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Compromising the humanitarian principles? Ethical foundations of humanitarian negotiations with a ruthless regime

Kristoffer Lidén and Carsten Wieland

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

Humanitarian action is commonly defined by the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. In spite of the prevalence of these principles, disagreements on their justification and practical application persist. While this is a source of great frustration among policy-makers and practitioners, it expresses familiar tensions between fundamental positions in the ethics of global politics. In this article, we explore these tensions by analysing a controversy over humanitarian compromises with the Assad regime in Syria during the recent civil war. The regime ruthlessly instrumentalised humanitarian assistance to mop up after its atrocities, suppress political opposition, and prop up its war economy. This was reflected in continuous humanitarian negotiations with the regime where humanitarian actors either had to compromise on their principles or leave the victims behind. In spite of public criticism, major agencies consistently compromised, entailing debates on whether they thereby violated their principles and whether such violation would be justified. In this article, we start out by sorting the ethical premises of this debate with a basic distinction between deontology and consequentialism, and between pluralism and solidarism. We then demonstrate that rather than falling neatly into these categories all actual positions in the debate involved combinations of all four types. This is illustrated by placing the positions along two intersecting continuums. In this way, we nuance standard accounts of the ethics of global politics while introducing a new theoretical framework to the ethics of humanitarian action.

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Introduction

The Israeli constraints on humanitarian access to Gaza during the war since 2023 put the ethics of humanitarian compromise on global display (cf. Hamamra and Shehab 2025; McNamara 2025). Should agencies for instance accept moving their camps and clinics away from the areas where they were needed the most because it served Israeli objectives? When the alternative was to lose protection from bombardment, was it then better to obey than to withdraw and leave dying civilians behind? The choice to comply in order to stay and deliver may seem straightforward until one considers its broader consequences for humanitarian action. Not only might the agencies be seen as partial– they would also send a signal to regimes and militias elsewhere that they are free to do the same. This is what the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence are made for: to ensure access, efficiency and protection for humanitarian actors. Yet, the question remains: what human sacrifices should be made for upholding these principles when ruthless political actors stand in their way?

While being more publicly visible than usual, this ethical dilemma is not unique to Gaza. State authorities and armed groups in conflict-ridden countries like Ethiopia, Sudan, Afghanistan and Myanmar also systematically prevent humanitarians from operating according to their principles at present. Humanitarians have always had to negotiate their way, also in the absence of armed conflict, and the question is not so much how to uphold ideal boundaries of a pure 'humanitarian space' as where to draw pragmatic lines in a 'humanitarian arena' (Clements 2020; Grace 2020a; Hilhorst and Jansen 2010). In practice, agencies tend to seek negotiated compromises rather than withdrawing when facing impediments to their work. These compromises involve strategic considerations of efficiency, funding, political support

CONTACT Kristoffer Lidén kristoffer@prio.org Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), PO Box 9229, Gronland NO-0134, Oslo, Norway

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and public reputation, but they also imply *moral* considerations of what is ethically justifiable within these strategic constraints. In a research project on the ethics of humanitarian negotiations, we have realized that this question of compromise not only is an ethical problem in theory but experienced as hard moral choices in practice. We see an interest among agencies in opening up about these dilemmas, but also hesitancy due to confidentiality and reputational risks (Akal, Roepstorff, and Lidén 2025).

Although the humanitarian principles are widely recognized across the humanitarian sector, their practical meaning has always been contested. As Sharpe (2024) demonstrates, neither international law nor United Nations (UN) practice provide definitive guidance regarding how conflicts between the principles should be resolved in concrete operational settings. Similarly, Labbé and Daudin (2015) argue that applying the principles necessarily requires contextual judgement rather than mechanical adherence to fixed rules. Consequently, humanitarian actors may endorse the same principles while nevertheless disagreeing profoundly about what those principles require in practice. In spite of an extensive literature on these principles and their application, we see a need for clarity on *why people with a shared understanding of a humanitarian crisis and a joint commitment to the humanitarian principles still disagree on whether and how it is ethically justified to compromise under these conditions*.

In this paper, we offer a heuristic framework for analysing this puzzle. The framework highlights different views on how to make ethical judgements (the mode of ethics) and on what is the relevant political universe for ethical reasoning (the geographical scope of ethics) (Lidén and Roepstorff 2023). Foregrounding certain positions on these questions without claiming they are the only ones to consider, we define the first dimension by the distinction between *deontology* and *consequentialism* – associated with an emphasis on *rules* and *effects* respectively (Baron, Pettit, and Slote 1997). The second dimension we define by the distinction between *pluralism* and *solidarism*, respectively seeing the *state* and the *globe* as the primary moral universe (Bain 2018; Lidén 2019). Both of these distinctions have figured prominently in debates on military humanitarian intervention, and have also variously been invoked in discussions on humanitarian action in general. Yet, they remain to be systematically studied in combination and applied to the ethics of compromise in humanitarian negotiations.

