

The Emergence of the Global Sumud Flotilla: Exposing the Moral-Institutional Paradox of Mainstream Humanitarianism

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Abstract. This paper examines the emergence of the Global Sumud Flotilla through the lens of critical humanitarianism, which raises implicit questions about the structural and moral limits of institutional humanitarianism in the context of long-held political violence in Gaza. For the purpose of limiting the analysis, the paper focuses on UNRWA, WFP, and ICRC and argues that their constrained engagement during Israel's siege of Gaza is the manifestation of a moral-institutional paradox. Bound by donor politics and the norm of apolitical neutrality, these organizations remained limited to issuing normative condemnations and providing minimal relief under restrictive conditions. On the other hand, the Global Sumud Flotilla, one of the largest solidarity-based flotilla mobilizations to date, showed flotilla activism as the process of repoliticizing humanitarianism, rooted in solidarity, resistance, and direct confrontation with injustice rather than depoliticizing relief. Employing a qualitative exploratory research methodology, this study aims to highlight the comparative analysis of mainstream humanitarian groups' limited action constrained by moral-institutional paradox to the Global Sumud Flotilla's grassroots activism as an attempt to repoliticize the humanitarian activism and signals the rise of a new moral practice of transnational solidarity.

Keywords: Global Sumud Flotilla, Critical Humanitarianism, Solidarity, Moral-Institutional Paradox, Activism

Introduction

Have bygone been the days when humanitarianism used to be a neutral, for-everyone enterprise operating solely on the basis of serving those inflicted by the conflict and crisis? The idea of humanitarianism is attached to the moral practices of alleviating human suffering through the principles of impartiality, neutrality, and humanity. However, the emerging humanitarian crises have been revealing a deep tension between the moral duty that the humanitarian organizations promise to carry out and their institutional realities, which keep them at bay from delivering humanitarian action following the same moral foundations that keep them standing. Critical humanitarianism highlights these anomalies by questioning their politically motivated actions that categorize sufferings based on the geopolitical realities of the victims, stop funding flows where actually needed, or translate political violence into technical problems of relief delivery while avoiding questions of responsibility, power, and injustice. This way, institutions manage to maintain their morally responsive posture while avoiding political confrontation that might get them in trouble with their funding bodies (Fassin, 2018).

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in the Gaza genocide, where a large number of international humanitarian organizations have been providing humanitarian relief in providing critical aid while remaining unable to openly confront the political and structural conditions that are the root causes of the long-held human suffering there, even before October 2023. Institutions like UNRWA, WFP, and ICRC have been actively engaged in providing

humanitarian relief to the people of Gaza, but their actions have been halted by the frequent donation cuts, legal and political restrictions, and risks of losing access and funding. There is an urgent question that can be asked concerning this moral-institutional paradox: How can humanitarian institutions negotiate the structural standpoints of politically motivated obstruction to their moral agency?

This has been long shattered by critical humanitarianism, which disputes the common belief that humanitarian action is neutral or apolitical. Rather, the scholarship has established that humanitarianism has historically remained embedded with power relations, donor interest, security regimes, and global inequality (Fassin 2018; Barnett 2020). Viewed in this light, humanitarianism does not stand by as a passive organ responding to the pleas of the sufferers but it is an actor in determining how life is to be ruled by classifying the vulnerability, prioritizing suffering by the geographical facts, and controlling what types of responses will be permitted by the donor institutions. Recent scholarship has further highlighted how new measures of donor dependence, counter-terrorism regulations, and risk-management frameworks, intensified after 2010, have constrained institutions' free mobility, which has tightened their upward accountability to donors over the downward accountability to the population that they are meant to serve.

In this backdrop, this paper advances the concept of moral-institutional paradox, highlighting the structural contradiction at the heart of contemporary humanitarianism. It captures the duality of norm and practice that while humanitarian institutions carry the universal moral imperatives to protect life, their institutional design by the donor regulations, norms of neutrality, and legal compliance regimes, often limit them to depoliticize violence and prevent overindulgence to address the core causes of conflict. Empirically, as mentioned above, this paradox can be witnessed by the works of major humanitarian actors in Gaza, including UNRWA, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the World Food Programme (WFP). These organizations have continued playing a significant role in keeping the civilian lives alive, yet neither were perceived to be criticizing the major powers collusion in backing Israel by offering financial and military assistance to carry on with the killing spree or insisting that the occupation be stopped. This would have resulted in suspension of funds or refusal to be part of negotiations or resources.

