The unintended consequences of emergency food aid: neutrality, sovereignty and politics in the Syrian civil war, 2012–15

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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 called this narrative into question, along with the alleged outcomes that help legitimize its persistence. Some have argued that humanitarian assistance, through diversion, larceny or misallocation, can strengthen the position of warring parties.[1] Others have described how the strategic interlinking of aid and external intervention can serve foreign policy objectives or neo-liberal agendas.[2] In situations considered of lesser geopolitical significance, aid distribution is said to have encouraged—even legitimized—international political inaction.[3] During the current 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. Our observations and analysis suggest that foodstuffs distributed by UN agencies and most humanitarian organizations, despite their pretensions to neutrality, have contributed to supporting sovereignty and political outcomes at odds with those neutral aspirations.

Why has this happened? How has humanitarian aid become enmeshed in sovereignty and politics when it categorically seeks to avoid these arenas? Aspirations to neutrality and practices claiming to uphold this principle help explain much of the story.[4] Although ostensibly non-governmental, humanitarian organizations came

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[1] Mary B. Anderson, *Do no harm: how aid can support peace—or war* (New York: Lynne Rienner, 1999); Alex de Waal, *Famine crimes: politics and the disaster relief industry in Africa* (Bloomington: 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. 184–95.

[2] Mark Duffield, *Development, security and unending war: governing the world of peoples* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp. 42–51; Nils Gilman, 'Preface: militarism and humanitarianism', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 3: 2, 2012, pp. 173–8.

[3] David Keen, *Complex emergencies* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), pp. 117–18; Ngaire Woods, 'The shifting politics of foreign aid', *International Affairs* 81: 2, March 2005, pp. 393–409.

[4] The debate over humanitarian assistance in times of conflict is far from new. The Geneva Conventions of 1864 and 1949, The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, and the 1977 Additional Protocols to the 1949 Geneva Convention 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.

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] Partly 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 the 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 were previously perceived as weaknesses in humanitarian operations—the lack of engagement with local political processes and the inability to address the fundamental concerns undergirding conflict—have become strengths in the eyes of many foreign patrons.[8] Emergency food aid is increasingly seen as a less forceful—or more benevolent—form of intervention that tacitly avoids the complexities of military and diplomatic engagement. Given the geopolitical disagreements surrounding the Syrian conflict, most donors will fund food aid only if the groups distributing it present themselves as working outside the political sphere. With the exception of the International Committee of the Red Cross (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 the 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

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[5] Michael Barnett, 'Humanitarianism transformed', *Perspectives on Politics* 3: 4, 2005, p. 724; Antonio Donini, 'Principles, politics and pragmatism in the international response to the Afghan crisis', in A. Donini, N. Niland and K. Wermester, eds, *Nation-building unraveled? Aid, peace and justice in Afghanistan* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian, 2004); Fatima Ayub and Sari Kouvo, 'Righting the course? Humanitarian intervention, the war on terror and the future of Afghanistan', *International Affairs* 84: 4, July 2008, pp. 641–57.

[6] The targeted killing of aid workers in Afghanistan and Iraq is a poignant and tragic demonstration of these developments. See Didier Fassin, 'Heart of humanness: the moral economy of humanitarian intervention', in Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, eds, *Contemporary states of emergency: the politics of military and humanitarian interventions* (New York: Zone, 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.

[8] De Waal, *Famine crimes*, p. 158; Zoe Marriage, 'Ambiguous agreements: aid in negotiating processes: introduction', *Conflict, Security and 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' with regard to the political impact of aid, see Jean Pictet, 'The fundamental principles of the Red Cross', *International Review of the Red Cross* 19: 210, 1979, pp. 130–49; 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 (Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF), interpret neutrality and the humanitarian imperative very differently from others, going 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. 308–20.

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to be neutral, their understandings of the term vary considerably.[12] To counter the profusion of differing interpretations, in 2010 the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) compiled a set of 'Principles of Humanitarian Action' 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 the 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] The OCHA conceptualizes neutrality as both 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 emergency operations. Although working under separate legal mandates, the ICRC and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), two of the largest international and local humanitarian organizations operating in Syria, have espoused positions broadly in line with the OCHA's precepts during the current 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 been aligned with this distinction. Like other humanitarian groups, the organization presents itself as external to politics, bereft of power and ethically pure.