After introducing these dimensions in the context of the ethics of humanitarian compromise, we apply them to a controversy over humanitarian negotiations with the Assad regime in Syria during the war that began in 2011. The heated debate over whether more should have been done to resist the demands of the regime, and our research into how agencies negotiated and manoeuvred this space in practice, allow us to study nuances in the ethics of humanitarian action that have so far largely been reduced to black and white caricatures of being for or against the humanitarian principles as such. The case of Syria is especially suitable for this purpose because the extensive public debate surrounding humanitarian operations produced an unusually rich body of institutional reports, practitioner reflections and scholarly analyses that explicitly justified competing approaches to the humanitarian principles. As exemplified by the case from Gaza above, it resembles a wider set of cases that nonetheless need to be considered in their own right.

Through the analysis, we demonstrate that all actual positions in the debate can be related to the distinctions between deontology and consequentialism, pluralism and solidarism. Rather than falling neatly into these categories, they combine elements of all these four directions in various constellations. In order to illustrate this point, we situate selected positions along two intersecting *continuums*.

Following Weberian ideal-type reasoning, the four positions thus represent analytically simplified orientations that highlight particular normative commitments without claiming that they exist in pure empirical form (Weber 1949b, 90–103).[1] Indeed, humanitarian actors frequently combine different ethical considerations, shift their positions across contexts, and justify particular operational decisions through multiple forms of reasoning simultaneously. Deontology and consequentialism represent different ways of reasoning about moral judgement, yet people often invoke both rules and effects when justifying particular decisions. Similarly, pluralism and solidarism describe contrasting conceptions of the relevant moral community rather than fixed institutional identities. Organizations operating within state-based mandates may nonetheless appeal to universal humanitarian obligations, while

[1]Ideal types are analytical constructs that rarely exist in their pure form in social practice but accentuate a particular point of view – like in Weber's typology of rationality (Weber 1978). Indeed, our four types of ethical orientation may be seen as non-exclusive sub-types of Weber's conception of value rationality, although consequentialism overlaps with instrumental rationality in its goal-orientation (Ryan 2014).

globally oriented humanitarian actors must continuously engage with sovereign political authorities. The analytical value of distinguishing these dimensions therefore lies less in assigning actors to discrete categories than in revealing which normative considerations receive greater justificatory weight in particular arguments and settings.

Our analysis draws on a combination of (1) scholarly and grey literature, (2) conversations with humanitarian practitioners, and (3) personal experience among the team members (see the acknowledgements). The case of Syria serves the purpose of exemplifying a theoretical problem and identifying nuances that cannot simply be derived from existing theory (Flyvbjerg 2001). While carrying out a form of philosophical argument analysis, our approach takes inspiration from 'controversy mapping' in Science and Technology Studies (STS) (cf. van Eemeren and Garssen 2008). Such mapping concentrates on actors in their practical, material settings rather than starting from generalized theories that supposedly represent their views, and then explicitly *reconstructs* their disagreements and interrelations through transparent typologies and simplifications (Venturini and Munk 2021; see also Gadinger and Niemann 2025). Without producing a full-fledged controversy analysis, this is a quite accurate description of our research process. As theoretical groundwork, the analysis nonetheless remains at a rather generic philosophical level, inviting further theoretical perspectives and empirical investigations in future research.

The ethics of humanitarian compromise

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) defines the humanitarian principles as follows:

- ***Humanity***: *Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.*
- ***Neutrality***: *Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.*
- ***Impartiality***: *Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.*
- ***Independence***: *Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented* (OCHA 2022, 1).

The current formulation of these principles grew out of a critical reflection within the Red Cross Movement on its operations during WW2, in particular under the Nazi regime (Favez 1999; Pictet 1956, 1979). The resultant principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence eventually became the predominant framework for *all* humanitarian agencies in the 1990s, when adopted in the UN General Assembly Resolutions 46/182 of 1991 and 58/114 of 2004 on the coordination of humanitarian assistance. In spite of this normative alignment, there are strong disagreements within and between humanitarian agencies on how the principles are to be understood and operationalized in practice (Bradley 2023; Grace 2020b; Labbé and Daudin 2015; Sharpe 2024; Slim 2015, 2022).