At the same time, but also, the advent of other models of humanitarian interventions, primarily in the flotilla mobilization, has challenged this depoliticized model categorically. The global Sumud Flotilla has brought back humanitarian action in the sphere of political practice transnational solidarity efforts, the most notable one being the Global Sumud Flotilla, which accuses Israel of its illegitimate siege and artificial human suffering. Their behaviors have been reflective of opposition, responsibility and shared morality. Considering the recent academic work on active humanitarianism, solidarity, and controversial politics, one can interpret these behaviors as the isolated instances of humanitarians, triggered by independent organizations, yet as attempts to repoliticize humanitarian action through the explicit address to the structural injustice inherent in suffering. (Nyers 2019; Perugini & Gordon 2023).

Though the emergent literature has dwelt on the reliance of donors and the politicization of the aid offered by the international donors, it has not included the point-blank talk between the structural humanitarianism and the solidarity-based activism. Humanitarian governance has always been fixated on organizational determinisms, whereas the importance of transnational activism has mostly been out of the scope of humanitarian studies discourses. This gap is addressed within this paper, which puts a comparative analysis of humanitarian actors and solidarity activism into focus using critical humanitarianism framework by showing how extreme political violence may result in different types of humanitarian reactions.

The paper poses the question of how donor dependence contributed to the humanitarian action in Gaza, and of how the rise of a transnational solidarity activism surfaced to question the moral boundaries that were being manifested by the institutional humanitarianism. It postulates that since mainstream international humanitarian institutions cannot mobilize themselves without the help of their donors, they consequently experience the clutches of moral-institutional paradox, which depoliticizes suffering, and the solidarity-based activism is not weighed down by those same financial constraints, which in turn causes the organizations to become independent, this is why have become the carriers of moral practice, through resistance and collective accountability, which re-politicize humanitarianism. As the first step in the discussion between the two types of humanitarian response, the paper is one of the contributions to the arguments about the moral and political responsibility of humanitarian action, as well as the ethics of humanitarian conduct.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Humanitarianism

Humanitarian activities have historically been linked with the ideals of impartiality, neutrality, and humanity whereby human misery is the only concern and interest in the conflict regions. But the modern humanitarian crisis has been exposing the oppositions between moral obligations and the institutional facts that humanitarian institutions frequently have to operate under. Critical humanitarianism unveils these dichotomies by questioning the power dynamics that come into play in shaping and constraining their work. It does not treat humanitarian action as a neutral or ethical response to suffering, rather it conceptualizes it as a historically and politically embedded practice that governs life, vulnerability, and responsibility. (Fassin 2018; Barnett 2020). It gives the perspective that humanitarian action is not impartially committed to alleviating suffering but with institutional considerations, rendering them actively producing moral hierarchies, institutional priorities, and forms of depoliticization, which then decide whose lives are worth saving and what conditions would be governing their actions.

The earlier work on humanitarianism from the lens of liberal and operational accounts categorized it as a technical enterprise directed by universal principles. It developed alongside imperial expansion, interstate warfare, and state-building projects, and that political meddling was not part of the equation (Barnett 2011; Davey et al. 2013).

Building on this corpus of scholarship, contemporary critical humanitarianism has shifted its focus from what institutions say to what they do. The operating mechanisms of the humanitarian institutions have increasingly adopted categorization of the population based on need, vulnerability, and risk (Fassin 2018). They do not directly call out the perpetrators of political violence, rather they translate it into humanitarian emergencies that need aid and assistance. This way, humanitarian work sustains itself on the field while refraining itself from questioning those who are responsible for the violence, who are benefiting from it, and whether they need to be accountable for their actions.

Critical humanitarianism frames this dichotomy as the central concern of its analysis by questioning the moral aspiration and institutional practices of these agencies. They are dedicated to humanity and the sanctity of life but their actions are not commensurate to the freedom act in general. They tend to be constrained and to a great extent influenced by donor dependency, legislative systems and security arrangements. This tension has been pointed out even further by the empirical research following the mid-2010s when the counterterrorism laws, sanctions compliance, and risk management practices have long been affecting the humanitarian space restricting their activity and raising the upward accountability to the donors. (Metcalf-Hough et al. 2021; HPG 2023). Consequently, such organizations tend to consider



survival in an institution rather than political denunciation and reputational control rather than structural criticism.

The tension identified in this paper is the moral-institutional paradox, a state in which humanitarian organizations have the moral obligation to act to alleviate mass suffering which is their initial calling but are institutionally caught up in the conflict with the political structures themselves, which are the very perpetrators. Critical humanitarianism offers that theoretical prism through which this dichotomy is not interpreted as an institutional failure but as a premeditated result to ensure that humanitarian agencies remain entrenched in the relations of world power (Barnett 2020; Calhoun 2008). However, in the case of extreme violence where political actors are now the financing part of the violence and these groups, such as in Gaza, this paradox is even better seen where the acknowledgement between moral urgency and institutional constraining broadens even further.

