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# Dismantling the Humanitarian Fortress: Presence, Access, and Risk in the 'Syria Response'

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how risk, presence, and access contribute to the categorization of actors in the humanitarian response to the Syrian conflict, with a focus on international NGOs and their local partners in Syria. Considering the humanitarian actor as a loosely defined category, three main streams of narration are highlighted: international NGO personnel, both international and national staff, and the Syrian partners themselves. Through an investigation of the design and implementation of remote management strategies in the Syria response, the author engages with questions surrounding presence, access, and risk to understand remote management and risk management embedded with the construction of the humanitarian dilemma in Syria. The author explores weaknesses in the delivery of humanitarian aid suggesting inequalities regarding security, knowledge sharing, and among humanitarian actors.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **1. FIELD DIARY ENTRY 1: THE 'SYRIA RESPONSE' – THE RIDDLE INSIDE AN ENIGMA, JANUARY 27, 2015**

Senior level staff of a large humanitarian and development organization tuned in for a virtual meeting. The call pertained to the current state of funding allocations and program activities constituting their response to the ongoing Syrian crisis. Calls are organized periodically in lieu of more frequent face-to-face meetings considering the geographical diversity of staff – calling in from Beirut, Bangkok, Geneva, and everywhere in between. As an intern for the organization at the time, I had the opportunity to listen from the Geneva office.

I struggled to navigate the call. I was not familiar with words and phrases used to describe various scenarios. Members were constantly saying, 'It's in the pipeline,' which I later learned refers to funding timelines. This situation, "It's stabilizing" and that program, "It is scaling up." What does this mean exactly? The brevity of the call and simplified country updates took me aback. When I was told this would be a confidential meeting to discuss sensitive issues, I expected that members of the working group would go into more depth on the challenges they faced reaching beneficiary populations and on their remote management strategies to deliver aid across borders. The call was not what I had initially anticipated. Rather, it was a foreshadowing of what I would discover as this research endeavor unfolded.

The humanitarian response for the people of war torn Syria has been a region-wide operation encompassing Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and directly inside Syria. It is a space of conflict, coordination, movement, and momentum. However, the 'Syria response' and the motives behind it are wide-ranging depending on which organization is under investigation. As for the international non-governmental organization (INGO) where I interned, it now operates in all mentioned countries and conducts cross border aid delivery into Syria, when deemed feasible, through partner organizations typically native to the region. Each separate country office that constitutes the overall 'Syria response' has distinctive programming, different line management, and sources of funding. Three separate organizational member states, all of which also hold membership with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), manage and oversee their own separate countries within the Syria response. The United States manages projects in Jordan and Turkey, France in Lebanon, and Germany handles operations from Iraqi-Kurdistan. Unsurprisingly, coordinating efficiently is always being discussed and reimagined.

During the call, a staff member commented on the need to have a clearer, more holistic picture of the organization's actions. Despite my novice position, I was not the only one left wondering what the Syria response means and what kind of risks it entails for the organization, to independent members, and more so to individual actors in the field. Establishing whose role is what and who reports to whom was expressed in the call as extremely challenging. Another pressing challenge mentioned was the need to "link with other actors," seeing that internal reporting mechanisms were weak and the external sources of information relating to the conflict were few and far between. What kind of 'other' actors were they referring to?

"It's a riddle inside an enigma," a voice rang out over the intercom, concluding the day's call.

As I embarked on this research about humanitarian organizations and the Syria response, the puzzle never solved itself. The enigma never proved more comprehensible. But what did appear evident to me is that the challenges of accessing 'vulnerable populations' in Syria go beyond the beneficiaries of aid. Humanitarian access is a challenge to fulfill much bigger projects beyond saving individual lives. Access is needed for the initial rapid response that humanitarians so often refer to in conflict and disaster settings. But even more so, access is part of long-term (non) political processes that seek to build a civil society in post-conflict realities or futures, of which humanitarian actors anticipate to lead.

Running parallel to discussions on access and presence is the notion of risk. Who is at risk and what does risk entail in the Syria response? In order to understand these dilemmas that define humanitarian operations in Syria, humanitarian voices must be heard in more nuanced ways. I came to realize that an analytical narrative of the aid community in Syria deserves fruition far beyond media headlines and situational reports.

## **2. FIELD DIARY 2: RESPONDING TO THE SYRIAN CRISIS, MARCH 17, 2015**

Al Jazeera published an article entitled, "You probably won't read this piece about Syria" (2015). I was moved by the text after returning from Amman, Jordan, where I had spent several weeks interviewing members of the aid community to get a sense of the situation on the ground. A photo of a woman's face drenched in blood introduced the article:

There's something in her eyes. Something more than bafflement you so often see in the faces of innocent victimized by the wars of others. It's something that haunts. Something that reaches you most powerfully not in your mind, but somewhere more prosaic. In your guts. In your bones. (Malone, 2015)

This frank piece was featured two days after the four-year anniversary of the beginning of the Syrian civil war. Al Jazeera was but one of a slew of news sources pouring out content on the Syrian crisis – ‘documentaries, powerful polemics, Syrian paintings, infographics, analysis, interviews, features and news’ (ibid). Despite such expansive publicity, what Al Jazeera realized is more haunting than the woman's bloodied gaze. Viewership was dramatically low, which according to them proves the world's stark apathy for the ongoing human cost of violence and upheaval in Syria. People are tired of reading about this drawn out conflict like many other previous and ongoing protracted situations. The suffering in Syria has lost its luster. Other more recent human calamities such as the Nepali earthquake have taken center stage in our hearts and minds. UN agencies and international NGOs direct their attention towards gathering funds and marketing their heroic presence in today's global disaster imaginary. But in all honestly, how many more pictures of vulnerable refugees in camps can be posted to social media sites that will have a real impact on media viewership and on donors?

Moving into the fifth year of the conflict, Syria is in dire straits. The violence and human upheaval has spilled over into every border. “The human toll has been staggering, and the destruction continues unabated...estimates are obsolete as soon as they are calculated.”<sup>1</sup> Whether working in the region before the war or establishing a presence after the crisis began, the majority if not all international NGOs now saturate the borders of neighboring countries. Driven by varying mandates, the overarching intent to ‘save lives’ serves as a springboard for bolstering humanitarian response mechanisms. Ultimately though, humanitarian principles are suffering from manipulation and irrelevancy. As the conflict rages on, seemingly good intentions bring looming challenges and risks.

The stark truth is that no matter the frequency and multitude of information produced on the war in Syria, no one really knows the full story [in real-time] nor do they know how to make it stop, it seems. Humanitarian actors struggle to gain access to the most hard-hit places and unreachable victims of war. International NGOs and aid

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 10, 2015



organizations have forged their presence in the region but even with a strong reputation and a mandate to save lives they face mounting external and internal pressures coupled with widespread donor fatigue. Human suffering has not eased but intensified. Warring parties prove they are willing to battle indefinitely to gain territory, to deify contemporary political order, and to sculpt reality according to their own aspirations. With no end in sight, humanitarian organizations appear to be in it for the long haul. But do they have the stamina and the leverage to maintain their presence in Syria despite challenging, risk induced, and unpredictable circumstances? What keeps them going despite the odds?

Some humanitarian actors are reluctant to maintain a direct, physical presence inside Syria due to previous attacks on aid workers and foreseeable threats. Ensuring the safety and security of staff has been an utmost challenge for UN agencies and INGOs as aid workers have found themselves center-stage of terrorist activities and atrocities of war. Despite the media's obsession with the most recent killings committed by the Islamic State and other armed, non-state actors, violence targeting aid workers in conflict zones is certainly not a new phenomenon nor unique to the Syrian conflict. But the recently unrelenting frequency of attacks against and kidnapping of aid workers and journalists has made working in Syria the most dangerous job in the world (Doyle, 2014) (Miller, 2014). It is not a matter of *if* but when another violent episode will threaten the operational security of humanitarian organizations and their field staff. All of these facets and more are expressed by INGOs as cause for widespread informational and operational gaps that define the current humanitarian landscape in Syria.

The UN Security Council resolution 2191 seeks to enable cross border humanitarian aid delivery to opposition held and government-controlled areas (Security Council Meetings Coverage, 2014). Despite the formation of legal tools to override internal bureaucratic obstacles when attempting to deliver aid across borders, international NGOs trying to establish their presence in Syria are fraught with logistical and security concerns which prevent them from being willing to work directly in besieged, government-controlled and opposition-held areas within Syria. This means that successful aid services have been virtually non-existent or extremely scarce countrywide. The need is unquestionably far beyond what the international humanitarian community has been capable of providing thus far. Refugees and internally displaced populations struggle to cope with lack of clean water, food, housing, clothing, and even staying alive. As this situation worsens, risk aversion

strategies, so often leaned upon by humanitarian actors, are proven in need of reformulation. At which point, local actors emerge from the shadows.

Maintaining presence and establishing sustainable access are necessities for humanitarian actors in operations like the Syria response. More than a duty towards humanity, it is part of the job as an aid worker to gain access, provide aid to beneficiaries, monitor the situation, write reports, and keep donors in the know. Or as one aid worker made clear about humanitarian work, “It all comes back to keeping the donor informed – a cycle of reporting that ends with accountability to the donor.”<sup>2</sup> It’s the finance-based strategies and processes that make humanitarian work a job like any other. However, when your work is to save lives you encounter multiple grey zones that make ticking boxes and writing lessons learned complicated, to say the least. I can imagine at some point the need to get the work done is prioritized over seemingly peripheral issues that are placed on the sidelines behind project deadlines and financial statements. But when people’s lives are at stake, determining notions of risk and which lives are more at risk than others cannot be disregarded. The challenges that organizations now face in responding to the needs in Syria has prompted or should prompt them to rethink inequalities and moral dilemmas embedded within the humanitarian system. Real dialogue on these issues has been a long time coming.

Everyone within the humanitarian space possesses certain types and levels of risk. However, some more than others carry significant burdens of risk and this has proven to be something that the humanitarian community is willing to acknowledge but not change, referred to by Didier Fassin as “the dialectic between lives to be saved and lives to be risked” (2007, p. 500). How can ‘saving lives’ translate to risking others? Many see this conflict has a momentous turn in the field and ideology of humanitarianism, where actors face challenges threatening the humanitarian principles and the very notion of humanitarianism itself.

Presence materializes in all shapes and forms. Violence has been committed against some humanitarian actors as insecurity prevails and prevents their undeterred mobility. The conflict and the evolving fragmentation of groups vying for power and territory either prevent, deter, or manipulate most forms of direct [international] humanitarian presence. Moreover, the majority of INGOs were not present in Syria before the civil war broke out. A regional director for a humanitarian organization concluded that establishing an office in Syria even before the war was an impossible feat, with absolutely no margin of maneuvers.

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 11, 2015

They [government officials] were deciding all of your staff. They were deciding all of your international staff, listening to you, following you etc. So what is the point? That is why I think most organizations don't really know the country. It's probably one of the worst cases we can think of.<sup>3</sup>

In order to maintain their presence and scale up capacities, INGOs hire 'local partners' to carry out activities in places proven to be insecure and subsequently unreachable for members of the international community, especially those from western nations. Taking on and managing local partnerships is one of the key strategies of 'remote management.' According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), remote management is defined as the withdrawal for security reasons of international staff and the transfer of program responsibilities to local staff or partner organizations (Howe, Stites, & Chudacoff, 2015). The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) defines remote management as a type of operation carried out from a distance whose nature is a reactive unplanned position due to deteriorating security conditions (Harmer, Stoddard, & Haver, 2010, p. 14).

What I am most interested in discussing and even problematizing in this research is how risk is conceived, discussed, and what it actually means in relation to different humanitarian actors positioned within remote management. Remote management has been the predominant operational modality in Syria since early on in the crisis and will prevail as increased reluctance on the part of the international aid community to take on security risks has inevitably transferred risks to local partners (ibid).

INGOs struggle to monitor and evaluate how and whether programs are working on the ground when direct presence is considered unviable. In remote operational and programmatic settings, programs and aid delivery are implemented through partnerships with emerging local groups, most notably Syrian diaspora organizations. These local actors serve as the delivery of aid to beneficiary communities and in turn, bring back local knowledge and serve as informational assets for international humanitarian entities. INGOs face pressures to be accountable and transparent to their donors by ensuring that earmarked funds channeled into Syria are being implemented by their local partners according to donor instructed guidelines. The international humanitarians positioned at a distance rely on local actors to access real-

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<sup>3</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 5, 2015

time data on the crisis. Compliance, trust, and risk have become fundamental traits and perhaps burdens of the INGO-local partner relationship in the Syria response. INGOs must be compliant to their donors' demands. Local partners must be compliant to their INGO counterpart(s). Trust between all actors serves as the idealized glue that binds these relationships.

INGOs are well aware of their actions. They have conceptualized what kinds of risks they are either adverse to or willing to endure to get their work accomplished. They know what kinds of risks are completely unacceptable in light of donor demands that in turn drive decision-making and security protocols. They also know how to work around operational obstacles to deliver their aid projects without having to put their international staff in harms way. They remove the physical presence, work remotely, and employ 'local knowledge' to do the work for them. It is completely risk adverse while simultaneously 'empowering local communities,' 'reinforcing local leadership' and a host of other overused development jargon and phrases. But they then run into the problem of a newly coined phrase – "risk transfer." *What kind of risks are we transferring to local partners?* Local partnerships and risk transfer have been hotly discussed quite recently and will appear more and more in case studies and reports as the Syrian conflict drags on (Singh & EISF Secretariat, 2012) (Howe, Stites, & Chudacoff, 2015). How do organizations work around this idea of risk transfer and attempt to ensure that actions are taken to mitigate the transfer of risk to partners with whom they may never physically interact?

I do not attempt to problematize risk and risk transfer. I will leave that to the never-ending risk management discussions that take place at INGO headquarters. Rather, I will think through whether and how humanitarian assistance produces hierarchies of knowledge, society, and fragments, subjugates, and silences the local (Mosse, 2005, p. 4). This is evident in the formation of new subjectivities that have become frontline actors in the humanitarian response to the Syrian conflict. The distinction between humanitarian actors runs parallel to the conceptualization of risks and notions that follow including risk threshold and risk transfer.

The purpose of this graduate dissertation is to understand the work of geographically, institutionally, and professionally diverse categories of actors that constitute the Syria response. Humanitarian actors may include UN agencies, state-sponsored organizations, local grassroots, large international NGOs, and even private sector entities. For the limited scope of this master's thesis, I focus on international NGOs and their local partners in Syria. I conduct an investigation of the design and

implementation of remote management strategies of several INGOs in the Syria response. Considering the humanitarian actor as a loosely defined category, I highlight three main streams of narration: NGO personnel, both international and national staff, and the Syrian partners themselves. Their narratives combined shed light on the institutional constraints, inequalities, and fragmented realities that define the humanitarian landscape in Syria. Although I consider critically, I do so with optimism as I speculate on the future of humanitarian assistance and presence in Syria.

I recognize that in order to understand the dilemma in Syria and beyond as the conflict spills over its borders, it is necessary to engage with questions surrounding presence, access, and risk. Information and knowledge production serve as a basis for problematizing the way in which different categories of actors are situated in remote management. How do information sharing platforms and mechanisms promote a hierarchical typology of actors and risks within the humanitarian response in Syria? Lack of information is not a new phenomenon for the humanitarian community. Deficits in both information sharing and cooperation between actors have been characteristics of many recent humanitarian crises. These issues will continue to pose grave concern unless the humanitarian community as a network of peers chooses to overcome differences and mobilizes their knowledge for the betterment of humanity.