As demonstrated in the following, this becomes particularly evident when political authorities or (non-state) armed groups present them with demands that contradict their principles as a condition for access, protection and support, entailing *humanitarian negotiations* (Clements 2020; Cunningham 2023; Grace 2020b; Magone, Neuman, and Weissman 2011). Should they then deny compromised assistance to people in desperate need in order to uphold the humanitarian principles? And if not – where should they draw the red line between ethically justifiable and unjustifiable compromise (Lepora and Goodin 2013)? Then President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Peter Maurer, formulated this question of compromise as follows in 2017:

> We need to be able to navigate between our principled approach and our pragmatic response; we need to support States in fulfilling their obligations and be advocates for victims; we must remain professional in highly

> politicized environments; we need to make clear distinctions between compromise and false compromise. (Maurer 2017)

This is notable coming from the head of the institution acting as the guardian of the humanitarian principles. It came against the backdrop of the war in Syria, in which, as we shall see, compromises on the principles were publicly known and criticized (e.g. The Syria Campaign 2016). Yet, humanitarians have always had to be pragmatic, as acknowledged in an official ICRC commentary on the principles: Thus, while the ICRC vigilantly oversees the maintenance of the principles of the Red Cross which is one of its cardinal objectives – we may be sure that inspired by the adage: *fortiter in re, suaviter in modo*, it will be careful to avoid dogmatism (Pictet 1979, 10). Essentially, this is not a question of compromising on International Humanitarian Law (IHL), but about how to operate within its remits (Akande and Gillard 2016b; Sharpe 2024).

Studies of humanitarian policy often resort to a distinction between a classic 'Dunantist' approach defined by the humanitarian principles, and a new 'Wilsonian' approach aligning humanitarianism with broader political objectives of justice, peace and development (Bradley 2023 Ch. 13; Gordon and Donini 2015).[2] With this distinction, we could expect the Wilsonians to be more open to compromising on the principles than the Dunantists. This is indeed the case in settings where the principles get in the way of broader Wilsonian objectives. However, as demonstrated in the following, Wilsonians get *more* restrictive than Dunantists when compromising the principles go *against* their political objectives.

In order to account for this nuance, we find it useful to break the Dunantist-Wilsonian distinction down into the above mentioned distinctions between deontological and consequentialist modes of ethical reasoning, and pluralist and solidarist accounts of global politics. As exemplified in the following, the *deontological* mode sees adherence to the humanitarian principles as an end in itself, while the *consequentialist* mode sees them as a means to achieving humanitarian ends (Radice 2019, 440–444; Slim 1997). The *pluralist* mode sees the subjection of humanitarian aid to the sovereignty of states not only as a legal requirement but as morally desirable because states are the primary political unit for moral contestation (Jackson 2000). *Solidarists*, to the contrary, think in terms of universal morality and therefore see states as secondary to a global political community (Ruacan 2025). While sharing a cosmopolitan orientation, solidarists are still committed to an international order of states on these conditions rather than replacing it with a new political order (cf. Buzan 2004).

Although it is possible to consider these as four mutually exclusive categories, we find that practical arguments always rely on both rules and effects, the state and the globe, in various constellations. Second, we find that the two dimensions always occur *together* in practice. For instance, it is impossible to draw prescriptive implications from the deontological approach without taking a stance on the moral status of the state. Instead of constructing four separate positions from the four ethical approaches, we thus focus on their *combination* along two *continuums* in our analysis (cf. the metaphor of moral theories 'climbing the same mountain' in Parfit 2013, 411; see also accounts of pluralism-solidarism as a continuum in Walzer 2004, Ch. 12; Weinert 2011).

We will now introduce the controversy over humanitarian compromises with the Syrian regime before analysing it with our framework.

Dealing with a ruthless regime

Let us begin at a checkpoint outside Darayya on 12 May 2016 where a joint aid convoy of the ICRC, UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) was halted by government forces. Like several other places, Darayya had been under siege by the government for three years, and no aid had been admitted in spite of persistent efforts. The situation was dire for the 8000 remaining inhabitants of the town that was controlled by a local council and militia supporting the opposition (AFP 2016; Shaheen 2016). Meanwhile, aid had been provided by the same organizations to government-controlled areas in the neighbourhood, presumably

[2]Placing these categories in a longer and less Western-centric trajectory, Michael Barnett (2011, 7–10) calls the Wilsonian approach 'alchemist' because it seeks to resolve the root causes of crises, and shows how it has come in many variations throughout history – not only 'liberal internationalist' but various religious and ideological iterations. Meanwhile, he calls the Dunantist approach 'emergency humanitarianism' because it concentrates on the symptoms only, and argues that it has never really existed in a pure form (Barnett 2011, 7).

reinforcing the siege tactic and being disproportionate to the needs (Siege Watch 2019; Whittall 2021). Thanks to an agreement for a cessation of hostilities brokered by the US and Russia, the convoy had been approved by the authorities in Damascus (Shaheen 2016). Yet, at the checkpoint it was demanded to remove all nutrition items for children (AFP 2016). The agencies negotiated throughout the day without success and eventually returned the convoy. In a press release, the head of the ICRC in Syria, Marianne Gasser, stated: 'There must be minimum conditions for independent humanitarian action in Syria. Today those conditions were not met. We urge the responsible parties to grant us this access immediately' (ICRC 2016). Nearly three weeks later, at the deadline set by the ceasefire agreement, a convoy was finally accepted into Darayya by the government forces. It contained no food for the starving population however, just some medicine, baby milk and vaccines (Siege Watch 2019; Whittall 2021). It was presumably a painful compromise between the aid agencies and a government intent on starving its opposition to submission.