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. The frame of neutrality has not only shaped the understandings of the Syrian conflict held by the key international and local humanitarian organizations and UN aid agencies that share it; it has 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 recognized only hesitatingly, if at all. While advocates of neutrality as an

[12] Charlotte Ku and Joaquin Caceres Brun, 'Neutrality and the ICRC contribution to contemporary humanitarian operations', *International Peacekeeping* 10: 1, 2003, pp. 56–72; Dietrich Schindler, 'Transformation in the law of neutrality since 1945', in A. J. M. Delissen and G. J. Tanja, eds, *Humanitarian law of armed conflict: challenges ahead* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1991).

[13] UN OCHA, 'OCHA on message: humanitarian principles', April 2010, https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM_HumPrinciple_English.pdf, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[14] UN OCHA, 'OCHA on message'. 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] International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 'Neutrality', https://www.ifrc.org/en/who-we-are/vision-and-mission/the-seven-fundamental-principles/neutrality/; Syrian Red Crescent, 'Mabādā al-haraka' [Principles of the movement], 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/; International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Even wars have limits', https://www.icrc.org/en/document/syria-even-wars-have-limits (all accessed 3 Nov. 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. 505–14.

[16] Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), p. 109; Séverine Autesserre, 'Hobbes and the Congo: frames, local violence, and international intervention', *International Organization* 63: 2, 2009, pp. 250–51.

operational principle claim that the concept is a crucial element in the effectiveness of humanitarian aid, 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 the political–military impact of aid and conceals involvement in the exercise of power.[17]

We begin by outlining the history and development of food-related welfare programmes in Syria, before describing how emergency food aid has become politicized in this context. We then discuss the concept of frames and apply 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] We then analyse the military impact of emergency food aid on the Syrian conflict through various case-studies. We argue that the neutrality frame obscures the impact of emergency food aid on both sovereign power relations and politics. Assuming that such assistance is neutral 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 civil war.

Our analysis draws on more than 100 in-depth interviews with aid workers, local volunteers and Syrian stakeholders conducted during a period of 24 months 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. Owing to these constraints, we use pseudonyms and fully reference only data obtained through public sources and on-the-record interviews. Information and anonymous quotations that are not fully referenced are drawn from confidential interviews and participant observation. To support our claims, we complement our findings with those of various reputable news sources. Undoubtedly, gaps in knowledge remain and further research is urgently needed.

Welfare and the politics of food

The provision of subsidized food to Syrians since the First World War has been 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

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

[18] Mariella Pandolfi, 'L'industrie humanitaire: une souveraineté mouvante et supracoloniale. Réflexion sur l'expérience des Balkans', *Multitudes*, no. 3, Nov. 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: 1, 2003, pp. 369–81.

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afford the spread of the food riots seen in Cairo, Beirut and Damascus after the onset of conflict in Europe. Within a year of its foundation, 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 postwar Syria.[21] After the Second World War, citizens became vocal co-producers of welfare systems, demanding from political authorities similar forms of support to those that had been provided during the years of conflict. These included subsidies on basic food-stuffs to assist urban consumers and on agricultural inputs to help rural producers; many of these subsidies were adopted and expanded by subsequent Ba'athist governments from 1963 onwards.[22] Despite the gradual and largely failed liberalization of Syria's economy over the past two decades,[23] the legacies of the Ba'ath Party's state-led development model persisted in various welfare policies aimed at ensuring food security and political compliance. The most prominent and long-lasting example was the government's subsidy of *khubz 'arabi* (Arabic bread). This programme helped ensure modest levels of sustenance and has proved crucial to minimizing public unrest and fostering loyalty to the Assad-led regime throughout the past 40 years. The provision of welfare—defined as the direct distribution or indirect facilitation of services, programmes and infrastructure intended to promote the well-being and security of recipients—can foster goodwill, establish a reputation for reliability and signal a desire and capacity to govern successfully.[24] Providing services helps to build community, signalling membership in a polity while also offering material security and psychological comfort to beneficiaries. In brief, welfare provision is political, in both its methods and its goals. If this is true during peacetime, the significance of welfare is heightened during war, when the contingent nature of political authority and its corollaries becomes 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 flour mills, poor harvests, transport impediments and military operations.[25] Flour mills

[19] Robert Vitalis and Steven Heydemann, 'War, Keynesianism, and colonialism: explaining state–market relations in the postwar Middle East', in Steven Heydemann, ed., *War, institutions, and social change in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 100–147.

[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. 142–7.

