Commentary

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Humanitarianism and Liberal Democracies: An Ambivalent Relationship

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Abstract

The war in Gaza reveals a profound transformation in the humanitarian sector. While Joël Glasman sees it as a breaking point, Michaël Neuman believes that Gaza is instead the culmination of a process that has already begun: the criminalisation of the enemy, political hardening, and a gradual shift away from the liberal framework. Both agree that non-governmental organisations (NGOs), traditionally supported by Western democracies, are seeing these alliances crumble as they face a loss of legitimacy and resources on the ground. Faced with these changes, NGOs are being called upon to radically rethink their role, their functioning and their autonomy.

Keywords: liberalism; war; humanitarian system; democracies; criminalisation

Introduction

By Michaël Neuman

The *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* (*JHA*) is publishing an exchange between the authors of two short essays published on *AOC (Analyse Opinion Critique)*, a French-language news analysis website in March and April 2024. Taking the situation in Gaza as their starting point, the authors provide partly divergent analyses of the history of relations between humanitarianism and liberal democracies. For the historian Joël Glasman, the genocide in Gaza marks a decisive turning point for humanitarian organisations, which, disowned by Western democracies, are faced with the need to reinvent themselves beyond liberalism in order to continue their humanitarian work. In his response, Michaël Neuman, Director of Studies at MSF-Crash and member of the *JHA* editorial committee, puts Gaza's place in these relations into perspective, while pointing the finger at illiberal tendencies of Western democracies and at the criminalisation of the enemy as the cause of the growing rift between NGOs and their long-time Western allies.

These contributions firstly appeared in AOC, on 24 March for Joël Glasman's article[1] and on 10 April for Michaël Neuman's article.[2]

After Gaza, Humanitarianism without Liberalism?

By Joël Glasman

The genocide in Gaza is a tipping point for humanitarian organisations. Disowned by the Western democracies, they are losing long-time allies and technical support in the field. Facing new political, environmental and demographic challenges, NGOs are going to have to reinvent themselves independent of liberalism if they hope to pursue their humanitarian work.

For the past thirty years, humanitarian assistance has been liberalism's ally, but that may be ending. Gaza marks a tipping point, the end of an era – one in which liberal globalisation and humanitarian action have gone hand-in-hand. And one in which Western democracies protected UN organisations and NGOs.

Humanitarian organisations used to follow NATO armies as they went off to war, relying on reconstruction

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funds (in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Sahel). Where those governments refused to get involved, they filled the void, conducting food distributions (Rwanda and Myanmar). 'Humanitarian reason' was part of the liberal software.[3] Western governments condemned violations of international humanitarian law. They condemned the killings of humanitarian workers[4] (in Ethiopia, Sudan and Ukraine). That alliance now seems increasingly fragile.

In Gaza, Western governments have given full support to an Israeli government that has killed tens of thousands of civilians, used hunger as a weapon of war, and killed more than a hundred humanitarian workers.[5] In Gaza, as of March 2025, the Israeli army has bombed hospitals, schools and refugee camps. This has not, however, ended EU or US support for the Netanyahu government. Instead, parroting Israeli propaganda, they attacked the legitimacy of UNRWA,[6] the UN agency that is vaccinating, feeding, treating and educating millions of Palestinians. They attacked the legitimacy of the International Court of Justice when it ruled on the applicability of the Convention[7] for preventing and prosecuting the crime of genocide. Has humanitarian aid entered a new era?

What is emerging is perhaps a *reterritorialisation* of humanitarian aid – a new relationship to the world for organisations that have seen themselves as the human face of liberal globalisation for thirty years. These organisations are going to have to rethink their relationship to the world. The ground is shifting beneath their feet. Moral principles are being shaken up by political, climate and demographic upheaval.

The first challenge is a political one: increasingly restrictive European and US immigration policies. This is a new era of forced migration. Over the past thirty years, bureaucratic practices have become increasingly restrictive. Yet liberal political *rhetoric* remained generous. This was one characteristic of liberal humanitarianism; publicly, Western leaders claimed to be strongly committed to the 1951 Geneva Convention and international law. In practice, however, a series of bureaucratic and legal decisions (the 2004 creation of Frontex, the 2015 Valletta accords, the 2016 agreement between the EU and Turkey, etc.) partially hamstrung such laws. But in principle, at least, Western governments claimed to espouse humanitarian values. Humanitarianism was not the enemy. It was *included* in strategies for controlling migratory flows (organising reception centres, refugee camps, etc.).[8]

Now, Western governments are attacking humanitarian organisations more and more openly. Panicked by the extreme right, liberal governments have ended up adopting its language. Great Britain is disregarding international refugee law. Italy is harassing rescue efforts in the Mediterranean. The French president no longer hides his contempt for the NGOs, who are 'playing into the smugglers' hands'.[9] The German chancellor recently stated that 'we have to deport people more often and faster'.[10]