I focus on challenges surrounding the notions of presence, access, and risk as a way to articulate what Didier Fassin has coined and what others concur as the 'politics of life' (2012). The politics of humanitarianism, the politics of security, is indeed a politics of life. But realizing the humanitarian space as a politics of life is just barely scratching the surface. Furthermore, I draw heavily from the work of Larissa Fast and others who promote a revamp of the humanitarian system and a shift to a humanity-based approach to humanitarian action and security. By reevaluating how they operate in remote and insecure environments, not just acknowledging but promoting and empowering previously silenced voices to take the driver's seat, humanitarian assistance can thrive, save lives, and ultimately remain relevant in a space filled with other actors vouching for their presence and public recognition. I seek to bring forth nuanced perspectives, contributing authorship of what Fast describes as micro-level factors that "influence an individual or collectivity of humanitarian actors and therefore endow them with agency in a way that global, macro-level factors do not" (2010, p. 16). As security experts can agree, it's a matter of building a "culture around risk." For risk and culture to merge, humanity must take center stage.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODS AND GEOGRAPHY**

Considering the limited amount of existing literature and studies in progress, my research relies heavily on interviews I conducted over a period of several months. My internship with a humanitarian and development organization afforded me access to many sources and contacts. I initially utilized my colleagues and their networks as a springboard to connect with others. Many interviews were conducted over the phone or via Skype, while others were conducted face-to-face during a three-week trip to Amman, Jordan, in February of 2015. In addition to interviews, I draw from those organizations that graciously provided working papers and internal documents on their remote management strategies and approaches to working with local partners. Some of these internal documents I refrain from quoting directly as the nature of their content is considered highly sensitive. While others bestowed material which I am permitted to utilize anonymously throughout this dissertation.

Since there is little in terms of similar data or previous research available on the topic of humanitarian action in remote settings and on the lived experiences of humanitarian actors, I use these primary sources with the utmost integrity. In fact, because of the sensitive nature of the topic and considering remote management activities are ongoing in Syria, I did face limitations in speaking with experts in the field. Aside from timing and access constraints, it is something that many people are reluctant to discuss for several reasons, some more personal than others. Hence, information can be scarce and I rely on what I have given the time, access, and sensitivity constraints.

While the topic of my thesis centers on the response of humanitarian organizations and the experiences of actors in and around Syria, I touch upon other contexts as anecdotes to further illustrate the challenges of remote management in Syria. The majority of my informants have worked in other insecure environments, managing in remote settings and with local partners in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. I visit these settings as a linking exercise and to realize the kind of operational, moral, and analytical lenses needed to approach the Syrian response in more holistic and humanistic terms.

My informants have shared experiences and sentiments in field settings, in the midst of wars, refugee camps, and post-conflict environments. Some praise the efforts of the organizations they have worked for and describe the heroic endeavors of their peers, expressing devotion and camaraderie in the midst of hardship working conditions. While others admit frustrations and apathy towards their employers, even

going as far as becoming “whistleblowers,” denouncing actions taken in the field that led to the failure of programming, the loss of funding, local support, and even the loss of lives.

After interviewing several individuals from different positions and organizations, I have decided to anonymize not only my informants when incorporating their accounts into discussion but also their affiliated organizations. While this decision may hinder a kind of in-depth interrogation of the aid system, considering I do not have the ability to conduct a comparative analysis of remote management strategies’ between various organizations, I seek to provide an initial foundation for the potential academic rigor this field may be afforded. Pierre Minn suggests that many research projects are “too disparate and decontextualized to offer an in-depth or nuanced understanding of the consequences of humanitarian aid” (2007, p. 7). I aspire to contribute ethnographic account that illuminates social contexts in and through which humanitarian interventions take place despite the limitations I faced accessing the field and being allowed to make distinctions between organizations and testimonies. For extensive research and analysis to flourish, I have realized that organizations need to be more willing to share information, to be accountable for not only their successes but also their failures, and most importantly, be open to collaboration with one another to ensure a safer and more accountable humanitarian space.

The order and way in which my fieldwork played out is something I feel worthwhile to explain. After spending several months interning for one such NGO at their headquarters in Geneva, I decided it was necessary given the nature of my topic, to witness for myself what was happening on the ground, at least from the proximate peripheries of these remote settings. Even if I was just observing from a regional hub in the Middle East be it Amman, Gaziantep, or Beirut, it would be as close to the conflict and the humanitarian situation as I could feasibly get. And then again, the objective of this research was not to study the conflict itself but the backstage operational processes from the peripheries. From the beginning I knew that staying in Geneva, waiting for many of my informants to return my emails, was not going to get me very far. I needed to be there. Somewhere.

The original plan was to travel to Gaziantep. Due to unfortunate circumstances, this plan was annulled in December when news came of the discovery of an explosives cache being stored by an unknown party in Gaziantep. As far as I knew at the time, the humanitarian community in Turkey was wary of possible threats. Around the same time, the organization’s Turkey office was on high alert as it became apparent that an

unknown party was monitoring them. With too many unknowns and suspicions, traveling to Gaziantep proved unfeasible, as it was clearly not a safe place to be for a researcher.

I changed my plan suddenly and landed in Amman in early February. It was fitting to go to Jordan seeing that many organization's regional hubs are based in Amman. Many of the people I had previously spoken with about remote management were either based in Amman or traveled frequently to the Hashemite Kingdom's capital. When I began rephrasing emails to indicate I would be physically present in Jordan, people started to reply. My calendar filled up rapidly.

#### **4. FIELD DIARY ENTRY 3 – NEGOTIATING MY PRESENCE**

Conducting this research was a learning process for me. Admittedly along the way, I was not sure where I was headed as I encountered challenges negotiating my position both within the humanitarian space and the academic realm. Unlike David Mosse's interpretation of ethnographic framework that, "turns a self-critical lens onto the anthropologist-actor as a member of a transnational community, speaking from within," (2005, p. 11) my roles as intern and researcher proved conflicting, contradicting and at times, limiting.

I initially assumed that taking on both roles would expand my access to information and my capacity for understanding how humanitarian assistance is carried out in Syria. As an intern in Geneva, I privileged from active membership in meetings on safety and security issues and impromptu discussions on risk and risk management. I participated in security-related conferences and meetings where I was able to get a sense of who's who in various organizations and the manpower behind headquarters and the field. I felt positive when imagining the kind of fieldwork experience I was about to encounter. However, upon arriving in Jordan I quickly realized that although organizations were happy to meet me, many were not willing to share their operational intimacies. Perhaps, my intern status did not offer the same privileges and access as a staff member. Being a student was also problematic. Once I moved past talking about doing the research and actually started doing it, I realized the micro politics internal to any organization. My limited position within this environment did not always afford me the access I imagined it would.

As a student doing research, I was in some way outside of the aforementioned politics. Running in parallel contradiction, being a student placed me on another end of this political spectrum. I do not doubt some practitioners had reservations and



skepticism regarding sharing information and insights with me. Past encounters with researchers might have had an influence as well. For example, in Jordan I applied for a visitor's pass to the Zaatari refugee camp. In order to send my application, I liaised with a UNHCR external relations officer. Expressing my motivation and reasons for visiting the camp, she explained that visiting the camp has become extremely difficult for researchers. Many have behaved unethically, quoting residents without their permission and taking pictures of unveiled women, jeopardizing their identity and religious sensitivities. What fellow visitors do and how they act can have detrimental effects on the research of others no matter how you identify yourself. Ultimately, I was not granted access to Zaatari as a student nor as an intern of an INGO.

And yet, I contradict myself. I was quite surprised at times by the way some of my informants perceived me. During an interview, I asked a field emergency coordinator to tell me what he thought about his organization's risk levels and how risk thresholds are determined. He immediately planted the question back on me, "well you are the intern, aren't you suppose to know that?" He then extrapolated on how risk levels are not determined by him but by his supervisors who sit at headquarters in Geneva. Rather than being sarcastic, he assumed I should know more about risk than I actually did at the time. This encounter made much more sense to me later as a reflected on my positionality post-fieldwork.

Despite limitations or contradictions, I tried to work with both sides of my identity – and explained to my informants how being both a student and an intern motivated my research. In Jordan, NGO staff knew me primarily as an intern. Scholars and independent researchers were happy to discuss with me as a student writing my thesis. Some of my informants were interested to know more about my anthropological background and even provided tips on how to frame and structure my thesis. Others were wary of speaking to me because of concerns they had regarding who would have access to my research after final submission of the thesis. Assumptions aside, the majority of my pursued informants were willing to speak with me and shared their insights, of which I am extremely grateful.

I was not granted access to speak to local partners in Jordan. The Hashemite Kingdom is not the most ideal location to meet with local partners considering that most are situated along the border of Turkey or in northeastern Syria. Very few local partners operate from the Jordanian border and even fewer, under secrecy, operate from the Lebanese side. When the plan to travel to Turkey fell through, the next best option was Jordan - to make the most of the resources on what I could gather

regarding humanitarian remote management. Jordanian authorities do not officially acknowledge or allow cross border aid delivery and programming. Instead, they unofficially allow INGOs to run their operations cross border under the radar. The Jordanian government basically “looks the other way” at the delivery of aid across the border. This makes for an extremely sensitive issue that the vast majority of INGOs and Jordanian actors are not willing to discuss. Although it has been extensively discussed and decided unanimously by the humanitarian community that NGO’s do not have to adhere to the Syrian regime, the Jordanians do not want to publically reveal their support to assist internally displaced peoples without the consent from the Syrian regime.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to add that I am not a newcomer to the Levant region. I previously worked and studied in Jordan and Morocco and returned to the region several times over the past six years. I have fond memories of Syria. Back in 2009, I decided to join a road trip with two other students I had met while studying in Amman. Even though I had spent the previous four months in Jordan, I had no prior conception of neighboring Syria. At that time, the political situation was relatively safe. I think of it now as an eclipse or a period of doldrums. I remember reading an article for a class on Syria’s progressive and shifting democratic politics. There had even been a recently appointed US ambassador residing in Damascus at the time. For all I knew at the time, it was a somewhat stable and quiet country bordering Lebanon and Jordan. Upon entering the country by taxi, I felt bombarded by a never-ending series of billboards displaying President Bashar Al-Assad’s face with welcoming messages. These experiences come to mind frequently as I attempt to imagine the humanitarian landscape in Syria and what movement across this border looks like today.

## **5. HUMANITARIANISM – HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND PRESENT DAY STRUGGLE**

The study of humanitarianism and humanitarian intervention constitutes a growing body of literature housed within an array of academic disciplines most notably in political science, economics, law, public health, and more recently in sociology and anthropology. More often than not however, epistemic and disciplinary studies on humanitarian responses to war and conflict are a vehicle for policy development, either internally coordinated or funded by the very humanitarian organizations and NGOs

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<sup>4</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 14, 2015

under investigation. William Fischer discerns that the majority of existing literature and anthropological studies on humanitarianism and non-governmental organizations is replete with sweeping generalizations and positive praise for NGOs 'doing good' (1997, p. 441). As a result, there are minimal independent research projects dedicated to critical engagement of humanitarian issues – those that force practitioners to reevaluate their positioning and institutional motives. Academia and practice would benefit from nuanced and multi-dimensional research that sheds light on humanitarian realities and is not afraid to question the inequalities and blow the whistle on wrong doings.

Anthropology can provide an analytical framework to enhance humanitarian action, ensure its success, and remain relevant in emergencies. According to Pierre Minn, an “anthropology of humanitarianism will hopefully contribute to our understanding of the lived experiences of aid, both on the receiving and the giving ends” (2007, p. 10). An anthropological investigation of humanitarianism, from the vantage point of the lived experiences of humanitarian actors, as mediums for social and political change, is much needed to complement existing literature and the humanitarian field of practice. I hope to contribute to the anthropology of humanitarianism in terms of how risk, presence, and access are constructed and how they create boundaries between actors, proving how complex and fragmented the humanitarian landscape has become. Multi-dimensional perspectives bring Fast's micro-level factors to the surface, providing rich empirical substance to make sense of the realities of the humanitarian profession, not to mention where humanitarian intervention is headed in ongoing and future emergencies. More specifically, the interface between international relief agencies and local and emerging structures has yet to be fully examined which makes a strong case for anthropological articulation (Minn, p. 22). We must first begin with an exploration of the historical significance and present day struggle defining humanitarianism and the humanitarian space.

Even today, defining humanitarian and humanitarianism remains an ongoing debate. Where and how did these terms originate? Might we look to the past to rediscover ways of interpreting humanitarian(isms) in present day? The ideas and founding principles of humanitarianism has become a momentous force for hundreds, if not thousands of individuals and groups worldwide throughout contemporary history. Humanitarianism was established on the basis of three fundamental principles: neutrality, impartiality, and humanity. It became a field of practice developed by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) since its inception in the late 1860s

(Krause, p. 104). Put into action, the guiding principles forged a movement of what is now reminiscent of a 'classical humanitarianism.' From the Battle of Solferino to the trenches of the 20<sup>th</sup> century world wars to the Biafran War, humanitarianism has been driven and defined as a lifesaving practice. It remains committed to saving lives but has indeed evolved with the times.

A new imperative to bear witness in reaction to the Biafran War was spearheaded by the founding of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in 1971. As testimony became an integral part of humanitarian practice, it was no longer enough simply to save the victims of war; one must also plead their cause (Fassin, p. 200). Since this time, the field has witnessed unprecedented growth, innovation, and 'professionalization.' "The professionalization of the sector might improve the effectiveness of aid, but it represents an exclusionary mechanism, perhaps discriminating against those who have experience but not bureaucratic power" (Barnett, p. 390). Humanitarian intervention has become synonymous with a host of scenarios and mobilizers. The practice has become a test in which organizations find themselves "facing other actors, other logistics, and other strategies, and have discovered the difficulty of maintaining their role of moral witness" (Fassin, p. 201). The founding principles remain in action rhetorically but it's highly debated as to whether and how these principles materialize in present-day reality.

How has humanitarianism, as a set of principles and a field of practice, changed since its inception? At what historical junction did humanitarianism take an operational and epistemological turn? A split in the humanitarian movement occurred in the early 1970s according to Fassin. "A second age of humanitarianism therefore corresponds to the emergence of the witness – not the witness who has experienced the tragedy, but the one who has brought aid to its victims" (Fassin, p. 206). The end of the Cold War marked a new world order. The post-Cold War sparked a changing geopolitical climate followed by the development of 'complex emergencies' shifting the tides and tendencies of humanitarian action. "Among UN agencies, a complex emergency is understood as denoting a conflict-related humanitarian disaster involving a high degree of breakdown and social dislocation and, reflecting this condition, requiring a system-wide aid response from the international community" (Duffield, 2001, p. 12; Weiss, 1999, p. 20). However, some suggest that humanitarian responses have changed rather than the situations that provoke them (Minn, 2007, p. 5)(de Waal, 1997).

Mark Duffield reflects on the 'new humanitarianism' as an adoption of the term

'political' to define humanitarian action and the argument that neutrality is impossible in the new wars (2002, p. 75). Aside from a gradual evolution, the field has professionalized significantly in reaction to the human cost of the new wars. The professionalization of humanitarian practice and its operations undoubtedly entails the professionalization of saving lives and the securitization of aid.

The humanitarian industry has become more than simply at the service of global suffering. It is forevermore embedded within the complex and fragmented sociopolitical contexts that define our global reality. "Since the wave of 'humanitarian interventions in the 90s and ever more since 9/11, roles between humanitarian workers and other actors has become increasingly blurred" (Ferreiro, 2012). Some even speculate that humanitarian responses have exasperated deprived human conditions in many contexts where the aid community operates. "Assistance...reproduces the very inequalities and injustices aid is supposed to address in the first place, particularly in violent contexts, by feeding into corrupt systems or by undermining existing coping mechanisms" (Fast, 2014, p. 115). Nascimento describes similar skepticism in that the international context of experimentation and chronic instability in many humanitarian aid recipient countries has shaped what has become known as the 1990s 'new aid' paradigm (2015).