[22] For more on Syria's postwar social pact, see Steven Heydemann, *Authoritarianism in Syria* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

[23] Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Syria: from "authoritarian upgrading" to revolution?', *International Affairs* 88: 1, Jan. 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.

[25] Michael Westlake, 'The economics of strategic crops', UN Food and Agriculture Organization, http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/y4890e/y4890e0e.htm; 'Syria faces looming drought', Syria Relief and Development, 29 April 2014, http://syriareliefanddevelopment.org/syria-faces-looming-drought/ (both accessed 3 Nov. 2015).

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 its own agenda—have established informal social pacts with populations living under their control, offering an array of welfare services to generate popular support or acquiescence. Humanitarian assistance, owing to its overlap with welfare practices, is closely imbricated in these processes.

The impact of emergency food aid lies not only in these intangible dimensions, but also in the very real resources it provides in a context characterized by scarcity. Compared to the Assad regime's prewar expenditures on food subsidies, the value of food distributed by humanitarian organizations since the ongoing conflict began is noteworthy (see tables 1 and 2).[27] In 2014, donor-pooled funds managed by the OCHA provided food assistance to an average of 4.43 million people each month.[28] In 2015, the UN, ICRC and SARC expected to support 8.7 million civilians in Syria with food assistance.[29] Given the size and scope of this intervention, how food distributions are organized and allocated is a crucial question. Although some independent aid organizations operate in Syria on their own account, the largest international organizations involved in relief efforts rely almost exclusively on Syrian partner agencies to deliver food aid. The World Food Programme (WFP), the largest UN operational agency funding and organizing food distribution inside Syria, as well as the ICRC depend heavily on SARC and 27 government-approved NGOs to reach areas they cannot access owing to security concerns and restrictions most often placed on them by the Syrian government. WFP oversight of these food distributions has been limited.[30] Since the dramatic escalation of humanitarian aid efforts in the summer of 2012 to increase the number of people reached from 540,000 people a month in July to 1.5 million in September,[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 the neutral aspirations of humanitarian organizations, emergency food aid—organized through UN agencies and distributed by local partners—has consistently benefited the Assad regime.[33]

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[26] 'Syria allows UN to step up food aid', Al Jazeera, 16 Jan. 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/2013116141212963604.html, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[27] Nearly US$7 billion have been spent on food, shelter and emergency aid for Syrians inside and outside the country since 2012: UN OCHA, 'Total funding to the Syrian crisis 2014', http://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=special-syriancrisis&year=2014, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[28] UN OCHA, 'Syrian humanitarian assistance response plan: 2014', http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/SHARP%20Sector%20Achievements%202014%20.pdf, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[29] UN OCHA, 'Syria 2015 strategic response plan', http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2015_SRP_Syria_EN_AdvanceCopy_171214.pdf, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[30] WFP, 'An evaluation of WFP's regional response to the Syrian crisis, 2011–2014', April 2015, http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/reports/wfp274337.pdf, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[31] WFP, 'Syria: WFP scales up food distributions as humanitarian needs rise', 15 Nov. 2012, http://www.wfp.org/stories/syria-wfp-scaling-food-distributions-humanitarian-needs-rise, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[32] The latter increase occurred after an agreement between the Syrian government and the UN, which allowed the UN to partner with 44 additional local NGOs: UN, 'UN agency plans to scale up food assistance inside Syria', 16 Jan. 2013, http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43935#.VIrirvmSxB0, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[33] Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: defying Security Council on aid access', 28 March 2014, http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/28/syria-defying-security-council-aid-access; Najib Ghadbian, Syrian National Coalition letter

Table 1: Syrian government spending on food subsidies, 2003–2008

Year	GDP (US$ billion)	Spending on food subsidies	
		US$ million	*% 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 no. 437 (Brussels: European Commission, Feb. 2011), p. 22; World Bank, 'World Development Indicators: Syrian Arab Republic—GDP', http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=SYR&series=&period=, accessed 7 Nov. 2015; Ivan Kushnir, 'Gross domestic product in Syria', World Macroeconomic Research, http://kushnirs.org/macroeconomics/gdp/gdp_syria.html#change, accessed 3 Nov. 2015; authors' calculations.

