

THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

DAVID ADESNIK
BOOK REVIEWS

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Carsten Wieland, *Syria and the Neutrality Trap: The Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid through Violent Regimes* (Bloomsbury, 2021)

Bashar al Assad relied on Russian warplanes to ensure his survival on the battlefield. But his regime also relied on U.N. humanitarian aid to avoid a complete financial collapse. While the United States and the European Union maintain

sanctions on Damascus, they also donate billions each year to fund the United Nations' humanitarian operations, despite knowing that much of it will be expropriated to subsidize the regime. This unusual arrangement has persisted for a decade, yet neither Washington nor Brussels has made more than a token effort to protect U.N. aid from Assad's depredations.

Rather than a scandal, this state of affairs is an open secret. In 2013, after returning from Damascus, a senior U.N. official published a detailed account of the many ways the Assad regime was co-opting humanitarian efforts. He reported, "In government-controlled parts of Syria, what, where and to whom to distribute aid, and even staff recruitment, have to be negotiated and are sometimes dictated." Periodically, journalists and human rights advocates have treated the situation as a cause for outrage. In 2016, the *Guardian* reported that the United Nations spent tens of millions of dollars per year to procure goods and services from companies under the regime's control. This included \$9.3 million dollars to house U.N. staff at the Four Seasons Damascus, which is owned in part by the E.U.-sanctioned Syrian Ministry of Tourism.

BECOME A MEMBER

Lengthy reports that document the diversion of U.N. aid have appeared courtesy of Physicians for Human Rights, The Syria Campaign, Chatham House, Human Rights Watch, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Their collective advice is that the time has come for the United Nations to stand firm when negotiating the conditions of aid delivery with Damascus. The reports also advise Western donors to set clear expectations for U.N. reform and carry out meaningful oversight of the operations they fund. If this advice has had an impact, it is barely perceptible. So far, neither the United Nations nor its donors appear to consider the issue a priority.

In *Syria and the Neutrality Trap*, the German diplomat and scholar Carsten Wieland provides insight into this lack of urgency. Wieland served with three of the United Nations' special envoys for Syria. Humanitarian issues were not an integral part of Wieland's portfolio, but his access to U.N. personnel and documents enable him to explain more effectively than previous authors why there has been so little reform in the face of this obvious problem. Yet, despite these insights, he remains hesitant to embrace the more radical conclusion that his book strongly suggests, namely that donor states should refuse to pay for U.N. operations in Syria. If aid prolongs the fighting and has become a "political and economic weapon used by a government at war against its people," why give more? Reading Wieland's account makes it appear high time for the United Nations' donors to present the secretary-general with an ultimatum: Fix the abuse by a certain date, or we will find new partners who can deliver aid responsibly.

Advice Ignored

Wieland underscores that the United Nations has a long record of issuing and ignoring corrective statements following post-mortem assessments of its operations. In November 2013, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon committed himself to implementing the recommendations of an internal review panel that condemned the "systemic failure" of the United Nations to prevent the diversion and obstruction of aid by the government of Sri Lanka. Ban promised, with specific reference to Syria, that "this commitment will be fulfilled promptly and systematically." Yet, as Wieland notes, U.N. leaders made similar pledges after fiascos in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s, only to see the same mistakes repeated in Sudan, Myanmar, and then Sri Lanka.

The book recounts how external criticism of U.N. operations in Syria initially came to a head in 2016, following the revelations in the *Guardian*. This led the United Nations to put Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman in charge of a reform initiative that produced the *Parameters and Principles of UN*

Assistance in Syria in October 2017. The contents of the document are effectively a restatement of the values the United Nations pledges to uphold in all humanitarian operations: neutrality, impartiality, and independence.

But the new parameters for Syria fared little better. To facilitate their implementation, the document created a monitoring group under the auspices of the U.N. Syria Inter-Agency Task Force. Wieland reports the group had not held a single meeting by the time his book went to press. Russia correctly identified the parameters as a threat to one of their Damascene client's most important sources of income. As a result, Russian media cast the document as a "hidden internal directive" that circumvented the U.N. Security Council.

