivals, producing a field of contingent or mobile sovereignties that differentiate populations and subject them to varied forms of

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[56] George Abu Ahmad, 'Order, freedom and chaos: sovereignties in Syria', *Middle East Policy* 20.2, 2013, pp.47-54.

[57] Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as exception: mutations in citizenship and sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 80.

[58] Thomas Blom Hansen, and Finn Stepputat, 'Sovereignty revisited', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35, 2006, p.297.

rule and citizenship. These sometimes contradictory and frequently mobile assemblages result in varied and contingent forms of order and authority. Of course, "sovereignty persists"—it has not disappeared—yet it does so amidst an intensification of ambiguities and uncertainties that have inhabited its operation all along.[59]

Building upon Schmidt, Agamben defines sovereign power not "as the monopoly to coerce or rule, but as the monopoly to decide."[60] He argues that the suspension of the rule of law in the state of exception underpins the modern legal and political order. The decision over the exception defines who the sovereign is and delineates its position both "outside and inside the juridical order," part of the legal order, but also able to suspend it.[61] This state, called upon in moments of emergency so as to invest one government or individual with authority beyond the law, can work to deprive civilians of their citizenship rights. Through the state of exception, the sovereign separates two forms of life: citizens included in a juridical order and those stripped of juridical-political protections, a separation between life that is politically qualified, and one that is "bare" or naked.[62] Despite its utility for theorizing the establishment and foundations of sovereign authority, to pose a simple opposition between normalized citizenship and bare life, as some of Agamben's readers have done, reduces the complexity and ambiguity that occurs during war. Humanitarian organizations, local militias and political activists may contest and problematize the state of exception so as to legitimize particular actions or practices

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[59] William Connolly, 'The complexity of sovereignty,' in Jenny Edkins, Veronique Pin-Fat, Michael J. Shapiro, ed., *Sovereign lives: power in global politics* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
[60] Carl Schmitt, Political theology: Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 13; Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: sovereign power and bare life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) p. 6 and 15; Giorgio Agamben, *State of exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 4.
[61] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.15; Adam Ramadan, 'Spatialising the refugee camp', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38.1, 2013, pp. 67.
[62] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 26-28.

through which laws are suspended and populations managed. As Agamben explains, the

exception "does not limit itself to distinguishing what is inside from what is outside but

instead traces a threshold (the state of exception) between the two on the basis of which

outside and inside—the normal situation and chaos—enter into those complex

topological relationships."[63] Rather than reprising debates over Agamben's applicability

to humanitarian spaces or conflict situations, we are better served by an empirically

informed approach that eschews a dichotomous reading of his theory of sovereignty.

Despite humanitarian organizations' disinterest in issues of authority, order and

legitimacy, the neutrality frame imbricates them in sovereign power relations in two

different ways. First, aid groups reproduce the bases of sovereign politics by constructing

a particular form of subject: individuals who are merely lives to be saved rather than

political voices to be considered—Agamben's "bare life."[64] By emphasizing the

alleviation of physical distress and deprivation, aid recipients are imagined as "pure

victims."[65] Those receiving assistance are valued strictly in terms of their biological life,

not their political voice; life alone—bereft of meaning or complexity—is what matters,

not the continuance of a particular way of life.[66] Emergency food distribution becomes

the only logical response to their suffering. This conceptualization of the human as

individual—thoroughly embedded in modernity's episteme—disembeds people from

kinship, community and religion in favor of an ethical universalism that one author calls

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[63] Agamben, Homo Sacer, p. 14.
[64] Mark Duffield, *Carry on killing: global governance, humanitarianism and terror* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2004), No. 23; Jenny Edkins, 'Humanitarianism, humanity, human', *Journal of Human Rights* 2.2, 2003, pp. 253-258.
[65] Liisa H. Malkki, 'Speechless emissaries: refugees, humanitarianism, and dehistoricization', *Cultural Anthropology* 11.3, 1996, pp. 377-404.
[66] Edkins, 'Humanitarianism, humanity, human', pp. 253-258.

"the secular religion of the new millennium."[67] It replaces ties amongst people with the idea of equivalence amongst strangers. In the process, suffering is depoliticized, as humanitarian ethics turns a political problem into an affective one.[68] By viewing aid as a neutral response to a crisis and conceptualizing recipients as victims to be given sustenance, the WFP, the ICRC and their implementing partners reaffirm 'bare life.'