The UN has repeatedly documented how the Syrian government blocks the delivery of food aid to civilians. It does so primarily through bureaucratic restrictions that seek to ensure that external resources assist the regime rather than opposition forces or those under their control.[34] UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's March 2014 report to the Security Council (UNSC) noted that 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 reduce the Syrian government's influence over such distributions eventually culminated in a decision to bypass the Damascus regime. 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 Jordan, Turkey and Iraq without the consent of the Syrian government.[36] This suggests that access was previously being withheld for less than genuine security concerns. Despite the passage of this resolution, however, the WFP's fear that the regime will cut

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to UNSC, 24 Nov. 2014, http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/548545cc4.pdf (both accessed 3 Nov. 2015).

[34] Colum Lynch, 'Syria's UN aid jam', *Foreign Policy*, 23 March 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/23/exclusive-syrias-u-n-aid-jam/, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[35] UN Secretary General's report to UNSC on implementation of Resolution 2139, http://columlynch.tumblr.com/post/80530596176/un-secretary-generals-report-to-unsc-on, accessed 7 Nov. 2015; Somini Sengupta, 'UN 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 3 Nov. 2015.

[36] Cross-border deliveries predated the resolution, but they were not carried out or funded by UN agencies or other organizations espousing neutral humanitarianism. See 'UNSC Resolution 2165', UN press release, 14 July 2014, http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11473.doc.htm, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

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 2 million civilians in rebel-controlled areas the UN estimated it could assist after passing UNSC Resolution 2165, food aid had 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. In the words of 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 for both military developments and the lives of civilians. Many of these are linked to the frame that underpins aid distribution.

Table 2: Food-related funding for Syria allocated by the Food Security and Agriculture Cluster (FSAC)[a] and World Food Programme (WFP)

Year	Funding (US$ million)	
	FSAC	*WFP*
2015	183[b]	147[b]
2014	604	542
2013	451	387
2012	111	109

[a] FSAC is the principal UN funder for the WFP, FAO and NGO partners providing food security in Syria.
[b] As of 20 May, 2015.
Sources: UN OCHA, 'Humanitarian response plan(s): Syria response plan 2015', http://fts.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha_R32sum_A1069___8_May_2015_(15_50).pdf, and 'Strategic response plan(s): Syria response plan 2015', http://fts.unocha.org/reports/daily/ocha_R1_A1069___1505081550.pdf (both accessed 3 Nov. 2015).

[37] Colum Lynch, 'UN's fear of angering Assad leaves gap in Syria aid effort', *Foreign Policy*, 30 Dec. 2014, http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/30/u-n-s-fear-of-angering-assad-leaves-gap-in-syria-aid-effort/, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.
[38] WFP, 'An evaluation of WFP's regional response to the Syrian crisis'.
[39] Lynch, 'UN's fear of angering Assad'.
[40] Quoted in Lynch, 'UN's fear of angering Assad'.

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 Autesserre, we understand frames as mechanisms by which individuals and organizations categorize knowledge and interpret it.[41] They are social objects that are embedded in routines, practices, discourses and technologies, and also in institutions. They can include ideologies, paradigms and shared definitions of particular environments.[42] Frames neither exist in isolation from actions nor come into being solely as a result of practice. Instead, they emerge from a dialectical relationship between discourse and experience, which are irreducibly and fundamentally interconnected. One of the key characteristics of frames is their ability to mould views of what is considered a problem, or a solution, by organizing and interpreting information in specific ways.[43] For example, if humanitarian aid efforts are underpinned by the 'neutrality' frame, 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 Syrian 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 Matthew 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 takes 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 the inadvertent corollaries of neutrality. 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 government elites, SARC President Abdur Rahman Attar and other members of the organization's 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 and its impact on humanitarian efforts. For Abdulrahman Omar, a paediatrician from Hama who oversees primary health care centres for the Union of Syrian Medical Relief 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

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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.
43 Autesserre, 'Hobbes and the Congo', p. 254.
44 Authors' interview with Matthew Hollingworth, WFP Syria country director, Amman, 9 Nov. 2014.
45 Authors' Skype interview with Ralph Hage, ICRC Damascus spokesperson, Amman, 29 Oct. 2014.
46 In reality, the national societies that form part of the ICRC have varying amounts of independence from domestic governments in different countries.

not to admit: 'The Red Crescent in Syria is the government.'[47] This may not reflect the political preferences of SARC volunteers, most of whom come from the local communities in which they work; yet at the level of the 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, detailed what he saw when visiting a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in government-controlled shelters near the University of Aleppo: 'Unfortunately, the aid 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 WFP 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

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[47] Quoted in 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 3 Nov. 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, and 'Why is Britain using a suspect charity to deliver aid to Syria?', *New Internationalist*, 12 Aug. 2014, http://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2014/06/12/syria-aid/ (both accessed 3 Nov. 2015); David Kenner, 'Assad's war on the Red Crescent', *Foreign Policy*, 12 Dec. 2012, http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/12/assads-war-on-the-red-crescent/, accessed 7 Nov. 2015; WFP, 'An evaluation of WFP's regional response to the Syrian crisis'.