Moscow's obstruction proved successful, since it swayed Antonio Guterres, the U.N. secretary-general. "Guterres, never a profile in courage in the face of powerful state bullying, quickly lost interest," a former senior official told Wieland on background. The main advocates of reform were Feltman's Department of Political Affairs; the U.N. human rights office; and Wieland's boss, the special envoy. The agencies responsible for delivering aid were lukewarm at best, with the U.N. Development Program vocally opposed.

The book suggests Moscow's exertions proved effective because the United Nation's principal donors remained indecisive. Responding to U.N. paralysis in 2019, "a number of Western states (mainly Germany, the US, the UK, France, Denmark and the Netherlands) started to compile a list of critical cases of violations of the UN Parameters and Principles, mainly based on open sources." The compilers could not agree, however, on how to leverage their list. Should they confront U.N. leaders, or would that provoke a defensive reaction? Should they insist on strict observance of the parameters, or would that rob the United Nations of the flexibility necessary to negotiate more effectively with the Assad regime? "In the end," Wieland reports, "the document was sent to the Deputy UN Secretary General in January 2021."

While developments in New York created one set of obstacles to reform, the book emphasizes that top U.N. officials on the ground in Syria had few regrets about the close partnership they enjoyed with the Assad regime. Accordingly, they opposed reform efforts they considered misguided. Feltman told the author, “the UN Country Team in Damascus [headed by Ali al Zaatari] tried to re-litigate, water down, and ignore [the parameters], consistent with the regime’s desire to refocus UN activities.” A Jordanian national, al Zaatari held the top post from 2015 through 2019. He dismissed “any criticism of the way in which the UN handled humanitarian assistance in Syria as ‘politicizing humanitarian aid.’” Al Zaatari avoided briefing Western diplomats, sometimes by telling them they should come to Damascus even though he knew they would never be able to get visas. He also lobbied donors to provide reconstruction funding to the regime without any conditions attached.

Wieland also points to the influence of Amin Awad, the director for Middle Eastern affairs at the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. In an interview with an Emirati paper, the *National*, Awad denied that “the UN is working with cronies of one regime or another.” He also said there was no reason to monitor contractors’ ties to the regime, because delivering aid is what mattered, not who received the contract. As the paper noted, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees awarded more than \$7.7 million to the Syria Trust for Development, a nominal charity led by Bashar’s wife, Asma al Assad. Rather than correcting Awad’s statement, the UN pressured the *National* to withdraw its article.

The regime’s influence also percolates down to lower levels of U.N. operations. Wieland clearly has sympathy for the numerous staff put into positions that are exceptionally difficult, both ethically and logistically. There is supposed to be a firewall that insulates humanitarian work from political concerns. But now that Assad has breached that wall, humanitarian staff face both constant interference

from the regime, as well as criticism for their alleged complicity. Meanwhile, they remain responsible for their primary task of caring for millions of hungry and displaced civilians.

Still, Wieland does not absolve the staff on the ground, whether they work for the United Nations or for the numerous international aid organizations active in Syria that face similar challenges. The book takes aim at the most common defense for continuing aid despite the regime's manipulation or even outright theft. I call it the trickle-down theory of humanitarianism – as long as some of the aid gets through, the war's victims are ultimately better off. Wieland's response takes the form of an anecdote recounted by an Assad regime diplomat, Bassam Barabandi, who defected in 2013. "Somebody from the Danish Refugee Council once told me: 'Even if only 20 percent of aid arrives with the needy, it's better than nothing,'" Barabandi said, "The point is that the other 80 percent are fueling the conflict!"

That is the essence of the "neutrality trap" that gives the book its title. Aid springs from altruistic intentions but turns into a "political and economic weapon used by a government at war against its own people." In the end, it does more harm than good. This raises a troubling question for Wieland: Are there circumstances in which the United Nations and its donors should cut off all humanitarian aid despite the intense suffering of a war's victims? The author warns that, when relief efforts fall too deep into the neutrality trap, the defense of humanitarian aid ends up "mutating into a hollow dogma."