This reaffirmation of 'bare life' also relies on a temporal disruption. Official documents from UN aid agencies describe the deprivation of Syrians as the product of a 'complex emergency'—a term developed in the 1990's to label major humanitarian crises—despite the ongoing nature of the conflict.[69] Emergencies are sudden and unpredictable; the urgency of the term drives those concerned to focus on people entrapped by the emergency's conditions rather than examine the circumstances that produce them. This allows humanitarian organizations to point to what is happening, but without reference to agency or politics. This view of wartime dehistoricizes the lives of Syrians—it cannot explain or understand how and why people have become dependent on humanitarian assistance.[70] This limits the capacity of humanitarians to proactively address sensitive situations before they degenerate.[71] Remedies come not from politics but new technologies and more efficient distribution methods. By disconnecting aid

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[67] Laurence McFalls, 'Benevolent dictatorship: the formal logic of humanitarian government', in Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, ed., *Contemporary states of emergency: the politics of military and humanitarian interventions* (New York: Zone Book, 2010); Edkins, 'Humanitarianism, humanity, human', p. 253.

[68] Miriam Ticktin, 'Transnational Humanitarianism', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, 2014, pp. 35.

[69] Mark Duffield, 'Complex emergencies and the crisis of developmentalism', *IDS Bulletin* 25.4, 1994, pp. 37-45.

[70] Keen, Complex emergencies, p. 160.

[71] Roberto Belloni, 'The trouble with humanitarianism' *Review of International Studies* 33.03, 2007, pp. 451-474.

recipients from the historically specific circumstances that produces their need, emergency food aid is technologized and depoliticized. Information demanded by aid agencies prioritizes consequences rather than causes, nutritional deficits rather than strategies of starvation, needs rather than grievances, flows of grain instead of flows of power. Success is measured not by how interventions alter hunger-producing conditions, but by targeted technical objectives that quantify recipients reached. This obscures fundamental questions such as who is kept alive and who has rights to food, subsistence and survival. The neutrality frame, and the concept of complex emergency that functions as its temporal scaffolding, results in relief efforts that reduce politics to the art of survival and the distribution of resources to a morally vindicated science of allocation.[72]

Second, UN agencies and programs operating in Syria have also taken on important sovereign attributes. By creating the categories of people in need of assistance and by virtue of their (in)capacity to move supplies to certain territories rather than others, humanitarian organizations take part in decisions over human survival. In determining what groups of people are 'at risk'—a category that is defined by ambiguous boundaries—the WFP chooses who is 'worthy' of aid, especially as budget cuts force it to choose recipients strategically. Through these and other daily routines of relief distribution, humanitarian organizations participate in the production of "mobile sovereignties"[73] lived spaces where various actors contribute to the suspension of law and the organization of political authority.[74] This concept helps capture how the dynamic, fluid political relationships between humanitarians, military forces and local populations in Syria has relativized political authority and reshaped the capacities of those who

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[72] McFalls, 'Benevolent dictatorship', p. 321-327.
[73] Pandolfi, 'Contract of mutual (in) difference,' p. 369-370.
[74] Ramadan, 'Spatialising the refugee camp', p. 67.

participate in its production.[75] This is not to say that humanitarian organizations are entirely oblivious to aid's impact. Serious actors do consider the political, social and economic repercussions of their efforts on the local environment, and there are an array of approaches to implementing the humanitarian principles and navigating the pragmatic concerns that drive their interventions. However, it is the very fact that these organizations are the principle decision-makers in managing certain populations and deciding who lives and dies—swayed as they may be by international law, on-the-ground constraints and individual organizational mandates—that gives them elements of sovereign power. Their participation in the fragmentation of authority and the reproduction of sovereign politics remains frequently overlooked.