[49] Authors' interview with anonymous WFP worker, London, 28 Jan. 2015. For a similar assessment, see Doctors Without Borders, 'Letter to the member states of the High Level Group on Syria', 18 Dec. 2013, http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/news-stories/speechopen-letter/letter-member-states-high-level-group-syria, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[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 3 Nov. 2015.

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

[52] 'Musāʿadāt al-umum al-mutahada wa a-salīb al-ahmar al-mukhasasa lisūriyyīn fi thiknāt jaīsh al-nazām 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, http://cht.hm/1PkQ604, accessed 3 Nov. 2015; Syrian National Coalition, 'Humanitarian aid supplies once again found to be used to sustain Assad's war effort', press release, 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 3 Nov. 2015.

[53] Syrian National Coalition, 'Humanitarian aid supplies once again found to be used to sustain Assad's war effort'.

Syrian National Coalition at the UN, the international 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 precludes 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 whom we interviewed shared similar ideas regarding the role of emergency food aid. Their neutral intentions occluded 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 principle 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 in the neutrality frame guiding relief efforts. Rather, they contributed to a few high-profile projects and minor 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, the power and impact of emergency food aid remained 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 basis of sovereign politics while obscuring the impact of emergency food aid on sovereign power relations. We conceptualize 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 at all levels from the household to the highest echelons of institutional power.[58] By abandoning the concept of sovereignty

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[54] Ghadbian, Syrian National Coalition letter.
[55] Lischer, 'Collateral damage'; 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* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 85.
[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, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 80.
[58] Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, 'Sovereignty revisited', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35, 2006, p. 297.

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 manifestations during the Syrian conflict. Throughout the war, sovereign power relations have been contested, rearranged and transformed on a daily basis. In practice, sovereignty is often shared or contested among 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 rule and citizenship. These sometimes contradictory and often fluid assemblages result in varied and contingent forms of order and authority. Of course, sovereignty persists—it has not disappeared; but it does so amid an intensification of ambiguities and uncertainties that have always been inherent in its operation.[59]

Building upon Schmitt, 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 as to what constitutes a state of exception defines who or what the sovereign is and delineates its position both 'outside and inside the juridical order', as part of the legal order, but also able to suspend it.[61] 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] The latter can work to deprive civilians of their citizenship rights. Despite the utility of this analysis 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, insufficiently acknowledges the complexity and ambiguity that occur 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 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 the applicability of Agamben's analysis to humanitarian spaces or conflict situations, we adopt an empirically informed approach that eschews a strictly dichotomous reading of his theory of sovereignty.

Despite humanitarian organizations' claimed lack of interest in issues of authority and order, the neutrality frame imbricates them in sovereign power

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[59] William Connolly, 'The complexity of sovereignty', in Jenny Edkins, Veronique Pin-Fat and Michael J. Shapiro, eds, *Sovereign lives: power in global politics* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[60] Carl Schmitt, *Political theology: four chapters on the concept of sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 13; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 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, p. 67.

[62] Agamben, *Homo sacer*, pp. 26–8.

[63] Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 14.

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 and community in favour of an ethical universalism that one author calls 'the secular religion of the new millennium'.[67] It replaces ties among people with the idea of equivalence among 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 1990s to label major humanitarian crises—despite the duration and protraction 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 perspective allows humanitarian organizations to point to what is happening, but without reference to agency or politics. It is a view of wartime that dehistoricizes the lives of Syrians: it cannot explain how and why people have become dependent on humanitarian assistance.[70] This view in turn limits the capacity of humanitarians to address sensitive situations proactively before they degenerate.[71] Remedies are seen as coming not from political action but from new technologies and more efficient distribution methods. By disconnecting aid recipients from the historically specific circumstances that have generated 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