The Radical Option

The natural corollary of this conclusion would seem to be that the time has come to end all Damascus-based humanitarian operations. Wieland calls this the "radical option," a name that suggests his discomfort with it. Yet, is it really so radical? The book itself demonstrates the futility of relying on the United Nations to reform itself. Only a shock to the system can change it.

Indeed, as Wieland discusses, there is historical precedent for the radical option. 30 years ago, the war in Bosnia had already exposed the UN's helplessness in the face of determined aggressors. Wieland describes how, in 1993, the head of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, chose to suspend all operations in Bosnia when Serbian and Croatian forces cut off humanitarian access to besieged Bosniak Muslim enclaves. She did so even though the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees served "1.6 million people, 380,000 of whom lived in Sarajevo, hungry, exposed to diseases and to the bitter Balkan winter." Bosniaks outside the isolated enclaves had already begun rejecting aid to demonstrate their solidarity with the besieged. Ogata's decision apparently stunned the United Nations, and the secretary-general overturned her decision within days. Yet, her show of resistance secured renewed access — albeit temporary — to Muslim enclaves.

Still, this is not enough to persuade Wieland. His primary concern is that the radical option threatens to do lasting damage to the United Nations as a bulwark of multilateralism and international law at a time when these principles are under siege. Wieland's introduction warns that international law — especially international humanitarian law — "is on the defensive" and "its normative binding force seems to be weakening." Concurrently, there has been a regression toward "a Westphalian type of untouchable and unconditioned state sovereignty," which ensures impunity for the gravest violations of human rights. The narrow self-interest of the Russian and Chinese governments has led them to promote this "hard notion of sovereignty," yet Wieland senses even greater danger if the United States and others respond by abandoning multilateralism and international law themselves. He argues that, with the election of unilateralists like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, the United Nations has become "an easy target" for both democratic and authoritarian governments.

This protective approach to the United Nations is understandable. Yet, to a significant extent, the United Nations has proven so resistant to accountability and reform precisely because of its friends' reluctance to put pressure on it. The Biden

administration's effort to revive multilateralism in the post-Trump era has fallen into this trap. Even though humanitarian assistance has been a focal point of U.S. policy toward Syria since Biden's inauguration, senior officials do not talk about Assad's expropriation of aid or the United Nations' resistance to rectifying the situation. In March, when Secretary of State Antony Blinken personally represented the United States at a Security Council session on humanitarian issues in Syria, he said nothing about the problem. Nor has U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, despite making public comments about Syria almost every week this year.

Given this silence, Wieland deserves ample praise for his decision to write a book that catalogs in exhausting detail the failings of an institution he admires so much. One hopes that his former colleagues understand the book as an effort to strengthen United Nations, not embarrass it. At the end of his book, Wieland concedes that a credible threat to withhold humanitarian assistance is probably necessary to make the Syrian regime change. In the chapter dedicated to specific proposals for reform, the book calls on U.N. agencies to negotiate with Assad as a bloc and make offers on a "take-it-or-leave-it" basis. Of course, if Assad were to select the latter option, this "leads us back to the above-mentioned radical options." For all his reservations about pursuing radical options, the author understands that there is no prospect for reform unless they are on the table.

While comfortable with the United Nations presenting ultimatums to Assad, Wieland seems to draw the line at donor states taking a similar approach with the United Nations itself. He calls for donors "to look deeper into the UN system, to question reports and procedures" and generally engage in more vigorous oversight. But Wieland sympathizes with donors' desire to withhold public criticism in order "to spare the UN's blushes in already difficult times."

This sympathy runs counter to Wieland's own narrative. As his book shows, the only time U.N. leaders initiated any kind of reform process was when confronted with a public backlash over their failures in Syria. Hopefully officials in

Washington and other capitals will read this and finally take decisive, perhaps even radical, steps to ensure that U.N. aid benefits the people of Syria instead of the Assad regime.

BECOME A MEMBER

David Adesnik is a senior fellow and director of research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. His research focuses on human rights, humanitarian aid, sanctions, and illicit finance in Syria. For two years, he served as deputy director for Joint Data Support at the U.S. Department of Defense, where he focused on the modeling and simulation of irregular warfare and counterinsurgency.

Image: [U.S. Army \(Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Curt Loter\)](#)

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