Critical scholars focus on the organizations that consider the depoliticization as their anchor on the issue of how humanitarian organizations are maneuvering this paradox. They employ bureaucratic practices focusing on vulnerability metrics, needs assessments, and legal compliance as their go-to conduct when confronting any conflict situation. This conduct implicitly turns normative commitments into neutrality that holds them back from directly confronting injustice (Ticktin 2020). This way, they respond to suffering by stripping it of its political cause. They maintain their moral legitimacy with this while avoiding confrontation with the political actors involved, who could be the same funding their actions in the first place.

This paper has taken three prominent cases of UNRWA, WFP, and the ICRC and examined their motives behind their explicit humanitarian actions while remaining silent on questioning the structural violence perpetuated on Palestinian civilians. By doing so, they do not politicize their position but rather are shaped by the politically structured institutional norms that put limits on the question of legitimacy when it comes to deciding which geography will be chosen for providing humanitarian assistance.

Confronting these established paradoxes, a new strand of scholarship has started examining the practices that challenge this depoliticized humanitarianism. Scholars of active humanitarianism, solidarity, and contentious politics have since been arguing that alternative moral practices emerge in the face of the failure of mainstream humanitarian agencies' response to sheer injustice (Nyers 2018; Stierl 2020; Perugini & Gordon 2023).

This paper positions itself in this strand of literature that sees the initiatives, such as the Global Sumud Flotilla, as an attempt to repoliticize humanitarian action. Such activism demands that the mainstream question the embedded political meddling in the violence conducted. They do not sit outside of the humanitarian field but rather activate inside these systems and expose the moral limits that mainstream humanitarian agencies often face. Their cause reinforces their call that alleviating suffering cannot be separated from the structure that keeps creating it in the first place. Critical humanitarianism, hence, does not limit itself to only exposing the moral-institutional limits that hold the institutional humanitarian back but also provides a lens for understanding the emergence of alternative initiatives rooted in transnational solidarity that question their silence in the face of political violence.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory, and comparative research design to examine the response of structurally divergent institutions to political conflicts. Instead of testing causal hypotheses, the work focuses on theory-informed and interpretive analysis to

highlight conditions that dictate institutional practices, and political silence by funding entities that overshadow humanitarian agencies' will to call out political meddling in perpetuating injustice while limiting them to moral claims.

The analysis concerns the meaning, framing, and institutional practice of the mainstream humanitarian organizations and the emerging transnational solidarity activism, for which the study is guided by the qualitative comparative analysis rather than a quantifiable outcome alone. Taking from the interpretivist scholars' insights, the qualitative approaches are suitable for examining how actors are framing moral legitimacy and articulate or refrain from articulating political claims in confined structures. The aim of the study, therefore, is to put forth analytical generalizations rather than statistical generalizations, which will contribute to contemporary humanitarian governance discourse through theoretically informed case comparison.

The cases to be examined in the study have been taken for their analytical value. Since the institutionalized, donor-dependent humanitarian work will be structurally compared with the grassroots and solidarity-based transnational activism as the result of the analysis, the study will preempt moral and political constraints under which humanitarian agencies operate.

The empirical case of Gaza holds significance for several reasons apart from it being an ongoing example of sheer political violence and involvement of great powers. It represents a prolonged case of humanitarian crisis that carries prolonged political violence, close international monitoring, and extensive donor involvement coming from a variety of countries, mostly major powers. Additionally, it also presents a case for stringent counter-terrorism regulations, donor conditionalities, and legal constraints, making it a perfect case for examining the institutional constraints dictated by politically motivated regulations.

In this context, the cases of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the World Food Programme (WFP) have been chosen for their active involvement in the Gaza humanitarian crisis. Besides, the organizations differ in mandate, operational model, and institutional history, yet have been facing similar constraints due to heavy reliance on voluntary donor funding, which they receive from identical donors, mostly Western countries and multilateral actors. Examining these cases will give insights about how donor dependence and political constraints work the same for functionally different organizations, limiting the assumption of attributing it to a single institutional design.

For comparison, the case of the Global Sumud Flotilla (GSF) has been selected for its attempt to repoliticize humanitarian activism. Contrary to the mainstream humanitarian entities, GSF does not show neutrality or impartiality in an overt or covert way, rather it explicitly has framed its actions as an act of political solidarity and resistance, implicitly highlighting the deafening silence of the mainstream humanitarian organizations. Moreover, they do not rely on state or multilateral donor funding, which is evident from their unwavering movement throughout the conflict that carried a unified message. The case of GSF provides impetus to examine whether humanitarian claims can be repoliticized employing alternative moral practices using grassroots solidarity action.

Data Acquiring Sources

The study gathers a range of qualitative data sources from official organizational statements, press releases, policy documents produced by humanitarian organizations and international agencies, annual and donor reports, and public speeches. Together with these, the publicly available sources include policy briefs on counter-terrorism measures, media coverage, and documents on donor funding patterns and legal constraints.