### **5.1 Humanitarianism, politics, and the aid paradigm (shift)**

What characterizes this new aid paradigm? According to Nascimento, the boundaries of humanitarianism have been stretched and the guiding principles essentially manipulated by world powers to fit a multitude of governing mandates. In this sense, the use of "humanitarian rhetoric has become another instrument of foreign policy at the service of states and reflects the growing politicization of humanitarian assistance" (Nascimento, 2015). Both the relevance and the ability to comply with the original founding principles of humanitarianism are at stake as a newly political and often times contradicting conception of humanitarian assistance have taken precedence. As the aid community transcends beyond its original humanitarian imperative, some multi-mandate organizations find it appropriate to align their goals with donor states' agendas and are willing to sacrifice the principle of neutrality to include in their portfolios nation-building, liberal peace, human rights, and economic development (Ferreiro, 2012). Humanitarian policies and practices ripen into western political objectives and actions become inherently political. Simultaneously, the aid community attempts to de-politicize when faced with hostilities that make acceptance-based

strategies impossible. Once humanitarian rhetoric merges with the political, it's nearly impossible to break away from its confines. Everything suggests, on the contrary, that rather than becoming separate, humanitarianism and politics are tending to merge - in other words, humanitarianism is indeed politics (Fassin, 2012, p. 224). Beyond a political project, humanitarianism is considered by some to have become a global governing system.

The new aid paradigm translates to a rising era of global governance, concerned with more than just 'cooperation' – it touches on matters of moral progress (Barnett, 381). Reiff concurs with Barnett and questions the pretense that somehow it is possible to stay outside of politics, taking the debate a step further to characterize humanitarianism as moral revolution. Can humanitarian objectives serve morality with genuine intentions or perhaps have we reached a point where objectives override moral concerns? "What is usually meant by outside, of course, really is above, as if a real revolution of moral concern could not be political" (2002, p. 75). Whether an imperative, an impetus, or a political project, humanitarian action has always mingled with morality. These kinds of discussions regarding morality, politics, and the aid paradigm are contextualized by ethnographic research into the lives of those leading a humanitarian profession.

Monika Krause examines humanitarian practice looking specifically at the work of desk officers in large humanitarian NGOs (2014). She argues that relief is a form of production with a humanitarian project being a form of commodity. Krause sees humanitarian agencies occupying a shared space, with the diversity of agencies comprising a market of projects, with the donors as consumers, and the projects and beneficiaries as commodities. She lays the groundwork for a comprehensive contemporary interpretation of the ideological formation and practice of humanitarianism. While many scholars will agree that humanitarianism is inherently political, Krause explains that humanitarianism has its own sense of autonomy and distance from politics (p. 115). Krause and others who conduct interviews with humanitarians capture how humanitarian principles have materialized into practice and later into profession. I am thankful for Krause and others' analysis of humanitarian aid workers. I aim to contribute to existing literature by capturing the complications and complexities that become apparent when discussing perspectives of aid workers across categories and levels within the humanitarian space.

It is evident that humanitarianism and humanitarian principles embody multiple narratives. There is not one but a multitude of avenues for thought regarding them.

Therefore, it is important I discuss perceptions of the humanitarian space before I narrow my focus on the presence, access, and risks of actors in the Syrian crisis.

## **5.2 Constructing humanitarianism and the humanitarian space**

What constitutes the humanitarian space? Is it simply a physical place where aid workers carry out their work? Collins & Duffield consider the humanitarian space as a physical and social arena where a variety of different actors – donors, UN agencies and INGOs, headquarters and field staff, aid recipients, local private suppliers, peacekeepers, and other actors including military – negotiate various activities and outcomes associated with aid (2013). Does it also serve as a concept used to designate a shifting landscape, an operational condition or circumstance? According to Eyal Weizman's account of an interview with Rony Braumann, the former director of MSF, the humanitarian space is a form of spatial practice rather than an actual space or a territorial designation (2011, p. 56). Humanitarian actors work in spaces deemed physically feasible, most often times not directly in conflict zones but on the borderlands or peripheries. "Humanitarian spaces are often marked as circles on maps around the areas where relief operations take place – at 'the internal peripheries of wars'" (ibid, p. 56). While operations will always be bound up with power relations, the humanitarian space serves as a functional concept and perceived as a tool for measuring an organization's distance from powers (ibid, p. 58).

Considering that organizations work from the peripheries, how do they determine how to access populations directly affected by war? How do they define their presence in places where they do not physically work? The answer to these questions requires that organizations determine what it means to be a humanitarian and this continues to be an ongoing debate. The humanitarian space is becoming more of a distant realm for many humanitarian actors, at least in a physical sense. This makes the humanitarian space very difficult to define and maneuver. "They find themselves, almost without knowing it, in a bubble, a 'non-place', a humanitarian mission which could be everywhere and which is nowhere" (Weizman, p. 60). "Humanitarians need to decide what the term 'humanitarian' means before deciding what the humanitarian space is" (European Interagency Security Forum, 2014). The international humanitarian community has its work cut out for itself if INGOs and UN agencies wish to be relevant, sustainable, and able to work alongside non-humanitarian actors for whom they share the same spaces.

"The very notion of 'humanitarianism' is continually being revisited and

redefined. These debates result in frequent four-hour meetings, often with no obvious outcome, and sometimes in meetings about meetings” (Global Development Professionals Network, 2015). Above all, the actors embedded within this space are those who have the most trouble defining it.

The humanitarian community is divided over how far the definition can be stretched before it becomes meaningless, and who can credibly present themselves as part of the community. At stake are not only resources and prestige but, according to aid agencies, the ability of humanitarians to do their work, get access to populations in need, and keep themselves safe.

(Barnett, 2013, p. 383)

No matter the mandate or the definition at hand, “humanitarianism aspires to save lives” (ibid, p. 380). What complicates this aspiration are not only the environments in which humanitarians find themselves, but the way in which actors manage themselves and others in the humanitarian space. The humanitarian space is also characterized by mobility and convergence (or lack) of actors within it. What dangers lie inside this space? Who is safe to move within the space and across its surrounding borders? Do some actors have more access and some take on more risks than others? I will not address all of the questions in the following text. However I urge others to investigate these dilemmas and more regarding humanitarian spaces, and both the presence and divergence of various actors within it.

Based on my observations, interviews, and experiences with international humanitarian organizations and their staff, I find it near impossible to pinpoint an agreed definition for what constitutes a humanitarian space. At the same time, my intention is not to define it but rather to explore the complexity of the humanitarian landscape in light of intersections between presence, access, and risk. This involves coming to terms with how concepts are forever debatable. Aside from politicization and overcrowded characteristics in many contexts, the humanitarian space is difficult to define because organizations have their own ways and sense of agency when it comes to defining. Perhaps the activity of defining is itself a political act. It is possible to recreate or manipulate the humanitarian rhetoric to fit a mold conducive to funding allocations and programming. Hence, the space becomes defined through the manifestation of presence, which is described collectively even as organizations operate independently and separate from each other.



In addition to establishing presence, gaining access is another pressing challenge for INGOs as the probabilities of insecurity and exceeding risk thresholds have become a stark reality. Working in the humanitarian space, which in many instances is compounded by the polarization around religious and political parameters, the use of modern weaponry, direct targeting of humanitarian missions, politicization of local staff, and open conflict in densely populated urban areas, undoubtedly comes with life-threatening risks (MSF-OCBA, 2014, p. 7). Whether increased insecurity is due to the degradation of humanitarian principles or to changing contexts in which violence is taking place, security concerns are forcing agencies to make difficult strategies and operational choices about where and how to intervene (Fast, 2010, p. 2). According to MSF Spain's newly revised strategic plan, debate persists as to whether there is an increase in the overall level of insecurity directly related to the provision of humanitarian aid resulting in a constant confrontation of dilemmas regarding the balance between exposure of risk and impact (2014, p. 7). Considering aid work as prey or victim to the seemingly heightened sense of violent attacks falls short of explanation.

A diverse array of actors are claiming their piece of the humanitarian space to manage and govern while other actors are made to fit into the confines of this space. As explained below, even if motivated by a sense of altruism, good intentions can and have bred an unequal playing field for humanitarian actors attempting to gain access. Good intentions can often lead to varying degrees of risk.

Altruism – the spirit behind humanitarianism – is obviously risky to the helped as well as to the helper. And its risks can be fourfold. First altruism can risk the physical wellbeing of the person doing the help. Second, if misguided, it can also endanger still further the person one is trying to help. Third, whether misguided or not, it can often end up providing succor to the perpetrators of the original evil. And finally, any intervention in the midst of a man's inhumanity to man is also likely to threaten the moral integrity of the helper.

(Slim, 1997, p. 245)

Hugo Slim addresses four primary moral values built into mission statements and objectives of the humanitarian architecture – preserving human life; the vast spectrum of values across the economic, social, civil, and political spheres known collectively as human rights; the principle of justice which is the moral measure of fair and equal

relationships between individuals and groups in a society (Slim, p. 248). Lastly, there is the value of staff safety which, almost in contradiction, appears to value the particular lives of some people over all other lives (ibid). To make this picture more complicated, I argue that within the reliance on categories of staff, there exists a hierarchy that denotes differences between aid workers and values some over others.

Often deemed as 'high-risk' and 'insecure,' some speculate that the inherent insecurity of some environments is the cause for the loss of humanitarian life. Others recognize the faults and weaknesses entrenched within the humanitarian system. These weaknesses pose as detriments to the management of the space, and while at the same time, new forms of aid are blurring the so-called purity of the founding humanitarian principles. Adam Childs depicts how acceptance-based strategies are not politically neutral and that aid work needs to be aware of its presence in order to curb inward threats and gain some sort of acceptance by host and beneficiary communities.

Aid workers are seen as part of a western, colonial and/or Christian domination of the countries we work. Donors have also become more political (for example, the incorporation of AusAid into its ministry of trade and foreign affairs). How can we say "don't shoot us, we're not part of the coalition force" when we are allowing governmental agencies to influence our operational decisions? Also, by being OK with food parcels being distributed by one armed actor such as the Afghani government, but not with the same parcels being distributed by another armed actor (e.g. Isis), we are further in danger of compromising our impartiality. (Childs, 2015)

Childs reveals a modern day portrayal of the humanitarian space whereby presence and access is carried out, by way of how aid workers and the governance of aid contradict themselves in various contexts. According to Childs, humanitarian actors directly contribute to the dangers they face. Why do humanitarians go to such violent and insecure places if the risks outweigh the value of their lives? Is it worth risking someone's life to save the lives of others? What agency do actors have in putting themselves at risk and risking the lives of others?

### **5.3 Politics and security in the humanitarian present**

David Fidler, a professor of law, discusses how "framing catastrophe governance through the lens of security creates significant complexities and controversies

concerning the provision of humanitarian assistance to populations affected by catastrophic events” (2007, p. 248). As states, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations increasingly conceptualize epidemics and disasters as threats to human, national, and global security, the field is becoming evermore politicized (ibid, p. 253). Israeli architect and political thinker, Eyal Weizman, seeks to understand the technologies, spatial arrangements, artifacts, and environments that shape the humanitarian present in his book, *The Least of All Possible Evils* (2011, p. 4). He journeys through historical accounts that bring us to what he deems as the humanitarian present: There are “different ways to inhabit the complex conditions of this humanitarian present...it also mirrors the transformation of the focus in the field of humanitarianism and human rights from a form of independent engagement with the pains of this world in the 1970s and 1980s to a political and military force in the 1990s, and finally into a legalistic strategy in the 2000s” (ibid, p. 5). Weizman’s account is certainly insightful, but what he fails to emphasize is the premise of immense deployment of security measures to ensure the safety of aid workers and how this translates in the humanitarian present.

A series of attacks on aid spaces, compounds, and workers in recent years have resulted in the standardization of security policy and the securitization of aid on the part of UN agencies and international NGOs. “Violence against humanitarian workers has skyrocketed post-9/11, from an average of 32 severe incidents and 38 killed per year in the period of 1998-2001 to an average of 148 severe incidents and 97 killed per year just one decade later, in the interval of 2008-2011” (Ferreiro, 2012). According to one recent study on humanitarian fatalities, kidnappings, and serious injuries, being an aid worker ranks as the fifth most dangerous civilian occupation in the United States (Fast, 2010, p. 6). More recently, humanitarian organizations and NGOs have taken security measures more seriously, developing safety and security units housed within head offices with several focal points located in field locations. Aid worker fatalities and security incidents in Afghanistan, Sudan, and Somalia account for the vast majority (Ferreiro, 2012; Stoddard, 2009; Egeland, Harmer, & Stoddard, 2011, p. 11). The August 2003 bombings of the UN and ICRC headquarters in Baghdad added further impetus to the centralization and standardization of security policy (Duffield, 2010, p. 459; Bruderlein and Gassmann, 2006).

Using these attacks as the bases for NGO security management without understanding the root narratives is problematic for the humanitarian community. “Humanitarians know that is it not just external factors but also choices they all make

that affects their security, and this realization is creating tensions within the humanitarian community” (Ferreiro, 2012). Mark Duffield contends that for many commentators, the main threat facing aid workers stems from the local backlash to the politicization of Western aid (2010, p. 459). To approach a root solution to the threat of attack and animosity would require aid organizations to speak out against Western foreign policy and promote genuine independent humanitarian action. But how does the language of genuine action translate on the ground? Arguably, working directly with local communities in defined ‘insecure environments’ might mean a higher risk appetite and possibly costlier in aid workers lives (Duffield, 2010, p. 460).

Rather than speaking out and endangering their own staff, humanitarian organizations are outsourcing these responsibilities and dangers by contracting local groups to do the work for them. This is a choice that some organizations choose to deploy while others attempt to remain directly present in places where the risks are credible and the attacks frequent. The NGO security apparatus is therefore a hallmark of the humanitarian present. Humanitarian organizations employ a host of personnel at different organizational levels to understand security threats and to develop and execute risk-mitigation strategies to ensure the safety of staff. While some approaches have become mainstreamed, every organization and perhaps individual, has their own way of carrying out NGO security and risk management. Some may take a militarized or hardened approach focusing on the notion of deterrence in insecure settings (Kingston, 2009). It is the role of the security advisor or officer to analyze parties in a conflict and perhaps even negotiate access with them in order to identify and respond to threats. This security advisor is one kind of humanitarian actor that I describe and contextualize in further sections of my paper.

There will always be epistemological avenues unexplored in research. However, security as a field of study within the humanitarian present is especially puzzling, just as the senior staff member described during the virtual meeting I attended. Or ‘hairy’ as another country director once told me. The study of security within an operational landscape constructed for humanitarians such as remote management has yet to be explored in academia, especially in anthropology and sociology. A look at the Syria response by way of presence, access, and risk provides a critical lens for understanding different roles within the humanitarian community.

Larissa Fast is one of the few scholars who writes in sociological terms on security and violence against aid workers in conflict zones. In her article, “Mind the Gap: Documenting and Explaining violence against aid workers” (2010), she clarifies

the existence of two main streams of literature; one that focuses primarily on documenting violence against aid workers – a proximate without cause approach – while a second stream explanation is without empirical evidence (p. 3). Her work sets out to combine both statistical data and documentation of typologies of violence against aid workers and epistemic approaches to explain this phenomenon. Fast makes linkages between aid and security, referring to aid as empire and the notion of the humanitarian fortress, which separates aid workers from the populations they assist (2014, p. 3). In her most recent book, *Aid in Danger* (2014), she extrapolates on the notion of ‘exceptionalism’ of humanitarian workers, on the creation of the humanitarian fortress, and calls for a humanity-based approach to security. “Reclaiming humanity will force aid agencies to recognize and grapple with the tension and inequalities that do exist and with the ways in which the everyday practices of aid define its meaning” (ibid, p. 45).