Aid's envelopment in sovereign power relations is well borne-out by two interviews conducted on the same day in October 2014. We asked two Syrian aid workers about the presence of aid organizations in their respective neighborhoods. The first worker, who lives in a regime-controlled area of Damascus, stated that, "Yes, there is the World Food Programme, Red Cross and Red Crescent, they distribute bags of food every two months or so." The second interviewee, a volunteer living in the Zamalka neighborhood in the opposition-controlled East Ghouta suburb of Damascus indicated that, "the blockade does not allow any aid organizations to enter, there are none in East Ghouta. The same applies to aid convoys." Undoubtedly, decisions over aid deliveries are intimately shaped by questions of access, safety and logistics, yet neutrality veils the very political process of decision-making, which instead becomes a question of bureaucratic and administrative micro-verdicts. Through their consistent participation in these decisions—that is, when aid agencies choose between helping a poor Syrian under

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[75] McFalls, 'Benevolent dictatorship', p. 317-333.

regime control or saving a starving one in opposition held territory—humanitarian organizations hold the power to make life-and-death decisions usually left to institutions with explicitly sovereign attributes.[76] Undoubtedly, aid agencies are hindered by legal norms, government and opposition restrictions and military battles when making these choices; nonetheless, they do participate in a struggle over the state of exception on a recurring basis.

Humanitarian organizations' relationship with sovereignty is thus extremely complex. In Syria, they reaffirm and reshape sovereign power even while engaging in similar—some would say parallel—activities.[77] Rather than seeing sovereignty statically—as something possessed or not, spatially bound or absolute—the Syrian case illuminates the fluidity of power relations. To understand such formations, close attention should be given not to absolute juridical claims or international norms but on the contingencies and contexts that emerge during war. Who holds the capacity to declare the exception? How does aid re-configure power relations between ruler and ruled? When do these processes occur and what do they entail? These are all questions humanitarian organizations should ask, but which the neutrality frame helps preclude. Equally important is how neutrality contributes to aid's entanglement in crucial political and military dynamics.

Emergency Food Aid's Political and Military Impact

Emergency food aid has unintentionally assisted the Assad regime in a number of intersecting ways. By channeling most assistance through SARC and other government-

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[76] The very act of keeping people alive in an internal war is both a sovereign and political act that should be recognized as such.

[77] Peter Redfield, 'Doctors, borders, and life in crisis', *Cultural Anthropology* 20.3, 2005, pp. 328-361.

approved organizations, emergency food aid has helped the regime fulfill some of its welfare responsibilities. The wartime government can neglect food distributions and other provisionary duties previously at the heart of its pre-war social pact with Syrian society, instead focusing funds on military efforts. Some critics have been dismayed by the UN's unwillingness to use the leverage this offers. David Miliband, a former British Foreign Secretary and current head of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), has argued that, "the Assad regime can't afford to kick the UN out of Damascus. The UN is feeding so many of [Assad's] own people."[78] All too frequently, emergency food aid has contributed to the regime's capacity to exercise power over resources and people. This helps the Assad regime maintain a semblance of the pre-war social contract and assuages popular unrest that may have emerged otherwise. This prospect was made evident in violent protests objecting to fuel, food and electricity shortages in the regime-controlled city of Latakia in late 2014.[79]

A steady supply of humanitarian relief has also helped regime-controlled areas project an image of comparative security. In war-stricken Syria, this has increased the attractiveness of government rule. Although initial internal displacements were linked to violence and insecurity, increasing poverty and devastation has meant that migration has become increasingly needs-driven. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian IDPs have fled from contested or rebel-held areas to the regime-controlled cities of Latakia and Tartous to ensure their survival, regardless of ideology or political orientation. The number of IDPs in the country—7.6 million by mid-2015, not including those not officially recognized by

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[78] Lynch, 'U.N.'s fear of angering Assad'.
[79] Suleiman al-Khalidi, 'Syria raises fuel prices to snuff out black market, soothe unrest', *Reuters*, 27 January 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/27/us-mideast-crisis-syria-fuel-idUSKBN0L029R20150127, accessed 23 June 2015.

the Syrian government—has dramatically altered the composition of local populations.

"The Syrian regime prevents the Red Crescent from working in liberated [rebel-controlled] areas or those outside of its control," said Moatez Hazm, an IRC worker in

Daraa. "The Red Crescent in Daraa … cannot give out any aid because it only works with

the Syrian regime."[80] Government-controlled Tartous, in contrast, has a sophisticated

network of aid distribution that helps IDPs fleeing from Homs, Hama and Aleppo. "Ever

since the huge waves of displaced came from Aleppo, official institutions have become

involved in providing aid," said one humanitarian worker in the city.[81] Both **Syrian state**

news and the WFP used aid distribution in Tartous to publicize the ostensibly apolitical

relief efforts, despite the unbalanced nature of the greater distribution process.[82] Although

certain opposition groups have been assisted by smaller organizations working to deliver

supplies across the Turkish border, far larger amounts of ostensibly neutral aid have been

repeatedly co-opted by government forces.[83] Rebel groups unable to feed those under

their control have seen their legitimacy eroded, a primary concern given their dependence

on popular support, or at least acquiescence. Of course, aid organizations are keen to

emphasize that their work is driven not by political considerations, but by human need.