In addition to the aforementioned explicit sources of data, the study tracks patterns of silence, restraints, and non-condemnation in the context of widely documented violations, as analytically significant. The study does not treat these instances of silence as mere ignorance but politically dictated measures that are coming right from the structural and political constraints, such as the avoidance of public condemnations of the perpetrators of the violence.

Analytical Strategy

The study will be examining four analytical dimensions of the actors examined. This analysis will be a theory-guided comparison of the opposing entities, examining how these actors frame suffering, engage or avoid engaging in public discourse, and articulate moral claims. These four analytical dimensions will be used to examine how different entities frame humanitarian suffering and responsibility to respond, what modes are used for political speech and public condemnation, what degree of operational and discursive autonomy is being enjoyed, and what could be the underlying moral logics as one group claims neutrality while the other reinforces practices of solidarity.

By placing mainstream humanitarian agencies in comparative dialogue with the Global Sumud Flotilla, this study gives insights into the divergent outcomes that are framed in the language of neutrality and solidarity in the context of donor sources. In the first case, donor dependence and institutional embeddedness shape the controlled humanitarian action, while the other works independently of any funding pressures, hence touted as a new moral grammar in the literature of critical humanitarian action.

Result and Discussion

While the mantra of humanitarian organizations relies heavily on the principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence, a growing corpus of scholarship is highlighting the shift drawing towards donor-dependent political and institutional structures. Scholars such as Barnett (2011) describe their conduct as a system of humanitarian governance where moral action is not an independent choice but remains in the confines of funding mechanisms, geopolitical priorities, and legal regimes, often stripped of their autonomous ethical judgements.

The expansion of humanitarian action has recently been guided by a concentration of funding into limited hands, mostly coming from Western countries and multilateral donors. It makes their actions appealing to the dictates of these funders, hence they rely on voluntary, earmarked contributions that deprive them from taking organic actions (Barnett & Weiss, 2008; ALNAP, 2020). This makes these organizations come under direct influence of these funders, the phenomenon that scholars' term as 'donor dependence'. It limits organizational priorities by dictating their actions, meddling in the operational modalities and political speech, which compel them either use technical language instead of political or remain silent (Barnett, 2011; Cooley & Ron, 2002).

There are several ways in which donor dependence comes into operation. Firstly, earmarked or project-based funding that is extended with specific mandates for a specific geography. It limits humanitarian organizations from reallocating resources to the places of conflict where it could be needed urgently (Smillie & Minear, 2004; ALNAP, 2020). Funding that is provided for specific sectors, geographic areas, or implementation partners limits the capacity of the agency to respond to the sectors and places where it may be acutely needed.

Secondly, the introduction of legal and political conditionalities on humanitarian assistance, especially when donors extend funds for conflicts related to armed conflict or involvement of designated non-state actors. These conditionalities have been tightened after the emergence of counter-terrorism legislation since the early 2000s, which introduced extensive vetting requirements, criminal liability risks, and reporting obligations, especially in conflict-prone areas (Howell & Lind, 2009; Metcalfe-Hough et al., 2015). Humanitarian agencies have frequently reported what they state as “chilling effect” from conflict areas such as Somalia, Syria, and Gaza, where these measures hold them back from over-engagement due to the fear of legal or financial repercussions (HPG, 2011; NRC, 2018)

Finally, the politically motivated claims to neutrality and impartiality give an ambiguous sense of moral claims with capacity limitations. Although the principles of neutrality and impartiality are framed as acclaimed moral virtues, the critical humanitarian scholarship argues that the frequent demonstration of these principles does not come from institutional ethos but is strategically crafted out of institutional necessity, particularly for those agencies that are donor dependent and rely on access negotiations (Fassin, 2011; Ticktin, 2011). Neutrality is therefore not a natural reaction but a calculated and controlled kind of depoliticization that enables such organizations to pass through their positions within the existing power arrangements.

In the observations made by Barnett (2011), this behavior is known as “calculated compassion” in which humanitarian organizations must make a tradeoff between moral concern and institutional survival. In case they decide to speak out against the state violence or structural injustice, they will be deprived of funding streams and they will be refused access agreements. Thus, they are restricted by the unspoken rules of the funders to give precedence to secrecy, backroom politics, or the adoption of technical terminology to the humanitarian emergency. Consequently, such organizations are still focused on reducing the momentary pain that people are suffering by rendering the much-needed help and support to the victim population without interrogating or condemning the political state of affairs that cause it.