At this point, the Syrian conflict had become one of the most complex operational environments in the history of humanitarian action (Wieland 2021). Following the outbreak of protests in 2011 and their violent repression, humanitarian organizations faced a government that asserted strict sovereign control over international assistance while simultaneously conducting brutal military operations that generated enormous humanitarian needs (Haid 2019; Leenders and Mansour 2018; Whittall 2021). International organizations were frequently required to negotiate with Syrian ministries, security agencies, provincial authorities and government-approved humanitarian partners over access permissions, beneficiary lists, staff recruitment, programme locations, implementing partners and the contents of humanitarian convoys (Bernard and Policinski 2017; Dieckhoff 2020; Khaldi 2020; Kool, Pospisil, and van Voorst 2021; Wieland 2021, 58–68). This also had to do with the safety of staff, as they could be attacked or detained if they defied the authorities (Scott 2022).

These negotiations rarely concerned whether aid should be delivered, but rather the political conditions under which delivery would be permitted. As numerous studies have documented, these conditions enabled the Syrian government to redirect assistance, reward political loyalty, reinforce siege strategies and strengthen state institutions involved in the conflict (Betare and Ghosh-Siminoff 2022; Leenders and Mansour 2018; Martínez and Eng 2016; Wieland 2021). In the words of Bellamy (2022, 389):

> Under the guise of humanitarianism, the UN channelled millions of dollars straight into the hands of Assad's family and supporters (. . .). For years it continued to supply food and medical items to government held areas, helping the government supply its friends and break the will of its opponents.

This can be described as a 'neutrality trap' in which humanitarian organizations are turned into a political instrument of the regime because their neutrality forbids them to take an active political stance against it (Wieland 2021; see also Cunningham 2023). Ironically, this trap is more effective the more gruesome the regime, because the alternative of withdrawing becomes ever more costly from a humanitarian perspective.

According to IHL, belligerents that have control of civilians must meet their basic needs. If they are unwilling or unable to do so, offers to conduct relief operations may be made. The host state is not required to accept all offers, but may not arbitrarily withhold their consent (Akande and Gillard 2016a, 488, 2016b). Meanwhile, the above mentioned UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 says that '[t]he affected State has the primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its Territory.' Throughout the war, the Syrian regime strategically invoked this requirement of consent, and withheld permissions for any humanitarian agency that did not comply (Leenders and Mansour 2018, 231). This is clearly not the intent of the resolution, as it presupposed that states would manage assistance in accordance with the humanitarian principles.

Indeed, the Assad regime was not the first to instrumentalize humanitarian action. The war in Syria happened against the backdrop of a decade of interventions for regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq where humanitarian aid was at times instrumentalised by the occupying forces (Donini 2012; Wieland 2021, 41–50). The NATO intervention in Libya had recently been justified on humanitarian grounds – to the frustration of Russia and China, but also of other regimes that saw such interventions as a potential threat. Worried of being the 'next Libya', this presumably reinforced the Syrian regime's scepticism towards international humanitarian assistance, although it already had a strong tradition of controlling international aid and suppressing civil society organizations.

As detailed by Wieland in *Syria and the Neutrality Trap* (2021), the humanitarian response was institutionally heterogeneous. The UN coordinated much of the internationally recognized humanitarian response through the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), while operational agencies including the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF implemented large-scale humanitarian programmes. The ICRC, working together with the SARC, maintained its long-standing mandate under international humanitarian law and sought to negotiate access across conflict lines. Alongside these organizations, a limited number of international non-governmental organizations – including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), CARE, Oxfam, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and many others – adopted differing operational strategies depending on their mandates, access opportunities and risk assessments. These organizational differences are analytically important because they shaped the justificatory language through which humanitarian compromises were defended or criticized.

Already in 2013, Ben Parker, who had just headed OCHA in Syria for a year, characterized the situation for humanitarian agencies as 'walking an ethical tightrope'. The answer could simply not be found in the humanitarian principles as such, he wrote, but in the 'murky – if necessary – compromises and accommodations' that had to be considered (Parker 2013, 3). One might wrongly presume that those defending the compromises with the regime did not truly care about the humanitarian principles or the regime's brutality, or that the critics arguing for pulling out were not truly concerned about the humanitarian problems and only cared about the politics. To the contrary, both sides were represented within humanitarian agencies, and they all invoked the humanitarian principles in their argumentation in some form. How, then, should this disagreement be understood?