[64] Mark Duffield, *Carry on killing: global governance, humanitarianism and terror* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2004), Working Paper 23; Jenny Edkins, 'Humanitarianism, humanity, human', *Journal of Human Rights* 2: 2, 2003, pp. 253–8.
[65] Liisa H. Malkki, 'Speechless emissaries: refugees, humanitarianism, and dehistoricization', *Cultural Anthropology* 11: 3, 1996, pp. 377–404.
[66] Edkins, 'Humanitarianism, humanity, human'.
[67] Laurence McFalls, 'Benevolent dictatorship: the formal logic of humanitarian government', in Fassin and Pandolfi, eds, *Contemporary states of emergency*; Edkins, 'Humanitarianism, humanity, human', p. 253.
[68] Miriam Ticktin, 'Transnational humanitarianism', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, 2014, p. 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: 3, 2007, pp. 451–74.

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interventions alter hunger-producing conditions, but by how closely they meet targeted technical objectives that quantify numbers of 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, result 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 programmes 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 in which 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 have relativized political authority and reshaped the capacities of those who participate in its production.[75] This is not to say that humanitarian organizations are entirely oblivious to the impact of aid. 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 humanitarian principles and navigating the pragmatic concerns that drive interventions. However, the very fact that these organizations are the principal decision-makers in managing certain populations and in determining who lives and who dies—swayed as they may be by international law, on-the-ground constraints and individual organizational mandates—gives them elements of sovereign power. Their participation in the fragmentation of authority and the reproduction of sovereign politics remains frequently overlooked.

The envelopment of aid 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 neighbourhoods. The first worker, who lives in a regime-controlled area of Damascus, said: '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 neighbourhood in the opposition-controlled East Ghouta suburb of Damascus, said: '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 closely determined by questions of

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[72] McFalls, 'Benevolent dictatorship', pp. 321–7.
[73] Pandolfi, 'Contract of mutual (in)difference,' pp. 369–70.
[74] Ramadan, 'Spatialising the refugee camp', p. 67.
[75] McFalls, 'Benevolent dictatorship', pp. 317–33.

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access, safety and logistics, yet neutrality veils the very political process of making these decisions, rendering it instead a question of bureaucratic and administrative micro-verdicts. Through their consistent participation in these decisions—that is, when choosing between helping a poor Syrian under regime control and saving a starving one in opposition-held territory—humanitarian organizations hold the power to make life-and-death decisions that are usually left to institutions with explicitly sovereign attributes.[76] Undoubtedly, aid agencies are hindered by legal norms, government and opposition restrictions, and military conditions when making these choices; nonetheless, they do repeatedly participate in a struggle over the state of exception.

The relationship of humanitarian organizations with sovereignty is thus extremely complex. In Syria, these organizations reaffirm and reshape sovereign power even while engaging in similar—some would say parallel—activities.[77] Rather than conceptualizing sovereignty as a static property—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 to the contingencies and contexts that emerge during war. Who holds the capacity to declare the exception? How does aid reconfigure power relations between ruler and ruled? When do these processes occur and what do they entail? These are all questions that humanitarian organizations should ask, but that tend to be precluded by the neutrality frame. Equally important is how neutrality contributes to the entanglement of aid in crucial political and military dynamics.

The political and military impact of emergency food aid

Emergency food aid to Syria has unintentionally assisted the Assad regime in a number of intersecting ways. By channelling most assistance through the SARC and other government-approved organizations, external donors have helped the regime fulfil some of its welfare responsibilities. The wartime government can reduce expenditures on food distribution and other provisionary duties at the heart of its prewar social pact with Syrian society, focusing its funds instead on military efforts. This helps the Assad regime assuage popular discontent that might otherwise translate into unrest. This prospect was made evident in violent protests against fuel, food and electricity shortages in the regime-controlled city of Latakia in late 2014.[78] Some critics have been dismayed by the UN's unwillingness to use the leverage this situation 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

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

[77] Peter Redfield, 'Doctors, borders, and life in crisis', *Cultural Anthropology* 20: 3, 2005, pp. 328–61.

[78] Suleiman al-Khalidi, 'Syria raises fuel prices to snuff out black market, soothe unrest', Reuters, 27 Jan. 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/27/us-mideast-crisis-syria-fuel-idUSKBN0L029R20150127, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

feeding so many of [Assad's] own people.'[79] All too frequently, emergency food aid has contributed to the regime's ability to exercise power over resources and people.