These are the conditions that are the perfect reflections of what this paper promotes as a moral-institutional paradox. On the one hand, humanitarian organizations appear to be driven by the desire to address the human suffering by saving their lives and assisting them to live the difficult conditions of the conflictual arenas. Conversely, they are still ingrained in the systems of donor-driven and legally controlled systems that guarantee their survival. It does not prove that humanitarian agencies are evil and callous actors, but the dilemma reflects the restrictions of how the agencies can be expected to remain caught in the concentrated sources of funding. It limits their actions to only addressing the symptoms while avoiding the structural causes, pushing them to risk becoming complicit in the reproduction of vulnerability and injustice.

Case Studies

There are myriad numbers of humanitarian organizations that showed their solidarity with their aid and the narrative that they sided with, but the mainstream humanitarian organizations, which remained one of the active contributors, apparently refrained from passing political judgments. This study has taken three such cases of humanitarian organizations, which, despite having different mandates and operational scopes, showed similar patterns of political caution, discursive restraint, and reliance on technical humanitarian language, which highlighted institutional constraints.

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

UNRWA was established in 1949 under the guise of a special mandate encompassing education, healthcare, healthcare and relief for Palestinian refugees in the Levant and beyond.



Holding a uniquely expansive mandate, UNRWA's operations are largely run through the funding that almost entirely comes from voluntary contributions. Major contributors to UNRWA's humanitarian work are historically the United States, Japan, the European Union, and some Gulf countries (UNRWA, annual financial reports). The reliance on these countries has exposed the risk of the agency to donor politics. In the case of Gaza, their vulnerability was witnessed through a major funding shock amid the urgent humanitarian operations they were having on the ground level.

At the start of 2024, UNRWA started reporting a lack of life-saving aid that they need to provide to civilians and warned that it may end soon because nine countries have temporarily suspended funding. Their concern was about the inability to provide critical humanitarian aid to the harshly hit civilian population in the conflict (UNRWA, 2024). Reuters covered the story the next day, stating that many donors, including the top donors, had withheld the funding following the allegations of Israel accusing them of involvement in the 7 October attacks (Reuters, 2024). Canada, being one of the contributors to the agency, halted their funding citing the same concerns (Global Affairs Canada, 2024). Their minister of International Development urged the agency to investigate the matter until providing them satisfactory evidence of their alienation, but till then, they paused the donation, obstructing the agency's critical humanitarian work in the field. The attitude was similar for other donors, too, highlighting the vulnerability of the organization to funding continuity tied to reputational and compliance concerns.

As a response to the funding shocks, a series of joint NGO statements from UNRWA and later by other civil societies, including the New Humanitarian, urged the EU and other donor states to sustain the funding citing the critical need for it for the civilians under ongoing conflict. This indicates that the suspension was not symbolic but rather a serious material threat to the operational capacity of the agency.

From a critical point of view, the response language of UNRWA in the face of funding shocks seems very alienated with the structural causes of the humanitarian suffering there in the first place. The language in their official response to the funding cut remains mechanical, citing only the concerns for their limited operational capacity, but never mentioning anything about the perpetrators causing the violence (UNRWA, 2024), and how it can be permanently stopped if the political elite decided so. The official statement from the Commissioner General of UNRWA mentioned:

“UNRWA is the primary humanitarian agency in Gaza, with over 2 million people depending on it for their sheer survival. Many are hungry as the clock is ticking towards a looming famine. The Agency runs shelters for over 1 million people and provides food and primary healthcare even at the height of the hostilities.....The only way that this can be done is through cooperation with international partners, especially UNRWA as the largest humanitarian actor in Gaza.”

His response mentions appeals to funding restoration rather than the end of the political violence, indicating the pattern where institutional survival surpasses the structural impediments and the donor surveillance pushes the humanitarian organizations to organizational legitimacy and operational continuity rather than issuing politically confrontational speech (Fassin, 2011; Barnett, 2011).

The World Food Programme (WFP)

The World Food Programme (WFP) functions as the world's largest humanitarian organization operating under the mandate of serving in areas hit by hunger and food insecurity as a result of conflict or natural disasters. Like the UNRWA, WFP's budget comes largely from

similar donors, and their operations are overwhelmingly run over voluntary, earmarked funding (WFP annual reports).

In the context of Gaza, although WFP did not face many funding shocks, its operations were constrained through operational disruption and pauses in delivery, which the organization framed in safety terms while not mentioning the burden of political accountability. At the start of 2024, WFP announced that they are pausing delivery of life-saving food aid until “conditions are in place that allow for safe distribution.” The report on the conditions on the ground mentions:

“WFP needs significantly higher volumes of food coming into the Gaza Strip from multiple routes. Additionally, crossing points to the north of Gaza must open. A functioning humanitarian notification system and a stable communication network are needed. And security, for our staff and partners as well as for the people we serve, must be facilitated.”

The framing of the conditions there is done in a very passive manner, highlighting the issues as happening on their own. While mentioning the catastrophic situations that civilians go through, none of the statements allude to the political causes behind them. Their operational retreat or inability to safely deliver the critical aid is justified through risk or safety framing rather than attribution to responsibility (WFP, 2024).