This logic appeals to the universal morality at the center of contemporary humanitarian

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[80] Author's Skype interview with Moatez Hazm, IRC worker in Daraa, Amman, 25 March 2015.
[81] 'Syrian coast attracts Aleppans displaced by war', *Al-Monitor*, 4 June 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/syria-coastal-markets-embrace-workers-aleppo.html accessed 23 June 2015, accessed 23 June 2015.
[82] 'WFP distributes emergency food assistance to Syrians fleeing to Tartous', WFP, 10 May 2013, https://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-distributes-emergency-food-assistance-syrians-fleeing-tartous, accessed 23 June 2015; 'Allocating relief assistance to martyrs' families and rural development in Tartous', *SANA*, 3 December 2014, http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=20366, accessed 23 June 2015.
[83] 'UN relief aid found in regime army positions', Syrian National Coalition, 21 May 2015, http://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/un-relief-aid-found-in-regime-army-positions.html, accessed 23 June 2015.

aid efforts, which "holds the preservation of life to be above and distinct from any political aims."[84] Yet such principles obscure far more than they illuminate.

The political impact of hunger in rebel-held territories has been evident throughout the conflict. Areas under military siege or opposition rule have been thrown into chaos on account of their lack of access to essential foodstuffs.[85] By advancing this outcome, the regime destroys the fabric of society by disordering areas outside of its control. In the East Ghouta suburbs of Damascus, internal rebel dynamics changed dramatically after regime forces cut off the last supplies into Douma, the *de facto* rebel headquarters in the area in late 2014. The regime prevented all food, fuel, aid and medicine from entering Douma. Prices of basic necessities skyrocketed immediately, forcing families to reduce their daily food intake.[86] The rapidly declining human conditions in the town caused residents to protest, demanding accountability from local military groups—*Jaish al-Islam* and *Jaish al-Umma*—and discrediting their claims to authority in the process. As Douma's infrastructure collapsed and the humanitarian situation became more desperate, neighborhoods just kilometers away benefited from humanitarian aid. "Food is available [even if] prices are very high," said one activist in regime-controlled Damascus during the siege of Douma.[87] Through its absence in Douma

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[84] Jenny Edkins, *Whose hunger?: concepts of famine, practices of aid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 120.

[85] Brent Eng and José Ciro Martínez, 'Starvation, submission and survival: the Syrian war through the prism of food', *MERIP* 273, Winter 2014.

[86] 'Encircled by the regime and ruled by Jaysh al-Islam, Douma residents run out of options', *Syria Direct*, 26 November 2014. http://syriadirect.org/main/36-interviews/1705-2014-11-26-10-01-26, accessed 23 June 2015.

[87] 'Inside Damascus, regime in tight control as resources scare', *Syria Direct*, 28 October 2014, http://syriadirect.org/main/36-interviews/1637-inside-damascus-regime-in-tight-control-as-resources-scarce, accessed 23 June 2015.

and its availability in nearby neighborhoods, emergency food aid reconfigured local political loyalties and modalities of governance.

Elsewhere in southern Damascus, three formerly pro-opposition towns—Babila, Beit Sahem and Yelda—agreed to truces with the regime in 2014. These followed months of besiegement by the Syrian army, during which an estimated 200 residents died due to malnutrition, starvation and a lack of adequate medical supplies. "The truces lifted a huge burden from the peoples' shoulders," stated one anonymous activist from Beit Sahem, "People don't have to worry about starvation anymore."[88] After the truce was agreed, SARC immediately delivered aid to the three towns and has continued to do so since. By allowing aid distributions, the regime shares credit for welfare provision without diverting resources from its military efforts. It is also able to cajole civilians into maligning its opponents. Following the arrival of aid, residents of Beit Sahem staged a series of daily demonstrations against the remaining Jabhat al-Nusra fighters in the town, who had been a prominent part of the local rebel brigade prior to the truce. Inhabitants demanded that combatants leave the area immediately for fear of breaking the armistice that permitted the arrival of aid.[89] "There is a sense of happiness," another citizen-journalist in Beit Sahem said in January 2015, referring to the state of the town after the Nusra fighters reportedly exited.[90] In southern Damascus, acquiescence, if not loyalty, was built on the back of humanitarian assistance.