A steady supply of humanitarian relief has also helped regime-controlled areas to 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 have 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 simply in order to survive, 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 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 have used aid distribution in Tartous to publicize the ostensibly apolitical relief efforts, despite the unbalanced nature of the broader 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. Failure to provide basic goods to local residents at successive stages of the Syrian war has undermined public support for various fighting forces.[84] 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 centre of contemporary humanitarian aid efforts, which

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[79] Lynch, 'UN's fear of angering Assad'.
[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 3 Nov. 2015.
[82] WFP, 'WFP distributes emergency food assistance to Syrians fleeing to Tartous', 10 May 2013, https://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-distributes-emergency-food-assistance-syrians-fleeing-tartous; SANA, 'Allocating relief assistance to martyrs' families and rural development in Tartous', 3 Dec. 2014, http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=20366 (both accessed 3 Nov. 2015).
[83] Syrian National Coalition, 'UN relief aid found in regime army positions', 21 May 2015, http://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/un-relief-aid-found-in-regime-army-positions.html, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.
[84] Kelly McEvers, 'Jihadi fighters win hearts and minds by easing Syria's bread crisis', *NPR*, 18 Jan. 2013, http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2013/01/18/169516308/as-syrian-rebels-reopen-bakeries-bread-crisis-starts-to-ease, accessed 3 June 2015; Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: inside the army of terror* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 222–6; Patrick Cockburn, *The rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the new Sunni revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 114.

'holds the preservation of life to be above and distinct from any political aims'.[85] 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 by their lack of access to essential foodstuffs.[86] By advancing this outcome and thereby throwing areas beyond its control into disorder, the regime destroys the fabric of society. 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. When 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.[87] The rapidly deteriorating conditions of human life in the town sparked off protests by residents 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, neighbourhoods just a few kilometres away were benefiting from humanitarian aid. 'Food is available [even if] prices are very high,' said one activist in regime-controlled Damascus during the siege of Douma.[88] Through its absence in Douma and its availability in nearby neighbourhoods, 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 siege by the Syrian Army, during which an estimated 200 residents died as a result of malnutrition, starvation and a lack of adequate medical supplies. 'The truces lifted a huge burden from the people's shoulders,' stated one anonymous activist from Beit Sahem; 'people don't have to worry about starvation anymore.'[89] After the truce was agreed, the 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 formed a prominent part of the local rebel brigade prior to the truce. Inhabitants demanded that combatants leave the area immediately for fear of breaking

[85] Jenny Edkins, *Whose hunger? Concepts of famine, practices of aid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 120.
[86] Brent Eng and José Ciro Martínez, 'Starvation, submission and survival: the Syrian war through the prism of food', *Middle East Report* 273: 44, Winter 2014, pp. 28–32.
[87] 'Encircled by the regime and ruled by Jaysh al-Islam, Douma residents run out of options', *Syria: direct*, 26 Nov. 2014, http://syriadirect.org/main/36-interviews/1705-2014-11-26-10-01-26, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.
[88] 'Inside Damascus, regime in tight control as resources scarce', *Syria: direct*, 28 Oct. 2014, http://syriadirect.org/main/36-interviews/1637-inside-damascus-regime-in-tight-control-as-resources-scarce, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.
[89] '"Despite regime violations, the truce has lifted a huge burden"', *Syria: direct*, 14 Jan. 2015, http://syria direct.org/main/36-interviews/1786-despite-regime-violations-the-truce-has-lifted-a-huge-burden, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

the armistice that permitted the arrival of aid.[90] '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 were reported to have left.[91] In southern Damascus acquiescence, if not loyalty, was built on the back of humanitarian assistance.

Emergency food aid has also altered the war economy and political dynamics in favour of those in power. An array of military forces have profited from relief efforts that seek to distribute aid to needy residents, having positioned themselves between humanitarian organizations and the local population so as to mediate the relationship to their advantage. Supplies intended for non-combatant populations have frequently been reallocated 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'.[92] 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.[93]

In early 2015, IS confiscated WFP aid intended for civilians, either through informal taxation or simply by 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.[94]

Emergency food aid has directed the energy of militants and politicians towards external sources of material assistance, rather than towards problems experienced by the governed. In Douma, for instance, Jaish al-Islam collaborated with traders to hoard food aid and other supplies acquired from humanitarian groups rather than distributing them 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.[95] By drawing on resources made available by emergency food aid, Jaish al-Islam was able to ignore public

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[90] Post for the Committee for the Syrian Revolution in Beit Sahem, Facebook, 31 Dec. 2014, https://www.facebook.com/bs.cor/posts/905664029486305, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[91] '"Happiness" in Beit Sahem after residents force Nusra retreat', *Syria: direct*, 27 Jan. 2015, http://syriadirect.org/main/36-interviews/1813-happiness-in-beit-sahem-after-residents-force-nusra-retreat, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[92] '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 3 Nov. 2015.