Four combinations

Here we return to our analytical framework, starting with four ideal-typical *combinations* of the two dimensions. We will then discuss how the actual positions in the debate can be placed in relation to these ideal-types.

Deontological pluralism: rules/state

The argument for compromising with the Assad regime finds support in the combination of a deontological and pluralist interpretation of the humanitarian principles. From a deontological perspective, what matters is the intention to act in accordance with the right moral rules. (This is not to say that deontological ethics necessarily entails a commitment to the humanitarian principles but that it represents a particular way of being committed to them.) In line with pluralism, the demands of the state form the natural conditions within which these intentions are formed: challenging the legitimacy of the state is the prerogative of the citizens alone. In the example from the checkpoint outside Darayya, one might thus expect deontological pluralists to accept removing the baby food and deliver whatever they could. If anger at this outcome would strengthen domestic opposition, it would be the sole responsibility of the government.

The ICRC's combination of being a custodian of the humanitarian principles and acting on behalf of sovereign states makes it compatible with this position (Cf. Slim 1997, 251). As we will see, the ICRC is nonetheless more pragmatic and political in practice than one might expect from this categorization. National societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, like SARC, can be expected to be even more pluralist in their adherence to state sovereignty than the ICRC. As long as everything they do is oriented by the principles, they can nonetheless still qualify as humanitarian from a deontological perspective – even when accepting painful restrictions. The fact that the ICRC and SARC did not give in at the Darayya checkpoint seems to contradict this reading. However, if they expected the government to take a different stance in an eventual negotiation and did not challenge their authority to intervene as such, the decision is still compatible with deontological pluralism.

Deontological solidarism: rules/globe

From a solidarist deontological perspective, however, humanitarian agencies should not have compromised with the regime – not in the case of Darayya nor anywhere else. The sacrifices this would require, like leaving Syrian civilians behind due to government obstruction, are seen as a necessary evil and not to be blamed on the humanitarians: only by resisting interference with the principles will the global humanitarian mission be consistent.

This orientation is associated with the MSF, which was initiated (in 1972) out of frustration with the (pluralist) adherence by the ICRC and UN agencies to the orders of the Nigerian government during the Biafra war (1967–70). Like the Assad regime, the government in Lagos prevented aid to the starving population in opposition territory as part of a military strategy to crush the rebellion (Barnett 2011, 144). Accepting this in the name of state sovereignty was seen as failing the humanitarian ethos (Taithe 2004). In this spirit, the MSF defied the Syrian government and established clinics in opposition-controlled areas. The MSF still sought approval for working independently from Damascus as well, however, in line with a deontological commitment to the principle of neutrality (Khaldi 2020, 55). As documented in *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed*, the organization is nonetheless generally far more willing to compromise than an absolute deontological solidarist position would allow (Magone, Neuman, and Weissman 2011). It has rarely opted for withdrawal as an alternative to treat patients under non-ideal circumstances. Still, its way of justifying such compromises as a matter of tragic necessity rather than ethical acceptance harmonizes with a deontological outlook (Le Pape 2011).

Consequentialist pluralism: effects/state

A consequentialist pluralist would accept compromising with the Assad regime as long as it had positive humanitarian effects overall. This implies a difficult calculus, weighing the benefits against the costs of strengthening the regime that was causing most of the humanitarian problems in the first place. Contrary to solidarism, interference by the state was not itself problematic, however. To the extent that the compromises undermine the humanitarian principles, it counts negatively due to their instrumental value: humanity defines the mission, impartiality ensures that aid reaches those most in need, neutrality helps secure access from all parties, and independence protects agencies' ability to act according to their mandates. Disregarding these principles is not seen as inherently wrong, however; it is only problematic if it reduces the overall humanitarian benefits. In the case from Darayya, this approach means that returning the convoy was justified if it was expected to yield better results in the future. Using the principles for whatever they were worth in this connection was a source of leverage but not a truly moral concern.

The closest we get to consequentialist pluralist agencies in Syria was probably UN organizations like the WHO and UNDP that were solving humanitarian problems without really identifying as humanitarian agencies. Similar to solidarist multi-mandate NGOs like Save the Children and CARE, the principles premise their humanitarian operations but do not define their overall objectives. As UN agencies, they must respect the sovereignty of their member states in accordance with a pluralist ethic. National agencies like Syria Trust that are filling a humanitarian role while only paying lip service to the principles may also be placed in this category.