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[88] 'Despite regime violations, the truce has lifted a huge burden', *Syria Direct*, 14 January 2015, http://syriadirect.org/main/36-interviews/1786-despite-regime-violations-the-truce-has-lifted-a-huge-burden, accessed 24 June 2015.
[89] Post for the Committee for the Syrian Revolution in Beit Sahem, Facebook, 31 December 2014, https://www.facebook.com/bs.cor/posts/905664029486305, accessed 23 June 2015.
[90] 'Happiness in Beit Sahem after residents force Nusra retreat', *Syria Direct*, January 27, 2015, http://syriadirect.org/main/36-interviews/1813-happiness-in-beit-sahem-after-residents-force-nusra-retreat, accessed 23 June 2015.

Emergency food aid has also altered the war economy and political dynamics in favor of those in power. An array of military forces have profited from relief efforts that seek to distribute aid to needy residents, as they have positioned themselves between humanitarian organizations and the local population so to mediate the relationship to their advantage. Supplies intended for noncombatant populations have frequently been re-allocated to military forces. One Mercy Corps employee relayed that Islamic State (IS) forces in the eastern Aleppo countryside "demanded to supervise the distribution process" and requested "a 30% share of aid supplies to distribute as it wished."[91] In Raqqa, aid groups operating in the region in late 2014 had to work with IS in order to assist civilians in the province. As one local activist explained, "Any aid that enters into Raqqa has to receive a paper of approval from the IS Office of Relief in order to secure the passage in and out of the region without IS confiscating the aid … The aid is registered at an IS office and then exits under the office's supervision."[92] In early 2015, IS confiscated WFP aid intended for civilians, either taking it through informal taxation or warehouse raids before distributing the goods under its own name. The IS media team circulated photographs of one instance during which its fighters distributed WFP food parcels with the Islamist group's logo stamped over the UN's, making explicit the process through which neutral humanitarian aid becomes politicized local welfare.[93]

Emergency food aid has directed the energy of militants and politicians towards external sources of material assistance, rather than towards problems felt by the

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[91] 'Syrian relief worker: regime siphons off humanitarian aid for fighters', *Syria Direct*, 23 April 2015, http://syriadirect.org/news/syrian-relief-worker-regime-siphons-off-humanitarian-aid-for-fighters/, accessed 23 June 2015.
[92] Authors' Skype interview with anonymous activist in Raqqa, Amman 8 April 2015.
[93] 'How the Islamic State group steals UN food aid', *France 24*, 6 February 2015, http://observers.france24.com/content/20150206-islamic-state-steals-food-aid, accessed 23 June 2015.

governed. In Douma, for instance, Jaish al-Islam collaborated with traders to hoard food aid and other supplies acquired from humanitarian groups rather than distribute it to besieged civilians. "They refuse to sell any items before meeting the needs of fighters," said one activist who, along with other Douma residents, protested against the traders' monopoly.[94] Drawing on resources made available by emergency food aid, Jaish al-Islam could ignore public demands for accountability and assert itself unilaterally in the city. This dynamic alters patterns of accountability so that rulers can override domestic pressures. **While ties to aid organizations and foreign allies have given Syrian opposition groups and the Assad regime access to much needed material assistance,**[95] it has repeatedly inhibited the emergence and establishment of more inclusive and comprehensive welfare systems. Failure to provide basic goods to local residents in various stages of the Syrian war has undermined public support for various fighting forces.[96] Given the presence of external resources, military groups had little incentive to expand their distributive apparatus. Without such assistance, the regime and certain rebel groups may have been forced to gather and provide resources locally.[97] The

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[94] Khaled Atallah, 'As Syrian army closes in, Douma residents turn against rebels', *Al-Monitor*, 24 November 2014. http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2014/11/syria-douma-protest-jaish-al-islam.html, accessed 23 June 2015.