The language used in the official statements of WFP recurrently uses words like “safe conditions”, “distribution feasibility”, and “access” allude to the indifference of the organization to the cause of the crisis. This is not a usual “neutral” language but highlights a peculiar bureaucratic grammar that converts wartime obstruction and violence into operational constraints (United Nations, 2024). This language is exactly what critical humanitarian scholars refer to as depoliticization through technocratic framing, where suffering is recognized through quantifiable measures, while the perpetrators of the violence and political structures that sustain them remain as the background noise (Fassin, 2011; Malkki, 2015).

Even when the WFP and other humanitarian organizations have framed their role in logistic and technical ways, the wider aid regime after 2023 has tightened its compliance rules and increased donor oversight. The July 2024 advisory issued by the USAID Office of Inspector General highlighted new requirements that the humanitarian agencies active in Gaza have to comply with, particularly managing the risks that the sanctioned groups operating on the ground might use to disrupt aid delivery (US, Office of Inspector General, 2024). Additionally, inter-agency policy work on screening and vetting in counter-terrorism and sanctions contexts also identifies the vetting and compliance that the agencies have to consider to secure delivery modalities and risk thresholds.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Unlike UNRWA and WFP, which are the UN agencies, bound by the UN charter, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) holds a distinct position in the humanitarian ecosystem. Self-appointed as the guardian of international humanitarian law, the ICRC has mandated itself to protect civilians, visit prisoners of war, and conduct confidential dialogue with belligerents. The committee is widely recognized as one of the most neutral and independent bodies among humanitarian actors, yet its funding is sourced mainly through Western governments, Japan, and other state donors (ICRC financial reports).

The ICRC has issued several public statements over the issue of hostages held in Gaza, indicating the committee’s increasing emphasis on unconditional release and requests for medical care and access to the affected population (ICRC, 2024). Like UNRWA and WFP, the language used in these public statements never points to the perpetrators of the violence, like the following, which gives a vague sense of the structural cause of the human suffering and the



inability of their active work on the ground: “We advocate for the hostages in bilateral dialogue with those who influence to make a difference. We have published a dozen statements where this has been communicated publicly.”

In subsequent public statements, for instance, the ICRC president has rhetorically called for cessation of the hostilities, which will enable humanitarian work, reinforced their demand for access to hostages, and mentioned the detainee treatment to be conducted humanely without spelling out Israel as being legally responsible.

The ICRC adopts a life-protecting and access-oriented approach, which often propagates a public discourse where the responsibility of the perpetrator countries involved is disguised under IHL abstraction. The terms “parties”, “respect”, and “neutrality” provide a vague picture of the crisis rather than politically attributing them to be responsible. This is where the main dilemma lies; the ability of the organization to continue functioning is guaranteed when they are neutral or keep their voices secret; this during the time of mass violence may appear as moral silence in the social arena even when they continue representing themselves privately through the back doors. (Barnett & Weiss, 2008; Barnett, 2011).

The Global Sumud Flotilla (GSF): A new Moral Grammar

These activities of Global Sumud Flotilla (GSF) are the sharp contrast to the work of the mainstream humanitarian agencies whose public denunciation is nearly invisible, whereas their practices also demonstrated the limitations of the institution. In the contrast to this, the transnational solidarity movement of GSF meant not only the protest against the propaganda but their direct criticism of the illegal occupation of Israel and the continued violence were the characteristics that denoted the independent character of their activity. Together, they formulated a different moral logic, one rooted in calling out the political responsibility for the perpetrators and seeking to contest structural barriers to humanitarian access.

It emerged in mid-2025 as a coordinated solidarity mission in response to Israel's illegal naval blockade of the Gaza Strip, which was later extended to a total blockade on imports, including basic supplies of food, baby formula, and critical medical supplies, during the intensification of war. Their movement was the coordinated effort of multiple activist networks, including the Maghreb Sumud Flotilla, Freedom Flotilla Coalition, Global Movement to Gaza, and Sumud Nusantara, which together formed a unified civilian maritime initiative taking on board hundreds of human rights activists and political figures aiming to deliver humanitarian aid directly from sea route to Gaza's civilian population.

The organizational materials and public tracking data show that the Flotilla had over 40 civilian vessels with participants from multiple sectors, from activists and medical professionals to movement supporters from at least 44 countries. It also carried well-known figures who were in its steering committee, leading the movement from the front. The well-known climate and human rights activist Greta Thunberg were one of those famous figures who also made the flotilla popular with youth around the world.