Peter Redfield, in his ethnographic sketch of humanitarian mobility and ex-pat staff, makes reference to Fast’s notion of empire – “If only some were free to travel and others held in place, the maps of aid organizations would uncomfortably resemble those of empires” (2012, p. 373). Considering this merging of security and humanitarian action, the ways in which security should be managed and governed is a contested dilemma, as there prevails varied perspectives and interpretations across organizations.

A primary contributor to the understanding of the development-security nexus, Mark Duffield, focuses specifically on the convergence between global governance, development, and security, stating how the enlargement of the aid market has been synonymous with the expansion of complex donor/UN/NGO welfare safety nets and human-dimension projects (2001, p. 54). Regarding the rise of the NGO world, Duffield emphasizes their ability to monopolize local access and their increasing influence within the international decision-making process. Additionally, Duffield discusses categories of actors by way how security is incorporated into the humanitarian landscape. By redefining security as a development or humanitarian problem, it becomes legitimate to divide up and parcel out the borderlands as a social body to the sectoral care of a wide range of specialist non-state and private organizations (Duffield, 2001, p. 312). The same goes for the division of labor. The delivery of aid would not be possible without considerable organizational innovation, a significant expansion and deepening complexity of subcontracting arrangements, auditing techniques, partnership frameworks and global compacts linking metropolitan states, multilateral

agencies, NGOs and private companies (ibid, p. 310).

“Aid – whether relief or development – represents an empire that is devoted to its own perpetuation, rather than a service industry devoted primarily to the needs of its clients, beneficiaries, or participants” (Fast, 2014, p. 115). Fast is not the only scholar to discuss how the aid industry is constructed and bolstered by its very own existence and self-perpetuation. “Notably Alex de Waal and American writer Michael Marren insist that in order to understand humanitarian NGOs it is first necessary to acknowledge the depth of their commitment to defending their own institutional interests” (Rieff, p. 85). De Waal claims that “humanitarianism is hugely self-justifying: it may even be the paradigm of a secular human enterprise that does not need to succeed in order to justify itself. Humanitarianism works, by definition” (Minn, 2007, p. 8; de Waal, 1997, p. 4). Or as another sociologist poignantly states, “Humanitarianism is humanitarianism for humanitarianism’s sake” (Krause, p. 113).

My research addresses whether and how international humanitarian organizations are becoming irrelevant in the Syria response considering their increasing distance from the humanitarian space and their heavy reliance on local partners to implement aid delivery and programming. I envision this research to spark further debate regarding how humanitarian organizations foresee their futures and come to terms with their realities in more nuanced and holistic ways. I do so by capturing perspectives from actors who normally do not have a strong sense of voice and legitimacy in the international humanitarian arena.

## **6. SITUATING AND MANAGING RISK**

Didier Fassin’s depiction of humanitarian intervention takes the concept of trauma to be both a clinical description and a state of the psyche to frame the contemporary global humanitarian landscape (2012, pp. 201-202). Just as trauma serves this metaphor so too does risk in depicting a state of the world today. The concept of risk produces vocabulary, conditions, and assumptions of war and brings suffering and inequality into existence by naming it (Fassin, p. 202). Before delving into how organizations attempt to gain access and maintain presence the term risk must be explored. The categories of actors that constitute part of the Syria response must also be described from the standpoint of risk. I must first briefly establish some bearings on the term risk and determine how to approach this quite dense and at times philosophical concept. In order to frame risks from the standpoint of humanitarian actors, I touch upon concepts of risk relevant to this discussion.

Deborah Lupton dedicates a volume of literature on the notion of risk drawing from a multitude of angles and scholarly perspectives. She situates risk within a broader historical context and explains how the ignition of risk is a term in our everyday language that originated with the tides of modernity. “The modernist concept of risk represented a new way of viewing the world and its chaotic manifestations, its contingencies and uncertainties” (Lupton, 2013, p. 7). Analysing risk from the works of Anthony Giddens, Lupton determines that in modern times, unanticipated outcomes may be the consequences of human action rather than the result of God’s will, largely replacing earlier concepts of fate (ibid; Giddens, 1990, p.30). Characteristic of modernity, risk can be calculated and therefore, managed by way of its manifestation as a technical meaning, relying upon conditions in which probability estimates of an event are to be known and knowable (Lupton, p. 8).

Risk is deeply embedded within both popular and scientific discourse but exalted to the realm of expert knowledge. “An apparatus of expert research, knowledge and advice has developed around the concept of risk: risk analysis, risk assessment, risk communication and risk management are all major fields of research and practice” (ibid, pp. 10-11). This has the effect of containing debates and exercises in reshaping and redefining risks within a higher echelon of expert knowledge, away from the masses affected by the execution of such rhetoric. “Expert knowledge tends to contradict each other, resulting in debates over standpoints, calculation procedures and results. This also tends to paralyze action” (ibid, p. 86). I am reminded of the Syria response call I was given access to and other similar scenarios in which conversations on risk are privileged to senior level members of the organization. These members determine how risks are defined and managed. Risks are considered a human construct and can therefore be known, altered, and avoided.

Risk management has become a prominent aspect of NGO security. According to a study entitled, “To Stay and Deliver,” commissioned by OCHA, a risk is defined as the likelihood and potential impact of encountering a threat (Egeland, Harmer, & Stoddard, 2011, p. xiv). Incident statistics show that major attacks against civilian aid operations, resulting in death, kidnapping, or serious injury, were on an upward trajectory since the late 1990s (ibid, p. 11). As a result of serious and fatal incidents affecting humanitarian aid workers, organizations have recognized the importance of addressing risks and deciding how they will approach any known threat. It is widely recognized that in order to be present and effective in complex security environments,

humanitarian actors must not avoid risks but know how to manage them (Egeland, Harmer, & Stoddard, p. 2). Knowing how to manage risks is not only necessary for field level staff but also for an organization as a whole.

According to some NGO risk management frameworks, everyone within an organization is considered to have responsibility when it comes to managing risk. “Staff at the organizational level are responsible for strategy, and staff at the departmental level for systems, while staff at the field level must make dynamic decisions on a day-to-day basis, and face particular challenges in the course of emergencies, and in insecure environments” (European Interagency Security Forum (EISF), 2010, p. 5). This has become known as the professionalization of security and a securitization of the humanitarian sector (Duffield, 2001). Focusing greater attention on risk-mitigation and security measures has been considered a positive marker for increased access in insecure operating environments. “Increased or good access and programmatic impact can be directly attributed to good security and risk management” (European Interagency Security Forum (EISF), p. 4).

I had read about risk and risk management in training modules and general remote management guidelines written by groups such as World Vision and the International Rescue Committee. But I was left wondering what exactly are these risks that have the potential to be transferred? What could happen if indeed these risks are transferred from one actor to another? Descriptions of probability and risk are rhetorically framed by experts, security advisors, and senior level staff. With expert knowledge in mind, how are risks defined and how do they influence actions taken on the ground?

All organizations fall somewhere along a risk spectrum when it comes to how they approach risk and what kinds of threats or attacks warrant what kinds of measure – whether it means pulling out of a region or removing certain staff from places based on perceived or calculated risk. This is otherwise known as an organization’s risk threshold. Individual’s will also have their own sense of personal risk threshold which can be the same or completely different from their affiliated organization. At one of end of the risk threshold spectrum, an organization is not willing to carry out programming if their activities may result in damage to organizational assets, staff injuries or casualties. On the other end of the spectrum, serious harm and death are considered practical probabilities to the nature of humanitarian work (European Interagency Security Forum (EISF), p. 7).



In recent years, organizations have drawn from findings in the field of risk management, acknowledging that ‘risk’ encompasses not only threats to staff and operations in insecure environments, but also threats to an organization’s broader remit, such as loss of reputation, issues of liability, etc. (European Interagency Security Forum (EISF), 2010, p. 3). While the study of remote management in high-risk environments is a very new and rapidly expanding field of study, it has been discussed as early as 2009. According to one study on risk thresholds in the humanitarian field, “certain categories of staff may be more exposed to risk due to their backgrounds, identities, or activities, or as a result of remote management frameworks” (p. 7; European Interagency Security Forum (EISF), 2010).

In order to understand the implications of NGO security and risk management strategies and procedures, it’s important to get a sense of how and why organizations choose to work in conflict zones and spaces of extreme uncertainty, especially in places where there is potential for uncertainty regarding the cost of aid workers’ lives.

### **6.1 Risk – managing thresholds and transfer**

The NGO world is filled with acronyms, terminology, typologies, and concepts. These terms have become very much a part of organizational frameworks and guidelines in recent years as a way to harmonize concepts and promote a shared understanding of security and risk across all occupational levels of an organization. In conversations and debates dedicated to staff security, one will undoubtedly hear terms such as ‘risk transfer’ and ‘risk threshold.’ Risk thresholds tend to be established as a reaction to an attack and thereafter create an upper limit to the amount of risk a given organization is willing to endure before it must halt programming, go underground or abort a mission in a specific location. “A direct attack (or credible threat of attack) on people or buildings, with motives clearly linked to what the agency represents, is fairly consistently seen as an upper ‘threshold’ of risk” (European InterAgency Security Forum (EISF), 2010, p. 10).

What is the risk threshold under which an organization operates in Syria and how may risks be transferred from one humanitarian actor to another? “With organizations increasingly choosing to work with or through local partners in insecure contexts, local partners take on elements of the risks to which the international organization would have otherwise been exposed” (Singh & EISF Secretariat, 2012, p. 15). To have humanitarian access, organizations may need to increase their acceptable risk level. A volume of literature or a database can and should be

developed that accounts for typologies of risks affecting organizations and humanitarian actors. I attempt to describe some risks affecting the humanitarian community in the Syria response based on relevant reports and conducted interviews. However my comments and my analysis are my personal interpretation and not associated with one particular organization or individual.

In Syria, the aftermath of attacks against several aid workers and journalist has been media uproar. This has made aid agencies extremely cautious when it comes to operating directly inside Syria. “An additional difficulty is that this red line can change overnight (due to changes in local leadership/context).” (European Interagency Security Forum, 2014). As of late 2014, the vast majority of organizations will no longer allow most staff to move in and out of the country.<sup>5</sup> As Kurdish Peshmerga forces and other Western-backed armed groups are gathering strength in regions previously held by Islamic State (Dearden, 2015), organizations are slowly moving in and back into Syria but limiting themselves to Northeastern regions where humanitarian corridors have been paved. At this stage in Syria, with the conflict unabated, organizations know that they can no longer avoid some risks that put certain staff in danger. If they cannot avoid them, they must come to terms with how they are going to approach and therefore ‘manage’ the risks in front of them. This is referred to as an organization’s ‘risk attitude’ although it is not referenced in NGO security documents pervasively (European Interagency Security Forum (EISF), 2010, p. 11).

## **7. MANIFESTING AND MAINTAINING PRESENCE – WHY GO?**

If we understand the humanitarian present as embedded within the era of global governance, then humanitarian actors have agency when it comes to deciding where to work and how to respond. Humanitarians have long been residing in some parts of the world, managing and shifting their responses from relief aid to development projects. They have the ability to create a presence in new places also. Didier Fassin and Larissa Fast respectively, remark on the manifestation of presence of humanitarian actors (Fassin D. , 2012, p. 209). In the acts of manifesting their presence, how do humanitarian actors discern which events are in their control, how to influence events that can be influenced, and how to respond to those that cannot be shaped? (Fast, 2014, p. 12).

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<sup>5</sup> I was informed of this multiple times by multiple sources during my fieldwork.

Presence is established in various forms – be it in emergencies, in human made conflicts, natural disasters, or long-term development projects. Other terms and phrases used to denote types of presence include deployment, intervention, rapid-response, long-term commitment. These terms specify duration and circumstance. There are different levels of presence and these levels have become embedded within organizational rhetoric and practice. An organization may describe itself as having a direct presence in one location while maintaining light presence in another. Defining and categorizing presence in one context coincides with an organization's overall mandate, affecting the establishment and effectiveness of presence elsewhere. For example, an organization with a mandate to reduce poverty and strengthen livelihoods must consider why and how they should provide assistance in an emergency setting. What will their presence in an emergency say about the work they are doing in other, non-emergency settings?

Large-scale international organizations have a presence in several countries if not continents. This expansion of the humanitarian industry is a new phenomenon. “In recent decades the independent humanitarian sector has also expanded. While in 1980 there were about 40 NGOs dealing with the Ethiopian famine, a decade later 250 were operating during the Yugoslavian war; by 2004, 2,500 were involved in Afghanistan” (Weizman, 2011, p. 51).

It is difficult to discuss presence without distinguishing one organization from another. There are purely humanitarian or development-based institutions and others are both humanitarian, development, and/or driven by religious beliefs. Some organizations provide medical care while others focus solely on the needs of children. There are NGOs which are passionate about battling gender discrimination or providing assistance to minority groups in conflict or post-conflict settings. The list of organization's and their diverse mandates is exhaustive.

Indeed, the myriad of organizations with a defined presence to defend human rights, assist refugees, or provide clean water to rural villages is indicative of how substantial human needs are in our world today. It also confirms the ever-debated description of the contemporary humanitarian space as cramped and chaotic. Not to mention the sheer size of the most well known international NGOs who easily employ tens of thousands of people at any given time. “The larger and more influential the humanitarian world has grown, the more incoherent it has become” (Weizman, p. 51). What is oftentimes left out of macro-level discussions and theoretical frameworks on issues within the humanitarian world is the individuality of any given actor. Indeed,

there has been research conducted on how humanitarian organizations have become increasingly dependent on militaries and armed groups in order to gain access to civilians in unsecured areas (ibid). But what is lacking is an understanding of how humanitarian actors are categorized and how they describe one another in relation to themselves. I extrapolate on personal accounts relating to remote management and risk in further sections.

Some practitioners believe the humanitarian space in Syria is sparse, desolate, and desperate. Others who take into account the actions of government, opposing political groups, and the aid industry presence, agree that the humanitarian space in Syria is crowded, fragmented, and confusing. These discrepancies were apparent during meetings, conferences, and discussions I had during my time as an intern. In my opinion, I see how the humanitarian space is dynamic; its density or scarcity in terms of humanitarian actor and activity ebbs and flows over the course of war and conflict. Aid is delivered in more secure regions where humanitarians can negotiate and maneuver their access. While aid is either manipulated or deterred in other geographic passages depending on who controls which territory.

Since the initial stages of the conflict, organizations have worked within the boundaries of two distinct modalities of operations: across the frontlines by organizations based in Damascus (only a handful with approval by the Syrian Regime) and across international borders without the consent of the Syrian government by organizations based in Turkey, and to a lesser degree in Lebanon and Jordan (Svoboda & Pantuliano, 2015, p. 5). In order to manage and maintain their presence inside Syria, some organizations have acquired permission by the Syrian regime to work in Damascus and government-controlled territories. While others find ways of forging their presence in opposition and rebel- held geographies. It is a constant game of negotiating with or tiptoeing around the Assad regime.

Where organizations are located geographically within the Syria response is revealing. Their presence is telling of their institutional objectives and operational mandate. It also reveals how they frame the conflict at least publically. Humanitarian actors must indeed be politically savvy, aware of the broader context within which they operate, and self-reflective of the ways in which their actions feed into or interrupts politics as usual (Fast, p. 113). Many organizations are reluctant to take sides or speak out against the Syrian regime for fear of losing their already fragile access. They must be careful when discussing warring parties and defining party lines as this is vital for upholding organizational values, protecting their strategic position within the

humanitarian arena, and ensuring the safety of their staff inside Syria and along the peripheries. Does an organization position itself directly inside Syria, along the borders in neighboring countries, or both? Does it work in rebel held territories or government held areas or both?