[95] **For more on the Syrian war in relation to regional political alignments**, see Gregory F. Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*, Analysis Paper No. 11(Doha, Qatar: Brookings Doha Center, 2014); Fred H. Lawson, 'Syria's mutating civil war and its impact on Turkey, Iraq and Iran', *International Affairs* 90.6 (2014), pp.1351-1365; Andrew W. Terrill, 'Iran's Strategy for Saving Asad' *The Middle East Journal* 69.2, 2015, pp. 222-236.

[96] Kelly Mcevers, 'Jihadi fighters win hearts and minds by easing Syria's bread crisis', *NPR*, 18 January 2013, http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2013/01/18/169516308/as-syrian-rebels-reopen-bakeries-bread-crisis-starts-to-ease, accessed 23 June 2015; Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: inside the army of terror* (USA: University of Chicago, 2015), p. 222-226; Patrick Cockburn, *The rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the new Sunni revolution* (London: Verso Books, 2015), p. 114.

[97] For more on how Islamist groups, ranging from Jabhat al-Nusra to IS, took advantage of these missteps and supplied civilians with security and various welfare services to generate public

benevolent ethos of emergency food aid, and the neutrality that underpins distribution, obscures the practical ways in which outside assistance can help undermine or erode the rights, responsibilities and conventions between rulers and ruled. While emergency aid can appear apolitical on the surface, food's varied but undeniable importance during wartime makes neutrality untenable. By bringing external resources into life-or-death situations characterized by scarcity, aid agencies inevitably become implicated in war's inner workings. The results are not necessarily negative, nor need they be. Humanitarian aid can be emancipatory or deeply regressive depending on the political configurations in which it is located.[98] But these decisions should be discussed and debated—something the neutrality frame does not allow.

Conclusion

Few studies have examined how emergency food aid influences sovereignty and politics during conflict. In this article, we have undertaken a first attempt at assessing these relationships through close scrutiny of the Syrian case. We have attempted to demonstrate how the importance of subsidized food to Syria's pre-war welfare practices coupled with the rapid increase in food insecurity since the onset of the country's current conflict make food highly political. Yet, for the aid organizations operating in Syria, providing food is not a historically contingent or context specific political endeavor, but a neutral intervention premised on humanitarian ethics they implicitly expect others to share. Relief organizations whose operations are shaped by this frame defend their ability to distribute aid to both regime and opposition-controlled areas, even if the allocation is unequal. By claiming that they make conscious efforts to be unbiased in their

> **Comment [T1]:** Re-word this big-time

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support, see Charles Lister, *The Islamic State: a brief introduction* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), p. 13-23 and p. 46-49; Weiss and Hassan, ISIS, p. 222-226.
[98] Edkins, *Whose hunger*, p. 131.

distribution—"reaching anyone who needs it, regardless of where they are located"—
they imply that their intentions can at least partially exempt them from the actual results
of food distribution.[99] When they frame their interventions in terms of neutrality,
emergency food distributions attempt to carve out a sphere for their work separate from
politics, even as those on the ground contest their claims based on actual results. We have
tried to show the various problems that emerge as a result.

What, ultimately, does the ascendance of the neutrality frame mean, both for
Syria and the emergency food aid enterprise more broadly? Whether emergency food
relief distributed in Syria demonstrates a return to older forms of neutral assistance, the
full-fledged transformation of humanitarianism into a vanguard form of transnational
politics,[100] or is merely another instance of aid functioning to "contain" surplus
populations in the Third World,[101] is a difficult question. Humanitarian morality—and
the neutrality frame it helps justify—does seem to be a (re)emergent form in the
legitimization of aid operations. For Fassin, politics in both peace and war is being
redefined—the ascendance of humanitarian morality involves a "new repertoire for
public action… that reformulates what is at stake in politics."[102] For others, emergency
food aid in Syria probably confirms humanitarian organizations' role in a global
counterinsurgency strategy, in which relief functions as a "merely discretionary

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[99] Authors' Skype interview with Hage, Amman, 29 October 2014; Authors' interview with
Hollingworth, Amman, 9 November 2014.
[100] Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian reason: a moral history of the present* (London: University of
California Press, 2012)**;** Denise Garcia, 'Humanitarian security regimes' *International
Affairs* 91.1 (2015), pp. 55-75.
[101] Michel Agier, 'Humanity as an identity and its political effects (a note on camps and
humanitarian government)', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights,
Humanitarianism, and Development* 1.1, 2010, pp. 29-45; Mark Duffield, *Global governance and
the new wars: the merging of development and security* (London: Zed books, 2001).
[102] Fassin, 'Heart of humanness', p. 274.