The rhetoric of the Flotilla remained explicitly political and humanitarian, focusing on breaking the blockade, delivering essential supplies, medicine, and food, along with pressuring the world governments to take concrete actions to end the illegal occupation and force Israel to end the war. Their message in the interviews and statements shared with the media gave a unified signal for describing their objective as “not merely to deliver aid, but to spotlight and contest structural denial of humanitarian access, continuously framing the Israeli blockade as unjustified and an existential threat to the civilians.

Contrary to the mainstream humanitarian organizations whose narrative seemed tied to neutrality and humanitarian assistance, avoiding calling out the structural injustice, GSF's

framing of the crisis emphasized political responsibility and legal norms, which Israel has been violating since the war started. Their official messages made logical appeals to Israel as the culprit of unlawful interference with the supply of life-saving aid and by so doing contravene the vital provisions of the Geneva Convention (GSF, 2025).

They were also on other occasions accused of not carrying any aid materials and only causing security threats to Israel; they reacted very swiftly by denying the allegations labelling them black propaganda. The Turkish delegation coordinator at GSF also requested an independent inspection on the cargo that they reiterated to be loaded with humanitarian materials. They argued that these are the attempts of Israel at sabotaging the legitimacy of the mission, harassing the activists and discouraging future missions. (Arslan & Tekin, 2025).

Such politicized framing which called the blockade as an illegal and an absolute violation of international law and which put the work of the Flotilla to focus on revealing the role of the state in humanitarian deprivation, is in blatant contradiction to the depoliticized and technical narrative of the mainstream agencies.

The trip of the Flotilla to Gaza was not able to reach its goal of reaching the shores of Gaza and delivering the humanitarian aid and was blocked by the Israeli naval forces. It was broadcasted in the international media and demonstrated the seizure of several ships and volunteers with humanitarian supplies (Reuters, 2025). Approximately 450 activists were arrested, and among them were high-profile ones, such as Greta Thunberg.

It was characterized by the post-interception messages of the organizers as an illegal intrusion into the waters of the international community and an illegal blockage of humanitarian aid to the population of Gaza, which Israel is actively pursuing with other resources, as well. Their framing was echoed by independent human rights advocacy organizations such as Amnesty International which also denounced the interception and detention of the activists as a violation of humanitarian principles and international law as well. They both began demanding an immediate and unconditional release of the detainees.

It also attracted global responses to their movements such as the international civil society and state response. An example is the United Nations, which keeps making statements that Israel should stop the measuring actions against the Flotilla and give it the free passage to the strip as it is necessary to facilitate the sowing of humanitarian aid to Gaza (OHCHR, 2025). Some of the national governments also echoed their voices, such as Malaysia that issued statements against the intercepting actions of Israel which attempted to discredit the legitimacy of the flotilla as a peaceful humanitarian mission, which further reinforced the political framing that was consistent with the narrative of the GSF (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, 2025).

The reaction of the national governments, international agencies and the civil society groups made the movement contributions to the transnational solidarity and gained space in the societal discussion. Along with the continued communications of the flotilla, their allied civil society groups pursued their narrative by releasing statements of solidarity. Using the case of Climate Action Network and other grassroots human rights networks, both gave statements denouncing the actions of Israel against the flotilla movement that tried to supply baby milk, medicine supplies and other essential needs. (Climate Action Network International, 2025). Their advocacy never stopped being based on the fact that the humanitarian access was obstructed leading into the fact that it was a clear violation of the international humanitarian law and they kept pressing the states to allow the safe passage of such in their good offices.

This overall transnational solidarity activism directly mentions political responsibility, referring to the blockade as collective punishment and law-breaking, and placing the actions of Flotilla in the context of the greater political-moral conflict with the humanitarian status quo and to the sanctity of human rights, to a great degree. This is indeed a clear indication of

initiating a new moral practice in the grammar of humanitarian action, standing sharply in contrast with the depoliticized language of the mainstream humanitarian institutions.

Comparative Analysis of Institutional and Grassroots Humanitarianism

Placing the two strands of humanitarian action in direct comparative dialogue provides an opportunity to differentiate how moral compliance can be limited and in cases, be dictated by the variation of their structural makeup. This comparative analysis hence focuses not on the effectiveness of the humanitarian outcomes but rather brings moral framing, political speech, and institutional autonomy on the spot to track the divergence of their action even though standing ideologically in the same place.

First, a central point of divergence can be tracked through the framing of suffering on both sides. Mainstream humanitarian agencies, including the ones taken as case studies in this paper, consistently framed the civilian harm and deprivation in Gaza in the language of humanitarian emergencies that need immediate relief. Their official statements keep emphasizing the shortage of food, shelter, fuel, and medicine as if they are passive outcomes of a random conflict, translating violence into administratively dealt indicators that need logistic support.