The second challenge is climate change. In the 1990s, humanitarian work was supercharged by cheap jet fuel. Logistics advances enabled organisations to go ever faster and farther; containerisation, satellite imagery, mobile phones, new plastics and lightweight materials gave the NGOs unhoped-for means of action. But global warming is killing the dream of border-free universalism. The earth is fighting back. Since the Industrial Revolution, the planet's mean surface temperature has gone up by more than 1.1°C. Current models predict that without a drastic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions the temperature will increase by 3.7°C to 4.4°C by 2100.[11]

Industrial and agricultural activity has caused a collapse in biodiversity. The rate of species extinction is a hundred to a thousand times higher than the historical norm. The 'services' the biosphere provides humanity (pollination, carbon capture, erosion control, water quality regulation, etc.) have already declined substantially. Humanitarian organisations can no longer ignore their environmental footprint. Among UN agencies, the World Health Organization is one of worst polluters; 90 per cent of its emissions are from air travel.[12] Some organisations are committing to reducing their carbon emissions.[13] But that will come at a cost; they will either have to curtail their activities or be ready to pay more for operations.

The third challenge is demographic. Europe is ageing. Half the continent's population is over the age of forty-four. The disparity with the rest of the world – Africa in particular, where half the population is under age twenty – has never been greater. The media image with which Western humanitarian groups flourished – the White doctor travelling the globe – is obsolete. The majority of humanitarian workers in the Global South have long been African, Asian or Latin American. Yet Africans and Asians are underrepresented at many organisation headquarters. They are relegated to the 'field', while Whites are overrepresented in decision-making. Some humanitarian organisations have been able to change. Others have been slower; while a quarter of OCHA's staff is African, there are almost no Africans at the highest echelons of its Geneva and New York headquarters. People from Western countries occupy 71 per cent of OCHA's decision-making positions, while Africans are usually assigned to the 'field'.[14] This imbalance has become unacceptable.[15]

This triple – political/climate/demographic – challenge is going to contribute to redrawing the humanitarian map. The organisations are going to rethink

their actions. Their responses will vary. Depending on whether they are secular or religious, emergency or development oriented, medical or food-based, humanitarian organisations will make different choices. They will find new allies and invent new ways of doing things. Some may come to an understanding with illiberal regimes, others will confront them head on. Some will make the environmental issue a priority, others will choose to focus on their usual missions. Some will decentralise their decision-making; others will reduce their radius of action. In one way or another, the territorial question will impact them.

This will not be the first time humanitarianism sheds its skin.[16] Born in the wake of the 1859 Battle of Solferino with the founding of the Red Cross and the invention of international humanitarian law (1864), humanitarianism underwent its first transformation after World War I with the creation of the League of Nations (1919), its second in 1945 with the creation of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and the Geneva Conventions (1949), and then its third in 1990 with the end of the Cold War. For thirty years after that, humanitarian aid was the spearhead of liberal values.

Capitalism, democracy, and human rights seemed to be advancing together – at least in principle, if not in fact. While in practice the humanitarian ideal did not prevent wars or massacres, it gave liberalism a human face and a kind of legitimacy. That may be coming to an end before our very eyes. As one G7 diplomat wondered, 'The Brazilians, the South Africans, the Indonesians – why should they continue to believe what we say about human rights?' And another added,[17] 'We've permanently lost the battle for the Global South. […] Forget the norms, forget the world order. They'll never listen to us again.'

Humanitarianism and Liberal Democracies

By Michaël Neuman

A shift toward illiberalism and criminalisation of the enemy has broken the relationship between the NGOs and Western democracies. While the situation in Gaza may be a symbol of this radical change, it is not – contrary to what Joël Glasman wrote recently in *AOC* – the 'tipping point', but rather the culmination.

In his 25 March article for *AOC*, historian Joël Glasman sounds the death knell of the alliance between humanitarian aid and liberalism, seeing the Gaza conflict as a 'tipping point' in the history of that relationship. According to Glasman, Western governments' support for a regime that has 'killed tens of thousands of civilians, used hunger as a weapon of war, and killed more than a hundred humanitarian workers' marks the end of a thirty-year period in which 'liberal globalisation and humanitarian action went hand-in-hand'. And I should say right away, I agree with that diagnosis, at least in part; what we are witnessing does indeed feel like the end of an era. It seems to me, however, that Glasman's piece contains some serious chronological inaccuracies, and the implications of this new state of affairs may be even more significant – and perhaps more importantly, very different – than what he suggests.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, the largest and most visible French humanitarian organisations, which were flourishing, had been outright critical of pro-Soviet totalitarian regimes, creating a de facto alliance with the Western democracies. The leaders and/or founders of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (Rony Brauman and Claude Malhuret), Action Internationale Contre la Faim (Bernard-Henri Levy) and Médecins du Monde (MdM) (Bernard Kouchner) laid out a number of radical critiques of the regimes they deemed responsible for the vast majority of refugees and crises requiring humanitarian intervention. The March for the Survival of Cambodia – organised with the International Rescue Committee (a US-based organisation often considered a CIA front) in December 1979 to protest the famine and diversion of humanitarian aid by the pro-Vietnamese Communist regime – was one demonstration of solidarity. In the years that followed, MdM, MSF, and Aide Médicale Internationale operations in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Angola were only possible under the protection of guerilla movements supported by the West in their fight against pro-Chinese or pro-Soviet regimes.