One study demonstrates that certain organizations working on both sides of the conflict (akin to neutrality) experienced a greater risk than those that did not (Fast 2002, 2007). Does their position change depending on the rising tide of political turmoil, looming security threats, and shifting terms of accountability to donors? How does an organization decide how to talk about their presence in relation to the Syrian regime and the opposition groups? These questions and more leave INGOs in murky waters. “Shifting frontlines, the volatility and unpredictability of the conflict and fragmentation among belligerents make it difficult to know who to negotiate access with, and whether any agreement reached will be honored” (Svoboda & Pantuliano, p. 5). This discussion discerns just how chaotic and fragile the humanitarian space has become in Syria, both in rhetoric and in action.

Organizations without permission by the Syrian regime carry out remote and cross border programming and aid delivery with management personnel situated in nearby cities including Amman, Beirut, and/or Gaziantep. Typically, cross border operations are physically carried out through local partners. Local partners range from loosely assembled civil society groups which have formed since the crisis began to internationally recognized and registered Syrian diaspora organizations. One of my informants defined diaspora organizations as Syrians abroad, moved by a cause, who decided to establish their own charities and organizations in those countries abroad where they reside. Therefore, these organizations considered ‘local’ are registered internationally, many in the United Kingdom and the United States. Some diaspora organizations have grown significantly since the beginning of the war, with more staff and potentially more capacity than their INGO counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

Without staff directly embedded in cross border operations, INGOs explain the process of building trust and sense of comfort with local partners to carry out their presence and objectives. In order for trust to be established, INGOs must select which local organizations to partner with:

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<sup>6</sup> An aid worker I interviewed described how local partners can be much larger than international NGOs in terms of staff. However, there is no documentation regarding this aspect.

We have a process of selection of partners that starts with mapping of existing stakeholders, of existing Syrian partners...and a process of due diligence and a consultation with existing local partners, and those who have experience with them – starting the process of engaging. Then we do a capacity assessment – it looks at government relations, at systems and procedures. It especially looks at finance and compliance. Of course, with due diligence it checks any links with any parties that are active in the conflict – militarily or politically. And once we feel comfortable with these and once we feel comfortable with the level of risk involved, we start with pilots or projects of less than 50,000 dollars over a period of three months in order to test their capacity, especially those who we haven't worked with before. And then once judging on that and evaluating, we move into the next phase or expanding and scaling up. It's a long process. That's why we take time to establish relationships. And once we establish them, we manage them over long periods. By long I mean – projects ranging from 6 months, 9 months, and a year and now from next year we are extending our projects to 24 months – moving from relief to assistance, more towards recovery and development.<sup>7</sup>

The INGO partnership coordinator determines a successful candidature for partnership through a series of processes. Local partners are checked, re-checked, tested, and checked again. According to many members of Syria response teams across the sector, local partnerships are established on the basis of reciprocal trust. But as the above account clearly explains, trust is only acknowledged and made possible once local partners pass through a seemingly never-ending series of hoops conducted by the INGOs. The process concludes with a reliable partnership in which INGOs feel a strong sense of comfort with their new partners and with the risks the new partnership could potentially bring. Comfort is described in relation to proximity and interaction with other actors active in the conflict and on the level of risk the organization foresees it would take on if it were to partner with a Syrian organization. What is also obvious in this narration is the neutrality of words chosen to describe the partnership selection process. Compliance, due diligence, government and party relations all denote a level of neutrality and rhetoric that INGOs feel 'comfortable' using. This is insightful considering the kind of controversy and risks organizations can easily get themselves

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<sup>7</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, April 30, 2015

into in war and conflict settings. Many organizations work very hard to remain neutral and maintain presence in such a fragile and high-risk context such as Syria.

Adding another distinction, there are some organizations that continue to carry out a direct presence assisting communities in Syria without the use of implementing local partners. I will not have time to make this distinction as this reflects another level of complexity and coordination regarding the humanitarian aid community, exceeding the scope of my thesis.

## **8. REMOTE MANAGEMENT AS PRESENCE, ACCESS, AND RISK**

In shifting the distribution of risk and eliminating the potential of presence and witnessing to curb the worst excesses of violence, remote management implicitly reinforces exceptionalism and the hierarchies that differently value categories of people. (Fast, 2014, p. 213)

The European Commission's humanitarian and civil protection aid wing, ECHO, describes remote management as "an operational approach used to provide relief in situations where humanitarian access to disaster-affected populations is limited" (ECHO, 2013). The ECHO remote management guidelines state that the main reasons for appointing remote management are security concerns and bureaucratic obstacles imposed by governments or 'non-state' authorities (ibid). According to ECHO, remote management should be used when limitations prevent other more direct modes of operation. Whereas another source explains it as a mode of operation adopted when security risks are high and sustained and normally a temporary measure installed only as a last resort (Herbert, 2013, p. 2). This impossibility could either be determined by reaching their defined risk threshold or in response to a serious security incident. It is almost always a reactive, ad-hoc strategy in response to the increasing threats and attacks targeting aid workers in conflict zones. Whether by limitations or impossibility, the majority of organizations refer to remote management in ambiguous and non-specific terms.

I learned through various inquiries that humanitarian organizations are vague as to when and how remote management is or should be carried out. Some have published remote management guidelines. Some take a research-oriented role, produce a 'lessons learned' or promote self-reflection to reformulate their approach to operating in Syria. Some have defined the management strategy and others either do

not share their definition or have not fully determined how their remote response should be verbalized. Quite a few organizations have recently hired external consultants to conduct qualitative research and stamp their logo on the final product.

There are other external initiatives conducting research, which seek to elaborate on how different actors carry out their work in insecure environments. The “Secure Access in Volatile Environments” programme or SAVE, is a three-year study funded by the UK Department for International Development (DfID) which engages with how actors maintain humanitarian access in challenging operational contexts. It does so through an investigation of three linking components - access, effectiveness, and monitoring evaluation and includes four case study: Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2014, p. 4).

Tufts University recently published, “Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings – The cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan,” (2015). This project encapsulates both qualitative methods and a literature review on operations in remote management settings, previous fieldwork by practitioners and academics, as well as analysis and coding of 123 interviews. In my opinion, this is the most comprehensive study to date on NGO remote management methods and challenges. However, the study is quite general and does not delve into specifics including transfer of risk and categories of actors. It is also very much geared towards a ‘know-how’ for practitioners and steers away from a critical interpretation of narratives and interview responses.

My interviews reveal that organizations generally do not discuss how they approach remote management in comparison to one another. Despite the impetus to enhance collective dialogue through virtual and face-to-face forums, overall they keep their information to themselves. They do not share security incidents with one another, even if knowledge of previous incidents could assist the greater NGO community in understanding security trends in specific locations and better preparing themselves for managing ongoing and future risks. An organization will typically only share news of a security incident internally, and even so, it may only be shared with a small pool of security personnel and not with other staff members.

Remote management has been and continues to be a primary mode of operation in other locations including in Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.<sup>8</sup> I became very familiar with the term remote management just like phrase ‘Syria response.’ To me, sitting in Geneva and even over the course of my fieldwork in

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<sup>8</sup> I learned that these are some of the prime locations for remote management based on discussions with many of my interviewees and others.



Amman, these phrases were just imagined and never became a real observation. I realized that in order to understand remote management further I needed to imagine them in other contexts as well. My colleagues and other humanitarian personnel told me that remote management looks significantly different in other countries compared to Syria but there are some characteristics that can be found in all remote settings. Also, that the origins of remotely managed operations took shape in Somalia. Obviously, the particular conflict, social, and political dynamics of remotely managed countries cannot be clumped together but knowing how aid is delivered in these different settings is important in order to recognize and assess the challenges of the Syria response.

An INGO country director in Pakistan remarked that remotely managed partnerships are vital for the development of a democratically governed nation which results in a strong civil society. According to the same source, partnerships are inherent to the organization's political project which notably is classified as a long-term development endeavor. Sometimes, Pakistani partners work hand-in-hand with the INGO. This particular organization avoids reverting too easily to remote management, but when they do, it is for temporary missions deemed absolutely restricted for international staff. This INGO has developed an existing set of classified 'emergency partners' when there is a security risk or threat halting programs. These disruptions are generally temporary in regions where international staff have no access. What is important to take from this example is that partnerships are not only active in remote management settings. Partners are utilized in emergency and development activities such as the case in Pakistan. For this organization, local partners work in the same office as their INGO partners, affording them constant access and physical proximity to one another.

Remote management in Somalia was installed when direct operational strategies became restricted by a non-state party and as the security climate intensified. In 2008, International Medical Corps (IMC) and CARE were expelled from the country for allegedly spying and gathering intelligence that led to the assassination of an Al-Shabaab leader (Elhawary, 2012). In late 2011, Al Shabaab rebels banned 16 aid agencies from operating within the famine-stricken country. The group said it had permanently revoked permission of the aid organizations, accusing them of being 'subversive groups' and 'persistently galvanizing the local population against the full establishment of the Islamic sharia system' (Chonghaile, 2011). A former assistant country director in Somalia, now working for an aid organization delivering cross border from Jordan into Syria, accounts his experience when his organization was kicked out

of Somalia. “In Somalia there were allegations of spying by NGOs, creating an intense security climate.”<sup>9</sup> His organization “worked tirelessly to embed with local communities, to hire locally and balance employment between local clans.”<sup>10</sup> Agencies were seen as the prime representation of the western world. What better way to conceal the western face of aid than to completely eliminate the presence of international staff operating directly inside Somalia. Rather, international staff worked from Kenya and other peripheral locations, directing internal and cross border aid operations. As international staff were relocated from Somalia to the organization’s office in Kenya, the Kenyan staff subsequently became responding actors as they had strong ties to the local government and could bolster official support in delivering aid across the border.

After 2004, the vast majority of humanitarian organizations working in Iraq had pulled out of the country and many were operating remotely from Jordan.<sup>11</sup> Some might agree that, “people in Amman were totally disconnected from what was happening in Iraq...with wrong information...wrong knowledge of the field.”<sup>12</sup> According to a former employee of the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), they were the only organization working directly inside Iraq with international staff. “The organization had to find a way to make us invisible in the field...armed actors were looking for westerners and had only us to target because we were the only expats in the region.”<sup>13</sup> The organization used GPS tracking to monitor staff in remote locations attempting to prevent them from straying too far away. In the Iraqi case, remote management referred to cross border operations from Jordan and remote management internally, from Baghdad to the field.

All of these examples provide a backdrop for contextualizing remote management in the Syria response. But the former ACTED employee offered an Iraqi scenario that provides a picture of what aid projects in Syria might look like also: “Sometimes in remote management, nothing is happening actually...You can believe you have a project, but you do not have a project...If you have no control in a very chaotic country you can imagine anything is happening.”<sup>14</sup> He went to visit the construction of a school in Iraq that ACTED was funding at the time:

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<sup>9</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 11, 2015

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 5, 2015

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

It allowed me to see what we were doing in remote management and what we were doing to others in remote management. It is quite impressive when you are the first one to see that, well this project does not exist, well this one is bullshit, and ahhh this one exists! And, when are you supposed to target vulnerable people and then you see your network system is in the rich area of the city where all the politicians are living. Why is it there? So you can question after...but yea, that is the risk.<sup>15</sup>

What is unique to Syria in terms of remote management is the fact that local partners are a definitive feature since the inception of the humanitarian response. Local partners may not have direct contact with their INGO affiliates if a project is carried out completely through INGO remote control. Local partners may be asked to cross borders and attend meetings and other functions at the offices of the INGO, but their attempted movement can often times be restricted or highly risky. A humanitarian worker conducting monitoring and evaluation training for local partners, expressed his efforts to have affiliated local partners attend a training session in Gaziantep. "Getting many of the partners to Gaziantep is extremely difficult. Last week, I organized a training for 16 partner participants and in the end only 4 showed up. Many have trouble getting a visa or even a passport, and it can also depend on the daily nature of border crossings and check points."<sup>16</sup>

What will be interesting to examine at a later stage, if and when the international community considers Syria as a post-conflict environment, is if and how INGOs attempt to steer their mandate from emergency response to long-term development and post-conflict recovery. How will this change their partner relations? Ultimately, will partners have the financial and the 'professional' capacity to operate without INGO affiliation? Will the INGOs be able to manage information, access, and risks without their local partners?

Just as organizations compete with funding, presence, and access, many also compete with publications and literary messages that serve to uphold or bolster their image on the international stage. Given the highly insecure nature of the Syrian conflict and the fact that most organizations are doing remote management in some way or another, it is pertinent for an organization to publish a report describing how they operate remotely in insecure environments including in Syria. This is what keeps their

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 23, 2015

manifestation of presence alive to a donor, a competitor, and a public onlooker. The unfortunate part is that many organizations are extremely reluctant to share information on how they operate remotely and manage their local partnerships. And even when an agency creates a report, it is often vague and brief – defining remote management in the broadest of terms. What these kinds of literary tools lack is the local perspective and involvement in defining remote management and other terms like risk, access, and presence.

## 9. HUMANITARIAN ACTORS OF THE SYRIA RESPONSE

*There is the humanitarian noble caregiver, as dupe of power, as designated conscience, as revolutionary, as colonialist, as businessman, and perhaps even as mirror... this confusion of roles has become unsustainable.*

(Reiff, 2002, p. 88)

*I think in many ways Syria is a context, which has been marked by a lot of animosity within the humanitarian sector, amongst actors and that has not helped in finding creative ways forward.*

(Svoboda, 2015)

I have recognized there is not a single definition of humanitarianism or a specific way to carry out humanitarian action. Humanitarians also do not fit a one-size-fits-all model. Not only is it difficult to define the humanitarian but, “more and more actors have attached themselves to the authority of humanitarian action, making claims to be humanitarian” (Krause, 108). In the following section, I seek to contribute to filling a gap in knowledge and literature on the categories of actors that constitute the humanitarian space in Syria. I have found that in existing literature, the ‘other’ humanitarian actor has almost always meant those that partake in the manipulation of aid such as belligerents, non-state actors, and military interventionists. Armed groups are indeed a kind of organizational actor that can produce and distribute aid. Manipulators of aid are actors that must be understood within the humanitarian space. Considering the limitations of this thesis, I focus not on belligerent manipulation of aid but on local forms of humanitarian assistance which have not been significantly studied or acknowledged.

This section seeks to recognize a few categories of actors, explaining what they represent to an organization, and where they are situated within the humanitarian space. I draw from qualitative interviews and existing literature to describe how the

humanitarian actor has become a confusing set of roles rather than traditionally imagined noble caregiver of the early years of humanitarian historicity. I situate three different categories of actors – the international, the national, and the local. Within these three distinct, yet often intermingled categories, I draw from discussions with the very actors themselves including aid workers in the field and those at headquarters. I incorporate anonymized testimony from security advisors, program officers, country directors, and academic scholars, national staff and local partners. I argue that the local constitutes an emerging actor category in the humanitarian response in Syria, which is distinguishable from the national. The local and national may not be valued as such but are indeed forthcoming leaders for the future success of humanitarian action in Syria and beyond. The following categorical descriptions will portray some humanitarian challenges in Syria. I must first reconcile who constitutes a humanitarian actor.

Fast's notion of humanitarian fortress puts aid workers on a sort of pedestal, separated from conflict and the war-torn communities they are providing support and aid. They are seen as both mythical figures and heroes in a tale of rescue (Fast, p. 90). But this is only describing one kind of aid worker - one who is foreign to the land where he or she is working. Therefore, can both international staff and local workers fit into the same category and are they both protected from harm's way in the humanitarian fortress? The conceptualization of security threats and the subsequent development of the humanitarian fortress bring forth complex challenges such as "the unequal hierarchies of protection and access within the mainstream aid establishment and the transfer of risks to its margins" (Collinson & Duffield, 2013, p. 3). "Strategies and mechanisms that might be effective for protecting aid agencies do not necessarily protect civilians in the same context and the security and access of aid agencies often wins out over the security of civilians" (Collinson & Duffield, p. 16). Do these strategies protect all aid workers, especially those at the lower spirals of the organizational hierarchy of aid labor?

