

SYRIA

Syria and the Neutrality Trap: The Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid through Violent Regimes, by Carsten Wieland. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021. 183 pages. \$91 cloth; \$29 paper; \$26.95 e-book.

Reviewed by Mark Ward

I read Carsten Wieland's new book with the eyes of an experienced Syrian conflict practitioner. In 2012, I set up the United States government's platform for providing cross-border assistance for Syria from Turkey and ran it for four years. I left for Geneva in 2016 to cochair the task force to improve humanitarian access in Syria with the Russians, which Wieland describes in Chapter 6.

Wieland's analysis of the hurdles facing humanitarian aid in conflict areas is spot-on. Neither international-legal instruments such as international humanitarian law and international human rights law nor multilateral institutions such as the United Nations Security Council can stop despots from killing their own people to preserve their grip on power. The five permanent members of the Security Council, the US included, look out for themselves more than innocent civilians. They use the jargon of the day ("fake news") when the facts work against them, with no apparent consequences. Wieland describes a sad situation in desperate need of leadership and change before the next Bashar al-Asad turns against his own people.

As a practitioner, I read Wieland's book hoping for specific recommendations to avoid future Syrias. I am convinced that other dictators and their allies, like Russia, will push the boundaries of state behavior further and further away from multilateralism and the limits imposed by international humanitarian law and international human rights law in the next conflict, having seen what the international community let them get away with in Syria. I wanted Wieland to offer realistic suggestions to keep the damage

to international law from getting even worse. I learned a lot about the norms laid to ruin in Syria, but I was a little disappointed that few concrete suggestions were offered for the next Syria.

One aspect of the Syrian neutrality trap that Wieland touches on, but I think deserved more attention in terms of finding solutions, is using donor money as leverage. The donor countries that keep the UN solvent can do much more to hold its agencies accountable for looking the other way when member states abuse international humanitarian and human rights law. And I can share an example when the US did just that: as cochair of the task force to improve humanitarian access, I engaged in often tense three-party negotiations over access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas with the UN (usually represented by Jan Egeland) and my Russian counterpart. After some initial success winning cross-line humanitarian access for UN convoys in 2016, thanks (candidly) to Russia's ambassador in Damascus pushing the Asad regime to allow access after more than a year of refusals, the regime gradually started blocking access again. More and more, Russia asked the UN to provide food aid to regime-friendly towns as a quid pro quo for cross-line access to besieged areas in opposition-controlled territory. There was little resistance from the UN or insistence on any assessment of need in those areas. It seemed like the UN was more focused on appeasing their Syrian hosts to keep the visas coming for UN staffers in Damascus, who did not want to lose their danger pay while living and working in a five-star hotel.

The US was the largest donor to the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and, as such, financed this blatant manipulation of humanitarian assistance for people in need. In fact, as Wieland points out, American funding was effectively funding the Syrian war machine. If the WFP was feeding people in government-controlled areas, Asad had more money to build barrel bombs and hire torturers. Armed with these facts, it was not difficult to convince the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to cut the WFP's funding

by tens of millions that year. Could US funding have been the leverage to change the regime's behavior? Its allies, Russia, and Iran provided zero financial support to the UN agencies, so Syria would have been hard-pressed to replace the US contribution. As former Syrian diplomat and People Demand Change cofounder Basam Barabandi postulated to Wieland, those opposing the Syrian government will never know if using financial leverage would have made a difference in the long run, but I wish we had been more willing to test the hypothesis at the time.

I join Wieland in his message to donors: they need to hold UN agencies accountable for abusing the very principles they were created to protect. If the donors look the other way, as many donor countries do because the UN is a convenient one-stop shop for their foreign aid budgets, they are complicit in the demise of humanitarian principles and the slaughter on the ground.

Another source of potential leverage that deserved more focus in the book is the collective power of the humanitarian organizations that deliver most of the aid. Wieland's readers may have the impression, as many do, that UN agencies deliver aid to the people in need. Some, notably the WFP, do, but most UN agencies are little more than middlemen for donors that do not want to have to manage multiple grants to humanitarian organizations. In most cases, the UN agencies provide grants to humanitarian organizations to deliver the aid. This funding, in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually for Syria, gives the relief organizations great leverage during a protracted humanitarian crisis like Syria. If they stop cooperating with the UN, as they did in September 2016 over its perceived connivance with the regime in Damascus, humanitarian assistance would largely grind to a halt.

However, NGOs are loath to criticize the UN agencies too much because they need their funding. Maybe it is time for the humanitarian organizations to come together and demand change from donors and UN agencies before the next Syria, when the pressure to continue providing

life-saving aid is too great to seriously consider pulling out.

As Wieland notes, we will never know if humanitarian access would have improved cross-line in Syria if either the UN agencies, the humanitarian organizations, or both had refused to work according to the Syrian regime's rules — or if the donors had stopped funding cross-line activities. Of course, some civilians in need would have suffered in the short term, and Syria and its allies would have hypocritically made them into martyrs in a public relations campaign. But the regime and its allies would have suffered too. The UN agencies and the humanitarian organizations would not have been there to help feed their population, which might have forced Damascus to budget more for food and social programs and less money for the war machine.

Despite the lofty language of the UN Charter, it is naive to think UN agencies' leaders are going to jeopardize their own lucrative positions by insisting on compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law. But the donors could. The UN agencies wither and die without donor funding. So, if the donors are serious about making the UN play by the rules, they can. They can provide a greater share of their humanitarian budgets directly to the humanitarian organizations, and cut the contribution to the UN agencies, to send the UN a message.

Hats off to Wieland for giving us food for thought at this critical crossroad in the evolution of humanitarian aid. I hope it leads the UN, donors, and humanitarian organizations to reflect seriously about how they can change their approach to delivering humanitarian aid during an armed conflict before we repeat the deadly mistakes of Syria.

Mark Ward is a retired foreign service officer who led the US team providing assistance to Syria from the Turkish border from 2012 to 2016.

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.3751/75.4.306](https://doi.org/10.3751/75.4.306)