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Humanitarian Diplomacy: A New Research Agenda

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Improving access to humanitarian aid in conflict and complex emergencies has always been a major concern for policy makers and humanitarian actors. Historically, humanitarianism has been conducted in situations of extreme insecurity and unstable political conditions to secure access, assistance and protection for civilians. Humanitarian diplomacy (HD) emerged as a concept in the early 2000s. It can be defined as persuading decision makers and leaders to act, at all times and in all circumstances, in the interest of vulnerable people and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles. Traditionally, HD ranges from negotiating the presence of humanitarian organizations to negotiating access to civilian populations in need of protection. It involves monitoring assistance programs, promoting respect for international law, and engaging in advocacy in support of broader humanitarian goals (Minear and Smith 2007). There is a growing political consensus and commitment to “leave no one behind” in the 2030 Agenda and HD is seen as an instrument through which to reach the most vulnerable people.

This brief discusses how the concept of HD is key to understanding critical changes in the humanitarian field and how humanitarian efforts, foreign policy and strategic interests increasingly overlap in the contemporary scenario.

Humanitarian diplomacy – an oxymoron?

There is a significant tension embedded in HD. Diplomacy is essentially about the representation of one polity in relation to another polity. Humanitarianism, on the other hand, is about advocating for and helping people in need. Diplomacy is characterized by compromise and pragmatic dealings, whereas the public image of humanitarian action is the opposite: it is about working for ideals and universal principles regardless of the interests of specific political actors. Unravelling this tension and exposing the complex diplomatic architecture of humanitarian aid (with the variety of actors and intentions involved) makes the study of HD crucial, timely and important.

Humanitarian neutrality has always been questioned by scholars and (more rarely) practitioners. This is due to the relevance of hidden political interests, the politics of humanitarian negotiation, and the broader sphere of humanitarian diplomacy in providing access to humanitarian aid. Indeed, the tension between negotiations and the principle of neutrality has traditionally represented a challenge for humanitarian organizations. Neutrality, along with humanity, impartiality and independence constitute “the foundations for humanitarian action” (unocha.org). Neutrality is seen as necessary to prevent humanitarian actors from taking sides or engaging in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. However, this proves difficult. Humanitarian organizations often depend on developing a network of formal or informal relations with parties involved in armed conflicts to guarantee access to aid. Humanitarian efforts are challenged by the regional competition of traditional and new donors (for example, in the Middle East) and international humanitarian organizations’ ability to remain relevant and faithful to humanitarian principles. Other major challenges include the volatility of public support, the legitimacy of the intervening countries, and the evolving relationship between humanitarian action and other forms of support, like development assistance and peace and stabilization operations.

From advocacy to diplomacy

The variety of priorities, goals and humanitarian actors involved in complex emergencies create different understandings of HD. The definitions and content of HD vary as widely as the number of organizations (or states) using the term. There is a significant difference between the idea of HD, the use of the term, and international recognition for an agreement on how it should be conducted (Regnier 2011). Although HD is increasingly framed as a crucial aspect of providing access to aid in conflict areas, few agencies and political actors reflect on their humanitarian diplomatic practices.

Scholarly works on humanitarian negotiations have largely relied on the analytical tools of advocacy networks, who study, for example, the conditions and the dynamics by which non-state actors are able to influence state policy and behavior to protect civilians, prohibit certain weapons, and fight violence against women. New studies on HD should draw on these insights but need to move beyond and investigate how humanitarian actors now have to operate in political environments where there is less agreement between political parties involved, the cast of actors is more diverse, and the challenges in providing access to victims are more politicized. They should also examine the implications of such actions. Humanitarian actors now have to operate with 1) increased uncertainty about the support for key norms and principles, and 2) new actors with very different interpretations of how these norms should be interpreted and advanced.

The politicization of access to aid

The massive humanitarian crises in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen and Syria, have shown that the “safe havens” humanitarian action was originally meant to provide have become targets of political violence. This leaves many people either trapped within the conflict itself or forced to flee along routes with high risk of exploitation from traffickers, and where humanitarians have little or no access. The dangers that humanitarians now face are the result of protracted conflicts and prolonged crises where civilians are the intended victims, where access to remote areas is difficult, and where aid workers risk being perceived as a threat. Access to humanitarian aid is increasingly challenged in ways that also redefine the role of humanitarian actors. The character of violent conflicts is changing and the politicization of access to aid has become an integral element of conflict itself. This trend has come to the fore in the Middle East (especially in Syria), where the involvement of both new and traditional donors has created new processes of negotiation and definition of the humanitarian space. Aid delivery merges with regional competition animated by different stabilization efforts, as well as unilateral, bilateral and multilateral humanitarian flows.

Case studies

Three relevant examples are Qatar, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). When Turkey’s foreign policy was no longer able to meet the requirements of regional and global development, HD became a useful term to explain Turkey’s engagement with new foreign policy actors, including non-state actors, providing legitimate entry into unstable zones such as Somalia before and Syria later on. In fact, Turkey has recently extended its humanitarian and development aid in Africa and Asia, increasingly characterizing its foreign policy as HD (Akpınar 2013; Altunişik 2014; Davutoglu 2013). Over the past few years, Turkey has become one of the world’s biggest donor countries (www.mfa.gov.tr). The growing humanitarianism of Turkey’s foreign affairs has produced

both new challenges and opportunities for its development plans and security cooperation in Asia and Africa. What we don't know, however, is to what extent Turkey's HD has been able to prioritize and facilitate more protection and more access to humanitarian aid, and in what specific ways Turkey's political agenda guides its HD. To advance knowledge in the field, an empirical review of Turkey's HD is needed: its political status, the ways in which it is produced and consumed, and its concrete effects (Baird 2016).