"In the contemporary era, the prolixity of humanitarian workers thus stands against the silence of survivors. The voice of the former is substituted for the voice of the latter" (Fassin, p. 206). I am willing to speculate that we have reached a new era of humanitarianism where previously silenced voices are reclaiming their testimony; a form of local knowledge production and engagement drastically needed by the former conception of international humanitarian worker whose voice dominates intervention discourses. The international is indeed the ruler of empire or at least a resident of the

humanitarian fortress, which separates aid workers from the populations they assist (Fast, 2014, p. 3). Beyond separation from beneficiaries, the humanitarian fortress has separated aid workers from other aid workers. What reifies the aid paradigm shift is in the articulation of risk by way of the emergence of local actors and what their position means alongside international and national humanitarian workers.

The role of host and local communities in humanitarian action is a pertinent component of the humanitarian landscape today. Local organizers, host communities, victims, and survivors are labels that comprise local and national categories in the Syrian contexts and others. They are part of the categories of actors 'from below'<sup>17</sup>, from the 'Global South' (Singh & EISF Secretariat) – who are capable of reaching aid beneficiaries directly but who lack the professionalized capacity and credible voice to shape the humanitarian space on a significant scale. And yet, their work entails much higher degrees of danger, risk, and uncertainty. Those who experience unparalleled levels of risk compared to their international counterparts are typically not the authors of their own narratives. Their existence and activity must contribute to the definition of humanitarian. Unfortunately they do not have much of a stake, if any, in the international humanitarian arena nor in decision-making regarding how humanitarian aid will reach and affect communities. Syrian local and diaspora organizations constitute new forms of humanitarians as do host community actors, such as Jordanian and Turkish nationals. These groups are worthwhile understanding, articulating, and contextualizing within the broader humanitarian landscape especially with regards to security and risk.

Different kinds of actors play different roles in the Syria response. An individual's profile is telling of the kinds of work he or she does, where geographically they work within the region, what kinds of security measures have been put in place to ensure their safety, and the professional and social mobility afforded to their role. Actors do not operate on the same playing fields with other actors. Some have access to certain areas in insecure environments that others cannot access. These same actors are generally local to the regions in question and have established networks which prove attractive and useful to large international organizations. In turn, the international organizations possess the technical and financial capacity that the locals lack. Actors are also distinguished by determination of their credibility, technical capability, and trustworthiness. The success of these measures results in a strong and viable partnership between international, local, and national humanitarian groups.

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<sup>17</sup> In reference to the field of Subaltern Studies, most notably the works of Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000)

No single actor within the humanitarian space is afforded complete access and lack of risks allowing them to work independently. On the contrary, actors only possess partial traits when standing alone. They need each other in order to carry out operations in volatile contexts. Whether operating directly or remotely, INGOs and their partners must coexist in the humanitarian space for the entire system to work as envisioned. Ultimately this coexistence has benefitted the international organizations in terms of access, reaching their goals, donor expectations, and in maintaining their presence and reputation on the international scene. This coexistence, whether fragmented or fluid has also significantly affected local organizations trying to grow into fully-fledged humanitarian actors. It is important to distinguish between national, international, and local actors that work in the humanitarian space in the Syrian region.

### **9.1 The International**

Many of the international aid workers I interviewed for this research used similar adjectives to describe themselves. *Restless. Thrill-seeker. Adrenaline junkie.* Although stationed in a safe hub like Amman, they find themselves in constant mobility. “To stay in Jordan for a whole month is a rarity,”<sup>18</sup> one said. However when given the chance to stay put in Jordan for long enough, the family-duty station can be very comfortable for expats – weekends smoking argeileh at Amman’s exclusive rooftop lounges, spas at the Dead Sea, desert excursions and trips to the ancient city of Petra. This does not capture the international humanitarian in his or her entirety, by no means. However, working remotely has many perks and can allow an international aid worker to maintain a sense of Western lifestyle in a place like Jordan or even Turkey. But we must be reminded that remote management was considered the best operational modality for well-founded reasons due to the heightened security climate and frequent fatalities of international aid workers globally in recent years.

Afghanistan remains a constant hotbed for violence directly affecting aid workers. A security manager who previously worked in Afghanistan recalls how his team attempted to gain access and network with local leaders in Afghan communities.

So each time we are willing to have a mission, it was with Afghans, not internationals because we were not sending internationals. Just a couple of times we did that. We were asking for authorization so that we are invited. And

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<sup>18</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 18, 2015

if you are caught when you are invited you are not attacked. If you are not invited, they can kill you. It's that simple. And they can invite you one day and kill you the second that. So we have based the way we enter on their traditional rules, basically.<sup>19</sup>

His team, comprised of few international staff, utilized the nationality and local knowledge of Afghan staff after quickly realizing that trying to negotiate access as a foreigner can potentially cost one's life.

The first time I realized the dangers that international aid workers face and the value put on their lives in insecure working environments was during a presentation on hostage negotiations at the European Inter Agency Security Forum in September of 2014. Given the increasing rise of violent, armed groups and their political and financial leverage in kidnapping Western individuals, it was indeed a very active time in the media and for organizations working in Syria. A leading hostage negotiator for Médecins sans frontières (MSF) took the floor of the conference room to explain a recent abduction of five international staff members inside Syria. The staff were not named or identified but distinguished according to their nationalities. This situation was portrayed as a process of categorization. Five internationally classified staff. Five governments. An Islamic State kidnapping.

Dozens of staff working in offices across the globe halted their usual roles to participate in the laborious struggle to free those abducted. They worked around the clock on tasks ranging from speaking to the media, contacting families of the hostages, and moderating with governments to ensure the safety and eventual release of the international workers. Although the negotiator was vague and only at liberty to speak broadly about the sensitive operation, he was critical of the governments involved. He explained how some governments attempted to retrieve their own citizens, even if it meant the insecurity or the expense of other internationals being held. The negotiator admitted that while his team did their best to coordinate with one another, cooperating with bureaucratic powers who also had a stake in the negotiations, proved to complicate the process and put some hostages at further risk. While he outlined the basic timeline of action by MSF and some of the challenges encountered during the intense operation to rescue their lives, his presentation was left out of the Forum minutes distributed to all participants afterwards. Members were not allowed to speak

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<sup>19</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 5, 2015



about the presentation with others and external guests attending the forum conference including USAID and NATO were not invited to this specific session.

I reflected on this presentation after speaking with an INGO program coordinator based in Jordan who distinguished the difference both strategically and rhetorically between an abduction of an international staff versus a national.

Back in the early 2000's and as a result of the US led coalition in Iraq, we were carrying out remote management from Jordan into Iraq. We had an office in Iraq but after a staff member was killed, shot dead, we pulled out of Iraq and decided to move the Iraq operations, the management side to Amman, with movement of national staff and local partners to carry out cross border operations and programming.<sup>20</sup>

The organization, although very familiar with remote management in several contexts, is in the midst of an operational shift, otherwise referred to as a 'transformation.' This transformation entails being more directly present and physically active in conflict zones and highly insecure environments in the coming years. This example and distinction in rhetoric sheds light on how and why the categorization of actors signifies varying degrees of emergency and security protocols.

As recent as early last year, the program coordinator's organization, which focuses on 'empowerment and social cohesion of local communities,' had been conducting frequent cross border aid delivery and routine operations inside Syria. "National and international staff would cross the border [from Turkey] in the morning and return to the same border in the afternoon and back into Syria. This was the modality of operations at the time, even though the presence of armed groups was very well known, the threat of ISIS was yet to come."<sup>21</sup> Although the organization did not have official approval from Turkish authorities to be working in the eastern regions, it continued to carry out programs from the Turkey regardless of limiting regulations.

Aleppo was formerly a stomping ground for INGOs known to work directly inside Syria even during the first half of 2014. When ISIS suddenly took over large swaths of territories in Northwestern Syria including the city of Aleppo, "the game changed."

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<sup>20</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 26, 2015

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

We consider a lot of research regarding civil-military relations and cooperation with armed groups...considering this is something that is deeply part of our management change process...we want to be an organization focused on emergencies in conflict zones...we have to determine our risk threshold.<sup>22</sup>

The program coordinator explained that her organization must negotiate with known terrorist and rebel groups if this transformation to direct presence is going to occur. At the same time, dealing with risks such as kidnapping and detention will need to be dealt with better as staff normalize their positioning vis-à-vis operational risks. “Several national staff have been detained by ISIS.” According to her rhetoric, if a national staff is abducted by the Islamic State (ISIS) or any other non-state actor in Syria, it is considered detainment. If an international is taken hostage, they have been kidnapped. As for risk, “we would reach our risk threshold if an international staff member was kidnapped. This would be it for us and we might have to pull out and end operations.”<sup>23</sup>

There is a striking distinction between international staff and other staff including nationals and locals and this has become a normal facet of the humanitarian system irrespective of organization.

Even within humanitarian organizations – as in development and cooperation organizations – distinctions are systematically instituted between foreign staff, almost always Western and white, and local employees. These distinctions relate not only to status, power, responsibilities, type of contract, salary level, and marks of esteem, but also to the protection of their lives, or their very survival, whether they were threatened by disease or war.

(Fassin, p. 240)

It has become ever more apparent across a range of humanitarian emergencies that international staff are given a precedence over their national and local counterparts. This is clearly evident in cases of kidnapping and ransom of international staff. There have been several recent cases in the Syrian conflict. These cases are widely known by way of global media channels which have covered the beheadings of hostages at the fate of the Islamic State and other rebel factions. These widely broadcasted acts show the world that aid workers are under threat more than ever before. But these

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

<sup>23</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 26, 2015

stories, as unfortunate as they are, represent a miniscule fraction of the kinds of threats endured and risks taken by aid workers in the field, especially those native to the region.

Fassin recalls the ransom and then payment to rescue the Dutch head of mission of MSF in the North Caucasus. “The publicity surrounding this transaction not only confirmed that money had been paid but also revealed the amount, and it therefore made clear the value that might be placed on the life of an aid worker – or more precisely, the life of an expatriate aid volunteer, for even among the members of these organizations, not all lives are of equal value” (Fassin, 2012, p. 238). Media can only serve to exacerbate the attraction of belligerents to target international aid workers, especially if their governments are willing to pay hefty ransoms.

Another characteristic of the international is their ability to stay somewhere for a short period of time and move onto a better job elsewhere, eventually scoring a senior position at headquarters usually located in the United States or Europe. During an interview, Jordan was referred to as a “kindergarten for aid organizations,”<sup>24</sup> where the young, inexperienced internationals go to gain field experience and professional credibility. Their time spent in Jordan enables them to check the field experience tick box on their CV and thus, accredit them the ability and freedom to move up the humanitarian occupational ladder. Internationals do not stay in humanitarian field spaces for very long, even in the supposed safe stations such as Amman or Gaziantep where remote management is conducted. Their mobility is out of choice, not out of necessity. The picture is quite different for the national and the local.

## **9.2 The National**

There has been growing internal praise regarding how connected and inclusive the humanitarian system has become in recent years. In 2006, a task force led by InterAction and UNICEF, liaising with other UN agencies, published a framework for improving security and cooperation arrangements between members of the humanitarian community known as “Saving Lives Together” (UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), 2006). But the defiant MSF report, “Where is Everyone?” suggests otherwise (Healy & Tiller, 2014). Even as capacity building and other technically termed arrangements are designed to allow for better cooperation between organizations and host communities, national staff and groups are often times left out of governance and decision making mechanisms. It is consistently difficult for non-

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<sup>24</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, January 28, 2015

western responders to be integrated into the humanitarian system and this poses as a serious hindrance in the Syria response. The emerging actors from the Middle East region are subjected to individuals or government donors who prefer projects with good visibility and hence, are required to work under the aegis of their governments or have chosen to line themselves with government policies (Healy & Tiller, 2014, p. 19). National staff and organizations are also at the command of their international counterparts who dictate their contracts and their career boundaries which can result in occupational and financial setbacks.

The international community realizes their limits of access and presence in contexts like Syria. “This preponderance of national staff is one of the more visible shifts in aid work over the past ten to twenty years, as agencies hire and promote staff either within a country or from the region. Thus, the image of the white, Western aid worker is no longer the true face of aid work” (Fast, 2014, p. 137). But then again, the distinction between white, Westerner, and ‘other’ national are not so clear cut especially in crises in which national and victim will often times merge.

In an operation as geographically expansive and socially complex as the Syria response, national staff can be comprised of Lebanese, Jordanian, and Turkish origins. This depends on where those in supervisory roles of remote management are situated and who constitutes the remote management and/or Syria response team. The national is recognized as such in relation to their international counterparts or those above them in the organizational chart. My fieldwork in Amman provided me a sense of the Jordanian perspective while others in Turkey conveyed a picture of the role of national staff there. Understanding the national is a highly complex task. National actors and host communities can serve as a locus of transformation but not in the sense that some organizations have previously coined regarding a shift in the way they operate<sup>25</sup>. They must serve on their own accord and where genuine coordination between humanitarian actors is deemed viable from all perspectives. The national should be articulated fully in an extensive study on host communities, with Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, and even Iraq as respective case studies.

The presence of UN agencies and NGOs significantly impacts the lives of civilians in host communities. Their presence not only defines roles for national employees but also the nature of national and grassroots organizations. But how is

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<sup>25</sup> Many humanitarian and development organizations are currently undergoing leadership and organizational changes which is often referred to as transformational. During my research, I came across documents regarding operational change processes within World Vision, CARE, and MSF.

their presence manifested? Is their presence visible to all members of the humanitarian community?

During an interview with an INGO representative based in Gaziantep, I asked him to elaborate on the terms and references regarding internationals versus national staff in his office. His explanation made me realize how much I had initially assumed and even taken for granted regarding the term 'national.' He called the national a 'funny term.' In his office in Gaziantep, a third of the staff are Syrian, another third are Turkish, and the last third are considered internationals or expatriates. To him, using the term local staff is more descriptive for it encompasses both Syrian and Turkish nationals. But an umbrella category will conflate the discrepancies and hence, inequalities that clearly exist between Syrians and Turks and to an even greater extent, internationals.

Considering that Turkey is the 17<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world, the salaries demanded from Turkish staff are much higher than typical nationals of other host countries where INGOs usually operate in remote settings. He explained that there is less inequity, "almost eliminating inequity,"<sup>26</sup> in Turkey because it is nearly the same amount to cover the salaries of Turkish staff as it is for the internationals. This is not the case for Syrians. "Syrians face real risks...power differentials...they are powerless and face bureaucratic hassles." As for internationals, "they face bureaucratic hassles but they are not powerless."<sup>27</sup>

This glimpse into an office in Gaziantep reveals how categorizing the national is indeed a complicated task especially in a place like Turkey where a given office will employ a diverse pool of people. Turkish staff exist somewhere on both sides of this categorical spectrum; they are undoubtedly nationals in their own country but they privilege from near-expat salaries. Whereas Syrians, even those holding residency permits or those who have the ability to live and work in Turkey, are in fact not nationals. But their lower wages, sense of powerlessness, and lack of leverage within the humanitarian and regional political sphere undoubtedly equates them with the usual 'national' suspect so often designated to those employed by INGOs in host communities. A brief look at the national in Jordan will further complicate the national actor category.