Consequentialist solidarism: effects/globe

According to the solidarist variation of consequentialism, lastly, aligning state sovereignty with humanitarian objectives is an end in itself. If states would observe humanitarian law and truly respect the principles of organizations, it would outweigh the benefits of compromised assistance. The idea of strengthening the Assad regime through pragmatic compromises thus goes against this agenda. Nevertheless, withholding aid from innocent civilians because of the regime's actions also comes at a high cost. Hence, solidarism also implies a hard calculation in this case, although with a much higher weight on the costs of compromise. In the case of Darayya, the eventual compromise was only acceptable if a stricter red line – halting aid until the negative side-effects of compromised aid were significantly reduced – would not at all be realistic and the signalling effects of such compromise were deemed insignificant.

International NGOs that are defined by a global political cause – be they secular or religious – can be placed in this group – like Oxfam, with a rights-based mission to fight poverty and injustice, and the Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), which is part of the labour movement. It is commonplace for such agencies to proclaim that they are *nonpartisan* but not strictly neutral because 'they side with the victims' (Barnett 2011, 201). While many such agencies opted for operating in opposition-controlled areas only (also because they were not accepted by the regime), others, like Oxfam, concluded that their overall political impact when staying in Damascus was still positive.

An ethical field of entangled red lines

When looking closer at the nuances of the controversy, however, the arguments of scholars and the behaviour of agencies hardly fall into these neat categories. Instead, they combine elements of them all, like positions in a diagram. This is illustrated by Figure 1, intuitively placing select agencies and commentators along the two axes. The positions are mere illustrations of our argument, and should not be taken too literally – which would require further inquiry and nuance. Presumably, a similar map could be drawn for staff within each of the mentioned agencies, adding to the difficulty of categorizing the agencies as a whole.

For instance, when Haid in the paper *Principled Aid in Syria* criticizes agencies in Damascus in a consequentialist manner for their impact on the war, he proposes that all agencies should unite behind a stricter set of red lines in what seems like a deontological proposition (Haid 2019). In line with pluralism, he accepts that compromises with the regime are made, while, in a solidarist logic, insisting on certain conditions for such compromise. In effect, his argument might be placed right at the centre of our map.

This idea of a continuum rather than sharp dichotomies resonates with the observation of Salomons (2014) that most humanitarian agencies see the principles from their unique political perspectives. He criticizes the assumption that all agencies should operate as if they are neutral ICRCs or MSFs and argues that everyone but these outliers should openly embrace a human rights-based approach. As Gordon and Donini (2015, 94) argue, even the ICRC does not treat neutrality so literally that it cannot

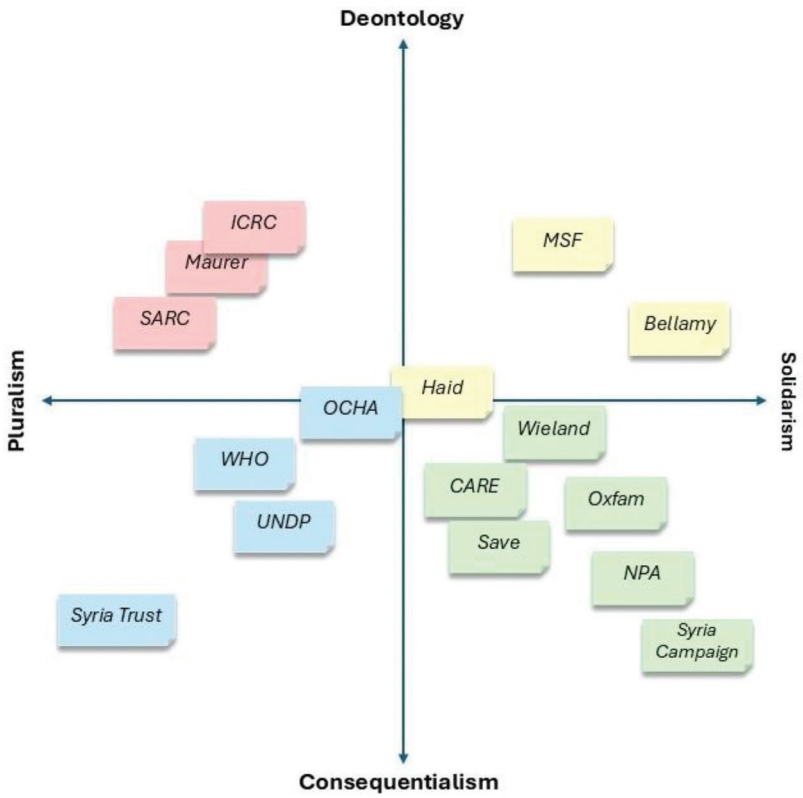


Figure 1. Four directions in the ethics of humanitarian action, with indicative positions of mentioned agencies and individuals.