Qatar is a new donor that combines support for peace negotiations with a more active use of humanitarian and development assistance (Barakat 2012; 2014). Today, Qatar is one of the main donors in Palestine. In Syria, Qatar provided US\$3 billion to Syrian rebel groups, in addition to hundreds of millions of dollars in humanitarian aid. But while Qatar prioritizes its humanitarian aid to Arab recipients, it is by no means confined to those countries. A look at aid recipient countries over the past decade shows that Qatar's humanitarian program reaches more than 25 countries, many of them non-Arab, and including several organizations such as the World Food Programme, UNESCO, UNHCR, WHO, etc. In some cases, Qatar channels its aid through agencies such as the Norwegian Refugee Council (Zureik 2017). Since 2005, Qatar's extensive involvement in regional mediation, in countries such as Sudan, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, etc., has led analysts to dub the country "the non-stop mediator" (Barakat 2012). In late 2011 and early 2012, Qatar pushed ahead with two of its most ambitious mediation projects: facilitating unity negotiations between rival Palestinian factions, Fateh and Hamas, and hosting talks between the United States and the Taliban. Such efforts made full use of the country's tradition of providing both refuge to controversial Islamist figures and a safe space for negotiations (Barakat 2012; 2014). Qatar's mediation strategies have paralleled its growing role as an international humanitarian donor and have paved the way to its current HD in the region. Since 2013, under the leadership of Sheikh Tamim, Qatar has shifted from an active to a passive role in foreign affairs. But Qatar still wields influence and its HD is rapidly developing. New knowledge is needed on the role that this new HD can play in stabilization processes in the Middle East and in facilitating negotiations between political parties and humanitarian organizations to improve access to humanitarian aid for civilians affected by conflicts and related displacement.

Since 2001, the UAE, once a gulf state with humble and neutral foreign policy defined by trade and business interests, has become an emerging military actor in foreign interventions in countries such as Afghanistan, Bahrain and Yemen. The UAE has also emerged as both a foreign and development aid donor with strategic foreign policy and security goals in the Balkans and in the Middle East (Bartlett 2017). Since 2004, the UAE has become the second largest Arab donor of development assistance and humanitarian aid. Since 2013, the UAE has been the world's largest donor of foreign assistance per capita.

The UAE's special interest in humanitarian aid also lies in the current trend of humanitarianism as business. Humanitarianism is part of the country's ambition to diversify its national economy. The International Humanitarian City based in Dubai is the largest logistics center for the storage and distribution of humanitarian aid in the Middle East. Since 2004, Dubai has hosted the annual DIHAD-Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development Conference and Exhibition that brings together hundreds of private corporations and profit-oriented organizations operating in the sector of humanitarianism. In September 2017, the UAE Soft Power Council launched the UAE Soft Power Strategy during the Government's Annual Meetings. The strategy includes six main pillars that together form the framework for the UAE's public diplomacy. The first pillar is HD, which represents the principal way for the UAE to establish its Middle Eastern regional relevance and expand its role more broadly in international relations. Over the last two decades, the UAE has emerged as a regional power with an increasingly assertive foreign policy in regional conflicts, and has become a player in the humanitarian sector with parallel visibility in the foreign aid and strategic investment sectors (Bartlett 2017). Today, the UAE's HD is to be understood within the broader shift in the UAE's foreign policy towards vigorous engagement with the rest of the world as an ambitious political and economic actor in the international arena.

New research

The merging of foreign policy and humanitarian efforts of new major humanitarian actors such as Qatar, Turkey and the UAE shows how the redefinition of the humanitarian agenda (Sezgin and Dijkzeul 2015) needs to be understood in light of new politics of negotiations and HD. At the same time, to understand the current position and assess the role of the traditional humanitarian actors (both states and international organizations) within the changing framework of humanitarian aid, we need to observe HD in a historical perspective. We need to understand the evolution of humanitarian politics, and develop a theoretical-historical framework that defines the relationship between traditional and new donors. We also need to explore the negotiated nature of the humanitarian enterprise (Acuto 2014) as a driver of historical changes, and a key mechanism in redefining the roles and priorities in humanitarian operations. Countries such as Sweden, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom are prominent promoters of humanitarian engagement, and consistently transmit a significant percentage of their funds to support international humanitarian organizations and NGOs (Dobrowolska-Polak 2014). We know that humanitarian negotiations conducted by these countries are motivated by a multitude of factors including geopolitics, economic interests, international law and underlying humanitarian principles and values, yet recent studies suggest that the new emerging donor states (as well as private and religious donors) and the growing

overlap of HD with foreign policy are transforming the nature and scope of humanitarian action. New research will have to investigate the long term implications that the changes in the field of humanitarian action have on the main imperative to provide access to aid in contexts of conflict and regional political tension.

Research questions that deserve further exploration:

- What is the historical trajectory of HD?
- How has the role of traditional humanitarian actors changed with the growing relevance of HD and the consolidation of new donors?
- To what extent does HD redefine the role of international organizations in complex emergencies and how do they measure successes and failures of HD?
- What is the relationship between means (such as working with unsavory actors, compromising “neutrality”) and ends (leaving no one behind) in the practice of HD?
- What are the key characteristics of HD conducted by new state donors?
- How and with what consequences do regional competition and contingent governments’ priorities influence states’ HD?

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