The sheer impact of humanitarian organizations on the employment sector in Jordan is a fascinating study to undertake. As a refugee camp manager suggested,

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<sup>26</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 7, 2015

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*

“Zaatari is a window into the picture of humanitarian intervention in Jordan.”<sup>28</sup> However, as the aid industry in Jordan “grows and shrinks,” over time, some people have quite strong opinions on its presence and its impact. Others embedded within the system remain confused as to whose role is what and what different organizations represent in the bigger scheme. “You know there are so many organizations [in Jordan], UNDP, UNSSP, WWF, OCHA – Why? You know, I am thinking who is OHCA...What are they doing? I hear about them but I don’t know them. I don’t see them anywhere,”<sup>29</sup> A Jordanian staff member of Zaatari camp confessed.

Even though the humanitarian system needs implementing partners to function, INGOs are more geared towards emergency relief and there is no capacity for development at the grass roots level. This leaves very little or no effort to support local Jordanian NGOs to be sustainable. One of the main reasons why national staff and national implementing partners do not stay with one INGO for long directly correlates to the nature of funding cycles. “There is no time, no funding, and no allocation of support for national groups and contracts...it all depends on ‘funding lines,’”<sup>30</sup> a researcher in Jordan told me. How can you provide capacity building to people who you know are going to leave the organization in a matter of months? People do not stick around one particular organization for very long and this why there has been such a drive for capacity building and training in recent years.

A Jordanian national works for UNCHR as a driver in the Zaatari and Azraq camps located near the Jordanian-Syrian border. He spends most of his time driving UNHCR staff to and from the camps. When there is significant influx of refugees on the Syrian border, he picks them up from the Jordanian side and drives them to whichever camp has room for them at the time.

The work is really good here in the camps, but it is temporary. I must finish the job soon and then I must wait and stay at home for three months...and then I can reapply. These are the rules. They make the rules suddenly and we must all follow them. But this will be very difficult for me and my family. I will not be able to work for three months and then I must try to reapply. I cannot find another job during those three months.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 20, 2015

<sup>29</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 14, 2015

<sup>30</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 25, 2015

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 14, 2015

Mobility, a characteristic of both the international and the national, functions for drastically desperate reasons. While internationals have the privilege of moving around frequently, gaining field experience, and eventually rising up the occupational ladder, national staff must be mobile in order to keep their jobs. Their contracts are short term, they may or may not get benefits such as insurances and coverage for their children. Their positions in INGOs are temporal and fleeting. Nationals move to manage themselves horizontally while internationals move to move up, or vertically.

In emergency relief, INGOs have temporary mandates. The objective is to provide a rapid response - reaching needy populations and providing assistance as soon as possible. It is ultimately a race against time and a vicious circle of competition between vying organizations to reach a remote place first. But what almost always happens, especially in a place like Jordan, organizations with a short-term presence stay, shifting their mandate to include long-term development projects.<sup>32</sup> No matter in relief or in development, INGOs need their implementing partners but they are not willing to give the national organization or individual sustainable capacity to function independently. Rather than this challenge being intentional on the part of INGOs, the inability of Jordanian NGOs to function independently from their INGO counterparts takes shape as if it were inherently built within the humanitarian system itself.

They lean on Jordanian NGOs but there exists no transfer of knowledge within partnership agreements. At the same time, it's an extremely competitive field to get into for aspiring Jordanians. On top of that there is a constant turnover of staff – leaving one position and filling another – people in Jordan are always looking for the next better job with better pay, incentives, benefits.<sup>33</sup>

This constant shifting of staff has significant implications for both INGOs and Jordanian organizations and their efforts to exist in the long-term. Even as someone leaves a short-term contract and finds a seemingly better opportunity elsewhere, the organization carries on regardless. On the surface, its presence remains unabated no matter who the national embodies. However, what INGOs have come to lack is institutional memory. This weakens the system at a micro and macro level. Therefore, institutional memory or lack there of, becomes a residual risk for INGOs which can often times creep up and prove as a detriment in the worst of scenarios.

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<sup>32</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 25, 2015

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*

These challenges do not exist for all organizations or in the same ways. According to a researcher, CARE has been in Jordan for many years and continues to maintain its presence quite successfully but it struggles with staff turnover rates. They foresee a very long-term presence, an expansive mandate, and many different kinds of activities and programs throughout the region.<sup>34</sup> This is what keeps CARE afloat in a sea of organizations in the humanitarian industry in Jordan. On the other side of the spectrum, some INGOs do not rely on national staff to maintain their presence or carry out their missions. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and MSF function mostly with expat staff and do not typically work through implementing partners. They conduct their own assessments and delivery of aid. World Vision is another organization that would rather work directly as opposed to working through partners of national groups. Therefore, how access and presence is approached at an organizational level relates heavily to who is considered the national.

The distinguishable terms international and national are also executed when discussing non-state and armed actors. This indeed blurs the categorical distinctions, complicates the humanitarian, and the landscape even further.

You have two different types of Talibans. We are just going to make a difference between what we can call international and national Talibans...it's more linked to their cultural things. When you talk to the Taliban, the national Taliban, you talk to people who are tough, who definitely have a different culture than yours.<sup>35</sup>

Although this informant is referring to a non-state actor and not a humanitarian, the fact that he chooses to install these terms to designate distinction between social categories within the humanitarian space can also lead to generalizing humanitarian categories – taking for granted the complexities inherent in the national terminology.

Additionally, Fast and others have documented increasing violence against aid workers and found that while internationals are targeted in specific places, national staff incidents have been on the rise widely in recent years. “For the years 2006-8, kidnappings and attacks international staff both increased from the previous years, and incidents in the three most dangerous contexts (Afghanistan, Somalia, and Sudan) accounted for the majority of the incidents...The numbers are increasing overall but

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

<sup>35</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 6, 2015



particularly for national (versus international) staff” (Fast, 2010, p. 7); (Stoddard et al., 2009).

For a long time, humanitarian workers, so preoccupied with saving ‘others,’ did not even realize that alongside them the national staff, perhaps too close to be considered as part of other otherness of victims but at the same time too distant to be deemed to belong to their humanitarian community, were not being afforded the same right to live for which the expatriates advocated in the international arena. (Fassin, p. 240)

Where is this so-called “platform for acknowledging the high level of exposure experience by aid workers from national organizations, for whom security incidents, including fatalities, still pass largely unrecognized?” (Kingston, 2009). Incidents and events affecting local partners are even more so overlooked by international organizations, making me wonder the intention and the implications of such partnerships.

### **9.3 The local**

Syria has always been an unpredictable working environment for humanitarian actors alike. “The Syrian government’s strict regulation of entry into the country, as well as its long-standing policies of obstructing civil society in general, meant that not only could international organizations, particularly INGOs, not easily enter Syria at the onset of the crisis, but also that those that were present prior to the crisis were heavily regulated and had few local partners to work with, even as the scale of violence and suffering increased” (Howe, Stites, & Chudacoff, 2015, p. 15). A regional security manager managing projects and programming in Lebanon conveyed a similar situation in Syria:

In Syria before the crisis, there was no civil society. And anyway, the civil society that was working through cross border is certainly not the same as the ones that were linked to the government before. You can put a lot of control mechanisms and things like that but as soon as you have never been inside the country, you are working with people you do not know, that you have never really experienced in different contexts, something like that – you must have a good level of trust.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 6, 2015

From this interviewee's description, local partners are a group of people from what he refers to as a Syrian civil society that never had a voice or public representation in contemporary Syria. They have never been known or acknowledged by the international community prior to the crisis. They are people that humanitarian organizations work with in order to gain access and implement projects but they are people whose validity and trust are constantly put into question. Additionally, a European Interagency Security Forum (EISF) paper on INGO-local partnerships addresses an increase in international/local organization partnerships or otherwise referred to starkly as 'North/South' (Singh & EISF Secretariat, 2012). Even rhetorically, the distance between internationals and locals could not be further apart.

And yet, Syrian groups and local organizations serve at the frontlines of humanitarian action today. They function as cross border aid deliverers and messengers of information and access for INGOs. But what serves them in this contractual exchange? How do they see their future within the humanitarian space? As these groups coalesce, the potential for different communities to adopt countervailing principles, have different ideas of the purpose of humanitarianism, and have different rankings regarding whose lives are worth saving is worth considering (Barnett, 2013, p. 387).

Many of the local groups obtaining contracts with INGOs are considered diaspora organizations, comprised of individuals from Syria but have founded and registered their organization outside of Syria predominantly in Europe or the United States. Many of my interviewees explained that the majority of INGOs with bases to deliver cross border aid into Syria from Turkey are mostly working with diaspora organizations or Syrians living abroad who were established in reaction to the Syrian conflict. Syrians who began these organizations are mostly highly educated, doctors and engineers, and had personal motivations to provide support to the people of their country. While driven by a 'humanitarian-like motivation,' they do not follow or are not in-line with the established humanitarian principles of INGOs, according to one interviewee.<sup>37</sup> There exist discrepancies between the kinds of values and building blocks that make INGOs and their partners quite different.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, in the context of the Syrian crisis and from Turkey specifically, some have expressed how INGOs do not have many choices or options when it comes to locating an appropriate

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<sup>37</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 5, 2015

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

partner to do cross border work for them. There is a very small pool of partners capable of doing this work and even then, the majority of partners do not have the technical capacity or skills.

Mohannad is originally from Damascus. He holds a bachelor's degree in English literature and a master's in Business Administration. In 2014, three years after the start of the Syrian civil war, Mohannad left Damascus to take a job offer with Khayr, a Syrian diaspora organization and relocated to Gaziantep, Turkey. He had to leave his wife and family behind in Syria. Originally working in accounting and assurance, Mohannad rose quickly and is now the COO of the organization. Khayr was formed by an umbrella charity-based foundation spearheaded by a group of Syrians living abroad in 2004. After the war broke out, the foundation committee heads decided to start Khayr in 2012 and a year later, began partnering with international organizations vying for presence in the region also. As a diaspora organization, Khayr is registered as a British organizational entity in the United Kingdom. Since the organization does not officially have offices in the UK, just a board of directors, it needed to be officially registered in Turkey also in order to maintain a programming station in the country, providing close proximity to the Syrian border and the international aid community.

Khayr will soon be expanding and hiring a manager located in Jordan to liaise with INGOs from the Jordanian side. "We have very big objectives. One of the biggest challenges is managing a sustainable flow of support and finances while also promoting our aspirations."<sup>39</sup> At the moment, ninety percent of Khayr's activities are those of INGOs and the remaining ten percent are dedicated to their own independently financed initiatives. They have a volunteer network located in the United States, Germany, United Kingdom, and the Gulf Countries to help fundraise. Plans of becoming of larger organization with more operational possibilities will depend on the nature of the conflict. "Some day we plan to have a headquarters in Damascus and to become an organization with more capacity, beyond Syria. We would like to assist in humanitarian crises and helping people in other parts of the world."<sup>40</sup>

Mohannad and Khayr's story is just one example of how the local is a complex category. More in-depth analytical research will need to be conducted to better articulate these distinctions between local and diaspora and also how local identities become the local when placed next to internationals and nationals. Syrians organizations need to forge their presence on the international scene in order to

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Mohannad, May 8, 2015

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*

become the future humanitarian leaders of their country and beyond. INGOs must establish and sustain their presence on local scales in order to maintain their international reputation and leadership.

These categories can at times be very rigid and determined by experts of the international community. At the same time, they can also serve as a sense of dynamism and fluidity that is very telling of the present age we are in in terms of political and social order and the humanitarian landscape. As I demonstrate, it is very difficult to make these claims but I believe that studying the Syria response further will allow researchers to engage with these identity-based dilemmas, yielding formidable insights.

## **10. RISK AND CATEGORIES OF ACTORS**

According to a fact finding mission carried out by an INGO, local Syrian groups are the only groups that uphold the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, and do so at a terrible cost, often paying with their lives after detention and torture.<sup>41</sup> Because they have no political or military affiliation, they have no protection. They are seen as a threat by all sides, particularly by the regime because, due to their neutrality, impartiality and independence, they offer a vision of a new Syria.<sup>42</sup>

The true equity of partnerships between local and international actors can be questioned when one side has all the money and holds most of the decision-making power. This dynamic is more nuanced in a remote management setting because while the international players continue to hold all of the money, the local players hold all of the access. The international actors have no choice except to partner if they wish to be involved in the humanitarian response.

(Howe, Stites, & Chudacoff, 2015, p. 9)

According to international and even national actors within the INGO architecture, managing local partners must entail a “robust management infrastructure,”<sup>43</sup> in order to carry out programming in Syria successfully. This indeed puts pressure on all actors but especially on partners. It puts the most risk on local partners but the most responsibility to ensure the safety of all staff on the INGO management team. I asked a

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<sup>41</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview and documents, March 10, 2015

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*

<sup>43</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 10, 2015

country director to explain to me the difference in risks between international and national staff and local partners:

The protocols are not the same for international and national which is kind of logical sometimes. That is normal to have different protocols. And then for partners, I am not sure if we are taking into account...sometimes...the risks we put on partners. It is sometimes a way to avoid the risks of [organization name]. It is the same for all organizations. It is unfortunately something quite common. You work through partners because you cannot work directly...you see what I mean?<sup>44</sup>

A potential risk that could affect the reputation or mandate of an organization is considered an utmost priority to avoid or to mitigate. This kind of risk could jeopardize all facets of the organization. It is then transferred to others who do not fit within the official social structure of the organization and the shielding security protocols put in place to protect those at the highest tiers of the social hierarchy.

It is not a matter of acknowledging that there are inherently more risks placed on partners. As he later mentioned, “the organization is conscious of it which is already a good thing.”<sup>45</sup> Awareness is applauded. Reluctance to try to change or even put forth constructive ideas builds a sense of apathy towards transfer of risk. The idea of it and the assumption that it is occurring is normalized and becomes collateral damage to the system – it most probably happens or they know it happens but it does not disrupt the humanitarian process to a point where the organization is at risk, therefore it is brushed aside.

Some organizations are afraid that their partners are taking on more work than they can manage and are juggling projects with many different organizations simultaneously. This can also take the blame of risk transfer off of the INGO and place it on the local, claiming that they chose to take on more projects and therefore, more risks than they can handle. It is a known fact that this is happening but its implications are unknown and unforeseeable. The best that organizations can do for themselves and for their donors is to install monitoring mechanisms to ensure that their aid is delivered to the appropriate locations and beneficiaries. The intent of monitoring partner movement has very little if anything to do with INGO liability towards them.

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<sup>44</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 5, 2015

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

Frankly, INGOs do not want to be liable for what happens to their partners. Rather, they want to know how, when, and where aid is reached to their target recipients inside Syria. Some organizations have GPS tracking or partner with private shipping companies to electronically tag packages and be alerted when delivered.

Another way of monitoring aid packages and partners is through a third party. In essence, third party monitoring would mean that one local partner monitors another or that an external party visits a local partner and conducts an evaluation. But what I discovered is that third party and peer-to-peer monitoring looks successful on paper but many organizations still don't have the human resources and the time to conduct these kinds of thorough monitoring and evaluation activities. According to a monitoring and evaluation specialist in Turkey, "There is a very small pool of partners capable of doing this work and even then, the majority do not have the technical capacity or the skills."<sup>46</sup> Not to mention, many local groups cannot gain the trust of INGOs if they are not considered legitimate actors on an international scale. It requires that they obtain a sense of professionalization before applying to become a local partner with an international humanitarian agency.

INGOs consider there to be limited choices in the ways of choosing a local partners. As a result, partners can be chosen to deliver aid to locations within Syria irrespective of ethnic, social, or religious affiliations. "We have recently taken on an Arab partner in a Kurdish held territory. So the Arab partner is providing aid to Kurdish regions, under Kurdish control."<sup>47</sup> These kinds of choices can lead to political and social tensions between partners. But the majority of INGOs do not have the monitoring efficiencies or direct oversight to determine to what extent this kind of scenario hinders the delivery of aid and whether this poses as an increased threat for the Arab partner, for Kurdish communities, or for the INGO.