think about the political causes of the problems it addresses or consider the political effects of its actions. Quoting Marion Harroff-Tavel, they remind us that neutrality is about not taking sides among contending parties or ideologies, and that Pictet in his foundational account of the principles saw neutrality as a means to the end of humanity. In the above quote of Maurer, he made a rather consequentialist argument when stating that it all boils down to 'the lasting benefit to victims'. In an interview, he later explained that the humanitarian principles are 'a moral compass' and not rules or norms of behaviour, and that it is possible to make compromises on rules if necessary without thereby compromising the principles as such: 'Principles are not, in fact, norms. Norms dictate action. They tell us, in concrete terms, what to do. Principles, by contrast, provide guidance for action. They inform and help steer our choices and behaviour' (Demeyere and Rafferty 2022, 1517). Balancing duties and consequences, it thus seems more precise to situate the ICRC, and especially Maurer's account, closer to the centre of the map.

Let us also revisit the quote where Bellamy harshly criticizes the UN and donor countries for boosting the atrocious Assad regime by giving in to its demands (Bellamy 2022). This could be read as a consequentialist solidarist attack on the pluralist premises of their approach in Syria – and it surely is to a certain extent. The subject of his critique is not the humanitarian agencies as such, however, but the foreign policies of states that failed to stop the carnage and enforce more adequate conditions for the humanitarian assistance. His take on humanitarian action in this picture is therefore presumably more 'centrist' than it seems at first. Like the *Taking Sides* report of The Syria Campaign, he nonetheless claims that the heads of UN agencies in Damascus were generally too comfortable with their situation. With our analysis, we may suppose that this had to do with a different way of thinking ethically about the problem rather than with accepting the regime's brutalities or being less committed to the humanitarian cause. For instance, a detailed account of the work of the head of World Health Organisation (WHO) in Syria, Elizabeth Hoff, who has been criticized for being too close to the regime, tells how she continuously balanced on a knife's edge between acceptance by the regime and maintaining her independence (Holth 2019). This, for instance, meant that she pretended to be travelling when invited by Assad's wife instead of rejecting the invitation or openly criticizing Syria Trust for being biased. To her deontological critics, she went too far in accommodating the interests of the regime in order to maximize the humanitarian impact of the WHO's work. And to consequentialist solidarists, she thereby helped the regime sustain its brutalities. As such, she probably departed from the centre of the map without thereby embracing an absolute consequentialist or pluralist position.

Likewise, the argument in *Syria and The Neutrality Trap* by Wieland (co-author of this article) could wrongly be placed in a radical consequentialist solidarist camp because it criticizes non-consequentialist approaches to neutrality. Indeed, he argues that agencies should have united behind collective demands and engaged in tacit and public diplomacy to reduce the regime's manipulation of neutral agencies (Wieland 2021, 132–136). His concern is nonetheless how to *uphold* a meaningful principled approach by taking its consequences into account and engaging politically – not by dismissing neutrality in general but by addressing the conditions for its meaningful observation: 'In the end, it is not about politicizing humanitarian aid from the donor's side but rather shifting the goalposts back to the centre that the Syrian regime had snatched and buried in the far corner' (136). Wieland thereby disagrees with the deontological pluralist constraints of the ICRC and OCHA that prevent them from taking such action, but does so with the same principles and objectives in mind.

Contrary to the image created by the Syria Campaign, defendants of international agencies remaining in Damascus who we interviewed had no illusions regarding the negative side-effects of their operations and were committed to reducing these to a minimum. What they could not accept, however, was the deontological solidarist contention that they should have halted their operations in order to save the humanitarian principles, and the consequentialist solidarist calculation that doing so would yield better humanitarian results. Being there and observing the humanitarian needs while experiencing Syrian politics from the inside may possibly have pushed their thinking in this consequentialist pluralist direction.

Essentially, we do not claim that the moral orientation of the above mentioned organizations explains *why* they take up these positions. As just argued, it is the state based mandate of organizations like the UN and ICRC that ties them to a pluralist mast. Similarly, we see a clear pattern where organizations that were founded as designated humanitarian entities have a deontological orientation, while development agencies and political organizations that eventually took on humanitarian tasks tend to align with a consequentialist orientation.

Although presumably harmonizing with the moral orientation of their founders, staff and supporters, their political character also conditions their way of justifying their behaviour in moral terms. These are evidently just empirical hypotheses for further investigation.

The possibility and desirability of alignment

Having constructed this ethical map and argued that most actual positions converge towards the centre of the model, we may ask what the very centre implies in terms of policy prescription. There is nothing in our argument so far that substantiates that such a middle ground would be more ethically justifiable than any of the ideal-types (cf. Weber 1949a, 10). Yet, it is tempting to conceive of the centre as a 'golden mean' that perfectly balances the two oppositions. What we find, however, is that the centre can licence not one but two, seemingly contradictory, prescriptions.