international protection of last resort" meant to contain the destabilizing effects of war and underdevelopment.[103] For the moment, the words and deeds of humanitarian organizations and their donors appear to evince a bit of both analyses. Interestingly, both assessments coincide in their critique of neutrality. By creating a set of operational and moral rules that work as an abstraction from the messy world of history, politics and conflict, the frame of neutrality allows humanitarian organizations to disregard their complicity in war's inner workings. By replacing a politics of rights and justice with one of suffering, compassion and technocratic proficiency, ostensibly neutral aid reinforces the inequality at the heart of sovereign power, reducing Syrians to their bare, biological lives. In categorically separating their actions from politics and power—a division that is embedded in the neutrality frame—humanitarian organizations operating in Syria erase the conflicts, disputes and shared understandings that shape a sovereign's capacity to declare and enact a state of exception. Simultaneously, they contribute to "localized forms of sovereignty," which are in turn "nested" within "higher sovereignties," so that sovereign power relations are found in multiple, layered and mobile forms.[104] No matter how honorable the goals or the intentions of those who distribute it, emergency food aid is far from the altruistic panacea or neutral operation its proponents imagine it to be.

We do not mean to argue that all emergency food aid should be unilaterally withdrawn. Humanitarian organizations do offer important services and have undoubtedly ameliorated suffering. Yet in the ethical claims they make on behalf of marginalized populations and through the practices they employ to assist those deemed

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[103] Mark Duffield, Development, Security and Unending War, p.19**.**
[104] Caroline Humphrey, 'Sovereignty', in David Nugent and Joan Vincent, ed. , *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 420; Hansen and Stepputat, 'Sovereignty revisited', pp. 304-305.

'at risk,' emergency food aid refashions sovereignty and reshapes politics in ways its proponents and distributors cannot see. What the long-term implications may be for Syria, and for emergency food aid as a humanitarian enterprise, remains an open question. The Syrian conflict is in many ways so idiosyncratic in its history, development and animating logics that we are hesitant to draw general conclusions.[105] Yet what we can say with some certainty is that emergency food aid is not neutral, nor can it ever be.

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[105] The rise of IS, Iran's active and persistent support for the Assad regime, the concurrent disintegration of Iraqi government control over parts of the country's territory and the geopolitical stalemate following the botched intervention in Libya are just some of the salient factors that complication humanitarian organizations' role in the Syrian conflict.

Table 1. Syrian government pre-war spending on food subsidies and as percent of Syria's total gross domestic product (GDP).

Year	GDP ($ billions)	Spending on Food Subsidies	
		$ millions	% of GDP
2008	$52.6	$1,470	2.8%
2007	$40.4	$850	2.1%
2006	$33.3	$666	2.0%
2005	$28.9	$577	2.0%
2004	$24.5	$515	2.1%
2003	$20.9	$480	2.3%

Sources:
Ronald Albers and Marga Peeters, 'Food and energy prices, government subsidies and fiscal balances in south Mediterranean countries', *Economic Papers* 437, February 2011, pp. 22; 'World Development Indicators: Syrian Arab Republic – GDP', The World Bank, http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx, accessed 23 June 2015; Ivan Kushnir, 'Gross Domestic Product in Syria', World macroeconomic research, http://kushnirs.org/macroeconomics/gdp/gdp_syria.html#change , accessed 23 June 2015. Own calculations.

Table 2. Food-related funding for Syria allocated by the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (FSAC)* and World Food Program (WFP).

Year	Funding ($ millions)	
	FSAC	WFP
2015	$183**	$147**
2014	$604	$542
2013	$451	$387
2012	$111	$109

*FSAC is the principle UN funder for the WFP, Food & Agricultural Organization (FAO) and NGO partners providing food security in Syria
** Ongoing, as of May 20, 2015

Sources:
'Strategic response plan(s): Syria response plan 2015,' UN OCHA, http://fts.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha_R32sum_A1069___8_May_2015_(15_50).pdf, accessed 23 June 2015; 'Strategic response plan(s): Syria response plan 2015,' UN OCHA, http://fts.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha_R1_A1069___1505081550.pdf, accessed 23 June 2015.