Humanitarianism, marginal and until then dominated by the prestige of the Red Cross, gradually made its way to the centre of Western society. In 1984, Liberté sans Frontières was created under MSF auspices to spread a profoundly liberal message. The anti-totalitarian agenda of the leading 'French doctors' was an easy fit with the ideology of the Western democracies. A very tangible example of this was MSF leader Claude Malhuret – shortly before joining Jacques Chirac's cohabitation government in 1986 – making a number of trips to the United States between 1983 and 1985 at the invitation of neoconservative intellectuals and Republican senator Gordon J. Humphrey.[18] Although the communist system was gaining ground globally, its intellectual influence in Europe was rapidly waning. Humanitarian aid, embodying the 'moral superiority' of the democracies, was becoming a new form of engagement. This was before humanitarian organisations began wrapping themselves in the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, now the bedrock of contemporary humanitarian lingua franca.

The alliance nevertheless continued, though far less linearly than this overly brief history would suggest, and took on new life with the end of the Cold War. The 1990s saw a surge in large, militarised relief operations intended as crisis management tools to serve the liberal peace that, it was hoped, would emerge from the rubble of the Soviet empire[19] – in Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, etc. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's July 1992 'Agenda for Peace' was the toolkit for bringing the various UN missions together to serve its primary mission: 'maintaining international peace and security could not be dissociated from its task of solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character'.[20] The apparent triumph of that Wilsonian view of humanitarianism was evidenced by the major international humanitarian organisations' participation in rebuilding Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s. Hoping to maintain their distance from such attempts to impose democracy by force, Médecins Sans Frontières and the International Committee of the Red Cross tried to exemplify a more 'Dunantist' view of humanitarianism and a narrower understanding of their action, and making the international contingents a party to the conflict.[21]

However, having initially joined forces against the communist enemy, liberal democracies and many humanitarian organisations found themselves allies, to some degree, in support of democratic peace. It took a nimble few to remind us that humanitarianism must not serve a 'sacrificial international order' that justifies 'the premature and avoidable death of a part of humanity in the name of a hypothetical collective good'.[22]

A Bygone Alliance?

Many signs now suggest that that era has passed, at least in part. Where do we see this and what are those signs? In the present case, I don't think Gaza represents a particular tipping point, but rather the culmination of an observable trend in a long history – at least in two specific situations: the fight against terrorism and migration control policy.

There has been intense debate in recent years throughout the humanitarian sector – and in France, as well – about counterterrorism and its impacts on humanitarian action. The 'war on terror' and counterterrorist activities by the Western democracies have helped create propaganda, sustained by rhetoric and legal tools, used to justify draconian, violent policies that are to varying degrees inconsistent with humanitarian action. One such policy is the global war being waged against totalitarian-minded transnational jihadist groups by the Western democracies and their local allies. In the Sahel, Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen, for example, humanitarian organisations operate – or have attempted to operate – in conflicts involving armed groups that fight the governments and civil society groups that fund us, that commit mass killings in countries in which our headquarters are based – sometimes less than a kilometre from our headquarters (Barcelona, Paris, Sydney, London and obviously New York) – or that recruit in countries where we are headquartered, planting adherents inside our own civil society organisations.

Gone are the 1980s, when Western governments and societies supported our clandestine work with armed groups considered 'freedom fighters' based on their opposition to communism. We're in a situation where we want to negotiate with armed groups that call themselves enemies of the liberal democracies, that barely tolerate the humanitarian actors wanting to evade their totalitarian grip. In their wars against these jihadist groups, Western governments and their local allies enjoy a 'licence to kill', as evidenced by the war crimes committed during the 'liberation' of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, and those committed by the Nigerian army in Maiduguri and Borno State and by the US-supported anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan, from mass POW killings early in the war to the 2015 bombing of MSF's Kunduz hospital, when a US attack killed forty-two patients due to (supposedly) incorrect information that part of the Afghan security apparatus hostile to our operation – which they believed was helping the Taliban – gave the US Air Force.