The first alternative – *unity* – is well represented by Haid's argument for better aligning the red lines of agencies with the consequences of their principles. This would imply a need for all humanitarian actors and donors to unite in collective bargaining based on a shared set of red lines. Haid argues that the benefits of the combined aid for the regime was so significant that it would have accommodated such red lines had the agencies been able and willing to rally behind them. It would also have avoided undermining the negotiation position of humanitarian agencies elsewhere. Those defending the compromises would not necessarily oppose this in principle, but regard it as unrealistic in practice.

The second option – *strategic diversity* – is a version of what actually happened in Syria. In practice, humanitarian agencies and donors along the different sides of the spectrum balanced eachother out, as we see from our map. Although the competition and misalignment among different agencies in these negotiations was certainly a problem, there may also have been an unrecognized element of strategic divergence (cf. Nilsen 2020). With an imperfect analogy, this resembles a chess game where some agencies are, at times, 'sacrificed' so that better placed agencies can advance.

Perhaps one approach does not exclude the other, however. It would be conceivable to make the strategic division as coherent as possible while working towards a united position. The question remains, however, whether such a unitary ideal would be preferable to the more flexible alternative of strategic diversity.

While being preferable to the distinction between Dunantist and Wilsonian humanitarianisms, our scheme is still highly reductive. Essentially, it does not include ethical critiques of humanitarianism as such. In line with the reflections of Venturini and Munk (2021, Ch. 8) on the politics of controversy mapping, it is worth considering how the model thereby (mis)represents the ethics of humanitarianism as 'humanitarian ethics'. Our intention is not, however, to end the discussion there but facilitate more precise ethical analyses of this topic in the future.

Conclusion

We opened by asking whether humanitarian agencies should accept working under partial conditions dictated by Israeli authorities in Gaza. If we think of this question from the perspective of desperate innocent civilians, it sounds rather egregious. Denying assistance because the state responsible for the bombing does not respect humanitarian principles appears ethically untenable. Yet, humanitarian agencies have to draw certain red lines when negotiating the terms of their assistance – also because there are limits to what they can achieve under such constraints. The problem is where to draw those lines, and which compromises to enter. Agencies primarily think about these questions in terms of strategy and efficiency. Still, they also need to justify their decisions in moral terms.

Through our analysis, we have seen how such justification may be radically diverging. In order to make sense of this misalignment, we have identified two generic dimensions that are at play in any such justification: how to make ethical judgements (the mode of ethics) and what is the relevant moral universe (the geographical scope of ethics). Combining these, we have shown how arguments in this debate can be situated between pure forms of deontology and consequentialism on the hand, and of pluralism and solidarism on the other. We used this framework to analyse the ethical profiles of different agencies that engaged in Syria. More attention should be devoted to this kind of variation instead of just presenting it as a question of being for or against compromising on the principles as such.

In a recent report, Barber and Bowden (2023, 1) refer to the question of compromise as an 'ethics gap' that must be filled with a structured ethical decision-making process: 'Accomplishing this will require a major shift in approach within the humanitarian community, as well as new processes supported by ethicists and staff training programmes'. Whereas such decision-making frameworks seek to improve ethical deliberation within organizations, the theoretical framework developed in this article seeks to explain why equally principled actors may nevertheless arrive at different ethical judgements. Recognizing these underlying differences in normative reasoning may itself contribute to more reflective and transparent humanitarian decision-making.

By reconstructing the principal ethical logics underlying disagreement over humanitarian compromise, this article thereby offers a framework for analysing future controversies without presupposing that one ethical orientation must prevail. The framework is thus intended as an interpretive rather than adjudicative tool: it clarifies the ethical structure of humanitarian disagreement without claiming to resolve it. In doing so, it seeks to contribute both to scholarship on humanitarian ethics and to wider debates about the relationship between ethical principles, political constraint and practical judgement in global politics.

The war in Syria happened during a transition from a liberal era of rights-based Wilsonian humanitarianism to a post-liberal era in which not only human rights but the humanitarian principles are meeting mounting resistance (Cunningham 2023; Fiori 2019; Fiori et al. 2021; Hopgood 2019; Pearson, Girling-Morris, and Nelson-Pollard 2025). The persistent confusion about what it means to uphold these principles under political constraint is thus a challenge not only for individual negotiations but for negotiating the future of humanitarian action in general. Transcending the influential Dunantist-Wilsonian divide by breaking it down into more precise distinctions should be a step in the right direction.

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ORCID

Kristoffer Lidén http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3078-4769

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