In contrast, GSF's frame of suffering was directly linked to the political decisions and coercive structures that perpetuate violence on the people of Gaza and actively deny them humanitarian aid by stopping every access from outside sources. The naval blockade is one such deliberate restriction imposed by Israel to deny them access. Their constant call for these deliberate obstructions highlighted that humanitarian need is inseparable from political justice and that Israel has no right to unanimously undo the international code of conduct. Their framing did not articulate relief as charity but as a right of the civilians of Gaza under the Geneva Convention that Israel is vehemently denying.

Differences in framing come right from how the organizations practice political speech. On the part of institutional humanitarian actors, the language used in their speech remains discursively restrained, where the references remain abstract, for instance, calling on "all parties" rather than explicitly condemning the state actors involved. Even in the circumstances where the violations of the international laws remain massive and where the atrocities are well-documented, it restrained practice is evident, because of fears of legal liability, access, and relations with donors.

The words spoken by ICRC in the post-conflict period prove this same trend in which their attention is on safeguarding IHL principles and observing humanitarian duty, but seldom mentioning the culprits in any of their speeches. One can also observe similar tendencies in the behavior of UNRWA and WFP, which prioritize on the continuity of operations and access to the ground, yet its communication is still restricted to the art of language in its strategic use by not confronting the main donors.

Contrary to these limitations, GSF has constantly shared a single message by naming Israel and its actions as the sole cause of the ongoing atrocities. They placed political responsibility on them by identifying the blockade and its continued siege as the primary drivers of humanitarian deprivation. The statements from the GSF and their allied civil society networks openly challenge Israeli actions and continuously call for international accountability by framing the obstruction of aid as unjustified and unlawful.

Lastly, at the center of this paper's argument, the organizational autonomy that both groups demonstrate is also tied to their organizational structure. The divergence of the actions is closely related to how much organizational autonomy the agency or the movement enjoys. Mainstream humanitarian organizations, including the UNRWA, ICRC, and WFP, operate

within the confines of humanitarian governance structures that are largely funded by international donors, especially Western countries that are allied to Israel. Their compliance with counter-terrorism measures and legal accountability regimes is part of the disciplinary measures that the donor states expect from them. Post-October 2023 funding shocks and operational pauses have highlighted the power relations that donor and recipient organizations have. Noncompliance can lead to immediate material consequences for institutional operations that these organizations usually avoid.

Global Sumud Flotilla's activities, in comparison, were largely organized through independent sources without relying on a formal donor system. Since its funding largely comes from grassroots contributions and civil society networks, its actions and agendas were not dictated by formal humanitarian accreditation or negotiated access. Having no institutional pressures, the flotilla actors were willing to take legal and physical risks that came in the form of interception, reputational attack, and detention. Even though this autonomy did not allow the GSF to increase material capacity to deliver aid, it shifted the moral orientation by showing their capacity to disrupt the established humanitarian narratives by exposing the structural barriers that limit their compliance with their moral claims.

The comparison of these two forms of humanitarian actions reveals the coexistence of two moral grammars within contemporary humanitarian action, one being the established institutional humanitarianism, while the other initiates a new moral grammar in the form of solidarity-based activism. The former underpins their narrative in neutral relief, impartial service delivery, and depoliticized compassion to avoid criticizing the structural mechanisms producing them. The latter, however, emerges as a response to them by rooting their activism in independence from the donor politics, reconfiguring the political responsibility, foregrounding injustice, resistance, and collective accountability while explicitly calling out the perpetrators

The moral-institutional paradox is that the divergent systems do not contradict each other in their moral foundations but the structural constitution of the systems prevents them to co-exist. Institutions anticipate their role of reducing suffering and preserving life without social disapproval or blaming the rapists, as opposed to the solidarity activism, which openly faces such structures but lacks the resources and access of the institutional actors.

Conclusion

The analytical study of the main conflict in the modern humanitarianism can be made through comparative analysis of the mainstream international humanitarian organizations and the emergence of the Global Sumud Flotilla within the context of the Gaza genocide. It based its arguments on the critical writings about humanitarianism and on-ground instances of humanitarian interventions, and thus presented the politics of donor dependence, compliance regimes, as well as the systematic constraints that are delivered via these disciplinary practices. These limitations affect political discourse and social responsibility of the mainstream humanitarian organizations, which purport to be morally responsible to save lives. Contrarily, the activism of solidarity by grass roots is excluded to such strains that exist beyond the framework of formal donorism.

The conclusion of the paper implies that the modern humanitarian space has been accommodating diverse humanitarian activities in large numbers and the gaps separating them are finding increase due to structural divergence. To a large extent, these groups can be defined by depoliticized, donor-supported relief and new models of transnational solidarity activism



that have similar ethical grounds on humanitarian issues but is differentiated by addressing those actors who are the ones that cause it in the first place. The article has not attempted to address this tension between two strands but has pointed at its continuity as a hallmark of the current humanitarian governance which responds to the dichotomy between the divergence of the humanitarian action.

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