[93] Authors' Skype interview with anonymous activist in Raqqa, Amman, 8 April 2015.

[94] 'How the Islamic State group steals UN food aid', *France 24*, 6 Feb. 2015, http://observers.france24.com/content/20150206-islamic-state-steals-food-aid, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

[95] Khaled Atallah, 'As Syrian army closes in, Douma residents turn against rebels', *Al-Monitor*, 24 Nov. 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2014/11/syria-douma-protest-jaish-al-islam.html, accessed 3 Nov. 2015.

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demands for accountability and assert itself unilaterally in the city. This dynamic alters patterns of accountability, enabling governing authorities to override local pressures. While ties to aid organizations and foreign allies have given Syrian opposition groups and the Assad regime access to much-needed material assistance,[96] it has repeatedly inhibited the emergence and establishment of more inclusive and comprehensive welfare systems. Given the presence of external resources, military groups have had little incentive to expand their distributive apparatus. Without such assistance, both the regime and certain rebel groups might have been forced to gather and provide resources locally.[97] The benevolent ethos of emergency food aid, and the principle of neutrality that underpins distribution, obscures the practical ways in which outside assistance can help to undermine or erode the respective rights and responsibilities of rulers and ruled, and the conventions of the relationships between them. While emergency aid can appear apolitical on the surface, the multifaceted but undeniable importance of food during wartime makes a position of 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. Humanitarian aid can be emancipatory or deeply regressive, depending on the political configurations in which it is located.[98] But decisions on distribution and allocation 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 prewar welfare practices, coupled with the rapid increase in food insecurity since the onset of the country's current conflict, have made food a highly contentious and political issue. Yet, for the aid organizations operating in Syria, providing food is not a historically contingent or context-specific political endeavour, but a neutral intervention premised on humanitarian ethics they implicitly expect others to share. Relief organizations whose operations are shaped by the neutrality frame defend their ability to distribute aid to both regime- and opposition-controlled areas, even if the respective allocations are unequal. By claiming that they make

[96] 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, Nov. 2014, pp. 1351–65; Andrew W. Terrill, 'Iran's strategy for saving Assad', *Middle East Journal* 69: 2, 2015, pp. 222–36.

[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 support, see Charles Lister, *The Islamic State: a brief introduction* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), pp. 13–23, 46–9; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, pp. 222–6.

[98] Edkins, *Whose hunger?*, p. 131.

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

What, ultimately, does the ascendancy of the neutrality frame mean, both for Syria and for the emergency food aid enterprise more broadly? Whether emergency food relief distributed in Syria demonstrates a return to older forms of neutral assistance or the fully 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 developing countries,[101] is a difficult question. Humanitarian morality—and the neutrality frame it helps justify—does seem to be a (re-)emergent modality in the legitimization of aid operations. For Fassin, politics in both peace and war is being redefined: the ascendancy 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 the role of humanitarian organizations in a global counter-insurgency strategy, in which relief functions as a 'merely discretionary international protection of last resort' meant to contain the destabilizing effects of war and underdevelopment.[103] For the present, the words and deeds of humanitarian organizations and their donors evince something 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

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[99] Authors' Skype interview with Hage, Amman, 29 Oct. 2014; authors' interview with Hollingworth, Amman, 9 Nov. 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, Jan. 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, 2001).

[102] Fassin, 'Heart of humanness', p. 274.

[103] Duffield, *Development, security and unending war*, p. 19.

[104] Caroline Humphrey, 'Sovereignty', in David Nugent and Joan Vincent, eds, *A companion to the anthropology of politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 420; Hansen and Stepputat, 'Sovereignty revisited', pp. 304–305.

how honourable the goals or the intentions of those who distribute it, emergency food aid is far from the altruistic panacea or impartial 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 alleviated suffering. Yet in the ethical claims made on behalf of marginalized populations and through the practices employed to assist those deemed '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 hesitate to draw general conclusions.[105] What we can say with some certainty, though, is that emergency food aid is not neutral, nor can it ever be.

[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 complicate the role of humanitarian organizations in the Syrian conflict.