And again, the Western democracies' hostility to humanitarian work in anti-terrorism contexts is similar in many ways to the pacification policy that crushed humanitarian considerations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In Angola and Sierra Leone, for example, we found ourselves 'against' the liberal democracies and UN, which were starving the enemy's populations in the name of peace. If Gaza has to be mentioned in this string of horrors, it's much more a dreadful continuation than a momentary breach in the history of the relationship between humanitarians and the liberal West; the fight against Hamas is being used to justify anything – including support for a brutal siege strategy and the deadliest massacres.

The second historical and ongoing trend is the conflict between so-called 'liberal' states and humanitarian organisations over the issue of migration; the former are extremely unhappy with the latter's opposition to 'border protection' policies that cost of thousands of lives and cause mounting, insupportable violence. The time when liberal democracies could claim superiority because they welcomed refugees from the communist bloc has passed. That shift became evident in 1990; refugees were no longer welcome. As then-MSF president Rony Brauman observed, 'living under a totalitarian regime isn't enough to get the international community's

protection anymore'. This sad trend has quite obviously gotten worse.

Now, at a time when European governments are instrumental in causing Mediterranean deaths to 'protect their borders', the sea is now the scene of a more or less silent struggle between humanitarian actors and governments. The Europeans fund armed Libyan militias in coastguard uniforms who go after migrants fleeing Libya and relief organisations alike. The latter are now completely on their own, mitigating the EU's failures on one hand, and suffering constant harassment on the other. Our refusal to co-manage this deadly policy can't help but lead to conflict, be it legal, administrative, in the media, or even armed.

The next front in this increasingly open conflict between liberal democracies and humanitarian action could well be domestic, because challenging the sacrificial international order may not be enough. When we work in support of exiled populations in Calais, Marseille and Île-de-France, we see a simultaneous decline in the welfare state and rise in government authoritarianism and repression. In France, the government – which just barely managed to put court-ordered, and sorely inadequate, humanitarian support in place – has abandoned the exile populations. What this appropriated vocabulary means is less, as Didier Fassin put it, evidence that 'the governments […] have hijacked the symbolic benefits of humanitarian reason to predicate, justify, or legitimise their actions'[23] than an indication that it has abandoned its mission to protect those who live on its soil.

For their survival, the exiles basically depend on charitable organisations, the community, and organised citizens, which fill the void left by scarce public services and an inadequate social safety net for these stranded populations, in terms of material needs, housing, rescue after they fail to cross the Channel, etc. Students, citizens in solidarity, and volunteer retirees, alongside more established private organisations, distribute meals, tents and blankets, and provide housing to those – including the frailest – left on the street due to the lack of room in public shelters. More and more, the only evidence of the government's existence is the intimidating police presence, destroyed personal belongings, and physical violence for which it is responsible due to their failure to deliver expected services, be it medical care or firefighting.

This is shocking to a society that's used to assuming that the government will provide. But the government no longer provides; it browbeats, denies and eliminates. The degree to which the welfare state has vanished when it comes to managing 'undesirable' exile populations may portend something much darker for the country as a whole, however. We – humanitarians working in France – already see the first signs: the lack of child welfare services, the general starving of the public hospitals, the disinvestment in the mental health sector and the worsening access to the legal system. That is what alarmed the *Défenseur des droits* (Defender of Rights) in its latest report, which described 'the normalization of attacks on rights and freedoms'. Hence neglected populations will only grow, leaving humanitarian actors no choice but to protest this deadly, destructive approach. That is what Joël Glasman's misses in his discussion: that the international humanitarian system is still largely financed by the States themselves – the Western ones, first and foremost. ALNAP's *State of the Humanitarian System* report estimated that in 2021, 57 per cent of the funding for international humanitarian aid came from the United States, the European Union, Germany, the UK, and Japan, for a total of 31 billion dollars, or double the figure from ten years before. The decision by some European states to allocate more to their military budget due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the anticipated election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2024 is also likely to impact funding for international aid. However, it is still too soon to know what real effects these trends will have and to conclude that the *pas de deux* between democracies and humanitarian actors is no longer working.

What has changed in the relationship between liberal democracies and humanitarian organisations is both the illiberal shift in European democracies – resulting in the criminalisation of the enemy (who is now portrayed as an 'enemy of humanity', thus justifying ignoring the rules of humanity), on one hand, and in their own population's humanitarian needs being left to private individuals and organisations, on the other – and opposition to the fact that issues that until recently were limited to people in faraway lands are now being imported domestically. What has changed, in reality, for humanitarian organisations is that disorder isn't just happening in other places anymore, in the usual faraway countries where they expect little or nothing from the government or opposition forces.

Admittedly, one question – as Glasman writes – is that of adapting or shedding our skin. But another, perhaps more important, question is this: what kind of society do we want to live in?

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