Parallel narratives concur that when partnering in remote management in Syria, risk should be a two-way street. An international admits, "If Syrian partners manage to operate in such a dangerous context and are ready to put their life at stake every day, can't we accept a degree of risk to stand by them and their humanitarian work?"<sup>48</sup> While Mohannad, a local partner, stresses that the risks "are worth taking if there is a sense of collectivity, a shared experience with these risks."<sup>49</sup> It is very important for Mohannad that international actors are present, at least in some aspect of the cross

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<sup>46</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 18 2015

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*

<sup>48</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 10, 2015

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Mohannad, May 8, 2015

border aid delivery process. He has come across many INGOs who simply use local partners as subcontractors. “They have no sense of physical presence or interaction with Syrian organizations – Syrians have to deal with the entire process on their own.”<sup>50</sup>

One organization states in a document regarding contractual agreements and terrorist financing that they will not be held responsible or suspect of collaboration with a terrorist group if their partners are found to be involved with warring parties.<sup>51</sup> If partners are found guilty of association with a terrorist group or belligerent party, the INGO will immediately terminate their contract. INGOs insist to partners that they report on any suspicion of any terrorist activities in the areas where they work. According to one organization, immediate reporting is key to the safety of partners and the overall safety of the organization. Failure to report on incidents or suspicion is also ground for termination of partner-INGO contractual agreements.<sup>52</sup>

On an individual level, international staff spoke very little about what risks meant for them personally. Some would say that working in insecure environments was “worth the risks,” correlating the term with struggles or uncomfortable situations. “Risks – they make you think on your feet.”<sup>53</sup> Others maintained a rather staunch stance towards expressing personal or individual thoughts on risk. As a humanitarian aid worker, some believe that following one’s organizational attitude toward risk and risk management come first and foremost or that ways of approaching risk were dictated to them by their supervisors.

On a collective level, humanitarian individuals seemed to have a clear sense of how their organization’s attitude toward risks stood up against others. “That organization has a more heightened sense of risk than ours and they are doing similar things in the region.”<sup>54</sup> At an organizational level, risk and capacity are frequently discussed in tandem. With more capacity and capacity for capacity, an organization is thought to be able to withstand or handle more risk. In all cases, organizations and individuals expressed how lack of oversight and monitoring of remote projects creates an environment in which risks are imagined with more intensity. Not only is there very little known about a project if an organization does not have a direct internal eye on its development and execution, but not knowing whether there might be unknown risks unaccounted for can make risk-acute minds run wild. Many speculative risks pertain to

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid*

<sup>51</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 10, 2015

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*

<sup>53</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 11, 2015

<sup>54</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 21, 2015

their partner relations and perceptions of whether partnering can create more risks for an organization.

There are definitely rumors about partners, and these rumors can spread because there is definitely a sense of opportunism – partners are definitely competing for jobs. Partners can and do take on jobs from more than one organization. One rumor was that one organization had affiliations with the Muslim brotherhood. At this stage, the risk of this are unknown.<sup>55</sup>

There are other more practical kinds of risks that should not be overlooked to explain how risk is a defining feature the Syria response. “So many people fear job security and do not dare blow the whistle on wrong doings within their organization.”<sup>56</sup> And the very same people either refrain from being interviewed or wish to be anonymized in this research. Speaking out can mean risking one’s livelihood or even life.

Risks are shrouded in secrecy. An interviewee was present when the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) landed in Sicily to receive the handover of hostages being held in Somalia. He got a call from a girl who had interviewed for the DRC for a position in Mogadishu. She was asking about the kinds of security risks in the country and how DRC handles security at field level. The aid worker was up front with her and found it timely that she was contacting him while he was part of a hostage handover process. Later on, the aid worker’s boss said he would dismiss the candidate for the mere fact that she contacted him and wanted to know about the risks and safety issues. The interviewee’s boss found this to be skeptical and did not want future employers asking these sorts of questions.

In discussion on local partnerships in the Syria response, one organization acknowledge that transferring more funds to Syrian partners means transferring more risks as well. But ultimately, when discussing risk transfer with an INGO representative, the notion undoubtedly reverts back to how the INGO is handling and managing risk versus what kind of risks local partners must grapple with to carry out daily programs. I had serious difficulty accessing partners to interview, not because they did not want to be interviewed but rather, their INGO partners did not want me to reach out to them. This proves that their knowledge of risk and risk transfer has yet to be fully understood

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<sup>55</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 19, 2015

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*



and addressed. Therefore, understandings of risk transfer inevitably fall short and are limiting if only the INGO perspective is incorporated into discussions.

When asking a local partner about their relationship with INGOs and the risks they take on when working for them, the unequal playing field becomes ever more apparent. “Taking Risks is now a way of life.”<sup>57</sup> Fear is part of everyday life too: “providing humanitarian aid to families displaced from neighborhoods which rebelled against the regime is declared a criminal act. In the logic of the regime, these families, mostly women and children, are a threat. Even the UN Agencies cannot reach them, who can only operate under the control and scrutiny of the authorities.”<sup>58</sup>

We need to be specific about what level of threat will trigger a suspension of an agency’s work. In Kismayo, Somalia, I remember a group of women saying that they understood that if five or six of them got killed then they’d leave. The implication being that the death of one or two people was acceptable. Not all of us have the same understanding, nor are we consistent with what we understand to be ‘threats’. This inconsistency can diminish our security by diminishing the deterrent threat of withdrawing assistance. (Childs, 2015)

Ultimately, the notion and the act of risk transfer is not a bounded concept. Indeed this is what I am trying to capture; it has been exalted to the realm of expert knowledge and in this act, it becomes bounded and limited by the privileged voices that decide its definition and parameters. But risk transfer undoubtedly has different meanings and implications depending on who is asked. It is something that is so often times spoken about but not phrased as such. Or on the contrary, the term is mentioned frequently yet what it implies in reality remains unforeseen. This is a real struggle for INGOs and those elected to govern the terms, conditions, and strategies. Risk transfer and even remote management are terms prescribed by a humanitarian system of governing experts. But there remains a gap between institutional prescription and how these terms materialize in reality and through the lens of local actors.

## **11. MANAGING SECURITY AND RISK: A PLATFORM FOR EXPERT KNOWLEDGE**

Part of my internship involved assisting the management of a newly designed security information management database. Until recent years, humanitarian organizations and

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<sup>57</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, March 10, 2015

<sup>58</sup> *ibid*

even UN agencies either did not report on security incidents or they stored information on excel sheets<sup>59</sup>. As security incidents involving aid workers rose to the point where security issues became a hindrance to programming, coupled with easily accessed technological advances, security personnel realized they needed to develop better ways of producing, storing, and sharing information on events affecting their staff. This online database functions as a platform accessible to certain staff located across the world. I feel it necessary to include this tool into my discussion as it provides a strong case for how organizations continue to struggle with managing the humanitarian space – in terms of risks, security, and different categories of workers.

The platform is designed in a way that only select individuals have an account and can report on incidents. There are typically two kinds of accounts – users and managers. These account types designate where account holders are located in the organizational hierarchical chart. Not everyone in the organization has access to this platform. For example, a country director in Cameroon would be a manager. As a manager, he oversees users in his country office and can view all of their written reports and profile information. Users are normally field staff, safety and security focal points, and might also be human resource and administrative assistants, at the request of their country and regional directors. Aside from managers and users, there are higher-level managers that can see incidents region-wide and even worldwide. A regional security director managing West African country offices can see all reports coming from West Africa but he cannot see reports made from users in Southern and Eastern African country offices. The highest accounts on the organizational chart are those who manage all staff from headquarters and the secretariat offices. However, there is more than one layer even for these more privileged accounts. The United States based headquarters manages the most countries across the organization. Other independent members including Canada, Australia, and to a lesser extent France and Germany, also oversee country offices. Therefore, the security director for US-managed countries can see all reports under him or her. Lastly, three accounts in Geneva can see all information, updates, and reports organization-wide.

Describing this platform represents how expert knowledge is conceived and how risk management and discussion are designed for and only accessible by a small group of individuals within an organization. This kind of system reinforces typologies of people and makes clear-cut distinctions between staff by way of who can see security-related information. It also illustrates Weizman's depiction of the humanitarian present

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<sup>59</sup> Anonymous aid worker, interview, February 23, 2015

as a space of 'non-place' where aid workers are everywhere and nowhere simultaneously (2011, p. 60).

Finally, local partners have absolutely no presence in this monitoring platform. They are not mentioned in reports, they don't have access to it, and they may not know that it exists. Syria is not a represented country on the interactive map featured on the homepage. Any incident that occurs in Syria is not regarded and stored in the database because no staff member works in Syria, only local partners. They are ultimately not considered as part of the organization but more so as subcontractors. The security incidents and risks affecting them are not considered relevant or significant for reporting and statistical purposes.

In fact, statistical information across organizations and aid worker databases do not account for all incidents affecting humanitarian workers. According to the 2011 Aid Worker Security Report:

...the overwhelming majority of recorded incidents affected national aid workers although, per capita, international staff are facing higher rates of attack. The report suggests that statistical evidence does not accurately capture many of the incidents that local partners encounter.

(Singh & EISF Secretariat, 2012, p. 8)

The platform serves as a microcosm of the broader challenges in the Syria response. It displays the strong distinctions between internationals, nationals, and locals. Locals and security incidents affecting them are not recorded and hence, not accessible on the platform. The majority of national staff (unless they are country directors) hold user accounts but cannot see anything happening within the organization beyond their field or subfield office. Internationals, in varying degrees, have significantly more access and control to how the platform is managed and how people and information are molded and maneuvered in this virtual space.

## **12. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Throughout this research, I explore notions of the contemporary humanitarian landscape. I initially wanted to understand how and why organizations operate remotely in highly insecure and risk-induced contexts, most notably in the ongoing Syrian conflict. I capture how the study of NGO security, including remote management strategies, is constructed. I explore how presence, access, and risk contribute to

defining the humanitarian space, the humanitarian present, and the Syria response. I demonstrate how different categories of humanitarian actors represent different aspects of remote management and the current humanitarian dilemma(s) in Syria. Humanitarian organizations and actors negotiate and maintain presence and access in various ways and ultimately, attempt to manage risks throughout their operational endeavors.

I have come to realize through my research and experience working for a humanitarian organization that humanitarian assistance is about making choices and decisions, sometimes under extreme pressure and undesirable circumstances. As one individual stated at an NGO security meeting, “humanitarian work is a constant tension between principles and pragmatism.”<sup>60</sup> In Krause’s thorough outlining of several large humanitarian organizations, she mentions that “these organizations need to find some way to make choices in order to make their mission manageable” (2014, p. 4). Ultimately, handling security measures and managing risks are considered necessary if organizational missions are to be carried out accordingly. Much rests on the information and knowledge of security experts who advise humanitarian actors on how to operate in violent and politically and socially fragile contexts like Syria. Their choices, even those that seem miniscule in the heat of a moment, can have a permanent affect on peoples’ lives. Unfortunately, gaining access can translate to sacrificing some values at least for a period of time, working without physical presence, and taking on risks that would otherwise be irreconcilable. The main risk facing organizations and a dilemma yielding endless debate is whether deciding on a certain operational approach will put staff in the line of danger.

INGOs and dominating humanitarian actors must come to terms with how their politicization has hindered their ability to work in many war torn regions of the world today. They must also come to terms with their emerging local competition, give back the testimonial torch to those who have become not only relevant, in terms of access and presence, but potentially powerful humanitarian actors. Evidently, their message is also a political one – to rebuild the Syria of tomorrow. What will the Syria response look like as the war drags on? How will the dynamics between humanitarian actors change or shift? Will funding sources move from Western-backed donors to those from the so-called ‘Global South’? How will international humanitarian organizations remain relevant and effective in the future humanitarian landscape, at least in case of Syria?

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<sup>60</sup> Anonymous aid worker, meeting, September 9, 2014

As a collective, we can hold endless discussions on the horrific suffering and the inhumanity that has defined this war. We will continue to read about the horror, increasingly nuanced terrorism, and daily shifting of power and territory between armed actors which creates the humanitarian dilemma at hand. Humanitarian actors cannot steer the course of the war. But humanitarian actors can think and act with humanity. They can think and act with a humanitarianism that fosters Fast's approach to security which will reclaim humanity and "force agencies to recognize and grapple with the tension and inequalities that do exist and with the ways by which everyday practices of aid define its meaning" (2014, p. 45).

The Syria response is a timely representation of this humanitarian dilemma. To question where organizations draw their risk threshold when maintaining presence becomes almost impossible without putting some lives at risk at the expense of others. This involves balancing staff, an extremely fragile political context, a sea of human needs, and the struggle to maintain consistent operational capacities all the while manifesting a sense of committed presence in a humanitarian space filled with risks and unknowns.

It is difficult to engage critically and reimagine the humanitarian space and the Syria response if organizations and humanitarians are not willing to share openly about their experiences and challenges. I was not allowed to disclose most of the names of individuals and names of organizations in order to conduct this research. While of course I am willing to anonymize identities for the purpose of discussing this topic, many aspects cannot be examined in depth without comparing and analyzing specifics of organizations. Therefore, anonymizing and not disclosing information disenfranchises research on this topic which has vast potential for providing insight for practitioners striving to remain relevant in the humanitarian landscape/space in the years to follow.

I aspire to contribute to the anthropology of humanitarianism in terms of how risk, presence, and access have created distance between actors, both rhetorically and physically. Despite struggles to discuss more extensively certain aspects of the Syria response remote management apparatus that are momentarily highly sensitive, I hope that my research will inspire others to explore remote humanitarian assistance and the trajectories of humanitarian actors. I encourage others to follow in my footsteps, delve deeper into these humanitarian categories, especially the national and the local. I support further research on case-specific ethnography whose micro-level findings will enhance larger debates on humanitarian assistance and how organizations are

operating in Syria and surrounding countries. In addition, I believe more insights and authorship from local partners and national staff are both vital for collective discussion regarding the humanitarian landscape today. This kind of research will not only be insightful but is extremely necessary for the betterment of the humanitarian community, space, and the future of saving lives. We must lift this layer of secrecy, speak out against the ills affecting humanitarians to carry out their work effectively, and be willing to accept criticism. Only then can organizations come to terms with how they fit into the humanitarian landscape, how they contribute to creating inequalities between staff, and how they are going to remain relevant in ongoing and future humanitarian situations. The riddle can be solved and the enigma can be revealed and resolved.

Fast depicts the humanitarian corridors originally built to protect aid workers from hostilities, known as the humanitarian fortress (2014, p. 3). Rather than a physical entity, the humanitarian fortress in Syria has become a distant and even virtual realm. Remote management is a feature of this humanitarian fortress. As a space of security, the fortress is not protecting everyone. This has been dismantled with little hope for repair. But there is hope for a different kind of humanitarian space; one in which local voices can claim their own narratives, establish themselves as legitimate humanitarian actors, and players in gradually building the foundations for a new Syria.

**Annex - Table 1 - Interviews**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>City</b>
CARE International	Regional Security Manager	Nairobi
CARE International	Country Director	Islamabad
MSF	Research Director	Geneva
ACTED	Field Coordinator	Amman
CARE International	Security Manager	Paris
World Vision	Team lead	Amman
CARE International	Assistant Country Director	Amman
UNHCR	Driver	Amman
IFPO	Researcher	Amman
CARE International	Security Manager	Amman
Humanitarian Outcomes	Researcher	Amman
CARE International	Emergency coordinator	Amman
Save the Children	Monitoring and Evaluation	Stockholm
CARE International	Monitoring and Evaluation	Gaziantep
IFPO	Associate Researcher	Amman
UNICEF	Security Advisor	Amman
CARE International	Policy Advisor	London
Khayr Foundation	COO	Gaziantep
Save the Children	Policy Advisor	Stockholm
ACTED	(Former) Security Manager	Baghdad
CARE International	Country Director	Gaziantep

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