

Neo-Humanitarianism:

The Role of International Humanitarian Organizations in the Emerging Global Order

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On October 7th, about 2 hours after the United States started bombing Afghanistan, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld stated that one of the 6 goals of the military operations was “to provide humanitarian relief to Afghans suffering truly oppressive living conditions under the Taliban regime.”² Given the fact that the Administration had portrayed the conflict with the Taliban and Al Qaeda as a fight for national and, indeed, civilizational survival, why would he feel it necessary, or even desirable, to include this seemingly unrelated issue as one of the major goals of the war?

What I would like to suggest is that global humanitarian action, and discourse over such action, has become such an increasing visible feature of international relations that it has insinuated itself into a variety of political and operational situations. In fact, humanitarian norms have become so important that they force their way into the general discourse of

¹ I would like to thank William DeMars, Holly Hansen, Sohail Hashmi, Kavita Khory, and Jon Western for comments on a previous draft of this paper. Much of the information contained in this paper derives from interviews and other discussions with more than 100 humanitarian aid practitioners, government officials, and others in the Great Lakes region of Africa, Geneva, New York, and Washington, and at the workshop on “International Humanitarian Law and Current Conflicts” sponsored by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Harvard Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research. This paper is intended as an initial sketching out of some issues within international relations theory relating to international humanitarianism, and thus the ideas contained herein are tentative. Comments are welcome.

² “Rumsfeld and Myers Briefing on Enduring Freedom,” news transcript, U.S. Department of Defense (October 7, 2001), Online: http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2001/t10072001_t1007sd.html.

war and peace. Further, humanitarianism has become an extremely valuable public relations tool. Thus, a US Secretary of Defense finds it useful to use humanitarianism to justify waging war in a remote corner of the world, and, in fact, may have felt normative pressure to do so.

In this paper I will argue that because of the changing nature of conflict, as well as other broad changes in international relations, we are entering an era of what I call neo-humanitarianism—the embeddedness of humanitarianism within, rather than at the margins of, contemporary conflict, and the explicit manipulation of humanitarianism for political or military gain on the ground in a conflict or as a substitute for political and military action. I will also argue that as a result, international humanitarian organizations (IHOs) have found themselves being manipulated by a wide range of actors in the middle of conflict. Yet, at the same time, they have acquired, in a way that traditional theories of international relations cannot account for, significant initiative, agency, and power.

Main Questions

The main questions to be addressed in this paper are:

- Why is neutral humanitarianism increasingly becoming a fiction?
- Why do states turn to humanitarian actors?
- What are the implications of state reliance on humanitarian actors?
- What are the effects on these organizations? Specifically, do they gain or lose agency, operational autonomy and the ability to change facts on the ground. Under what conditions?

Classical Humanitarianism

Billions of dollars are poured into NGOs and UN agencies each year to alleviate suffering in conflict situations. Yet, since the first modern humanitarian principles were put forth, the context of humanitarian action has changed dramatically. When Henri Dunant witnessed the slaughter and the suffering on the battlefield of Solferino in 1859, war was generally fought between two state armies along fixed lines of battle. War was perceived, whether rightly or wrongly, as being within the conduct of civilized, gentlemanly behavior. Thus, when Dunant began to propagate the Red Cross principles which eventually became enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, they were embraced by the European statesman as being a way to ensure the gentlemanly conduct of war. Thus, humanitarian action, including assisting wounded soldiers and others affected by the war, was seen as an act of compassion, rather than an act of politics.³

The International Committee of the Red Cross, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and many other humanitarian organizations strive to perpetuate this view, at least publicly. Assisting victims of armed conflict is portrayed as apolitical, an act which assures us that we are still human, even in the midst of the brutality of modern war. This is the classical model of humanitarianism—neutral, impartial, and independent. Nonpolitical. Helping people. Relieving suffering. There was always an element of myth to this, but it worked well enough—at least to the extent that organizations like the ICRC were able to convince a wide variety of actors not to fear them.

Neo-Humanitarianism

The on the ground reality of war today belies this view. Most war today is not between

³ See Michael Ignatieff, *The Warriors Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), especially pp. 109-18.

states. It is between a variety of state and non-state actors. It frequently takes place in poor, out of the way countries which hold no strategic interest for the great powers. It is not necessarily about power and territory, but rather about gaining access to resources. It is frequently meaningless to talk about the front lines—war today is a much more fluid affair. Most casualties are civilian. Unlike the generals on the battlefields of late-19th century Europe, the commanders of many of today's armies have not heard about the Geneva Conventions or the Laws of War, and would laugh at them if told, wondering why, for example, they would want to let humanitarian assistance be delivered to populations under control of their enemy. Indeed, they would recognize that starvation can be a useful military and political tool. They recognize the political nature of humanitarianism. While in many instances humanitarian norms may be given lip service, almost all parties to almost all armed conflicts today seek to manipulate humanitarian action for a wide variety of reasons. Rebel groups want the food and medical supplies for themselves. States fighting rebel groups want to deny those resources to the enemy. The most powerful states in the world, who frequently feel pressure to “do something” and intervene in instances of genocide and other humanitarian crises attempt to use humanitarian actors to show that they are responding to a crisis while not actually doing much at all, and certainly not putting their soldiers in harm's way. By turning to the do-gooders to do their work for them, they have helped to usher in neo-humanitarianism. These actors become politicized and become targets for parties to a conflict.

The move from humanitarianism to neo-humanitarianism in many ways mirrors and coincides with the move from classical peacekeeping to recent iterations of peacekeeping and peace enforcement. Since the end of the cold war, peacekeeping and other related internationally sponsored military operations have moved away from such core principles

as neutrality and requiring that some sort of peace be in place to be kept. Peacekeepers are now much more involved in humanitarian efforts, although in many cases this had much more of a public relations impact than real, on the ground impact. Peacekeepers find themselves much more in the thick of internal conflicts, can become targets themselves, and, given limited mandates and circumstances on the ground, frequently find themselves negotiating with warring factions. In the same way, humanitarianism has, to a significant degree, lost its core principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Humanitarianism is now as much about public relations as it is about helping people, often used in the service, either directly or indirectly, of foreign policy goals and wartime objectives. One need only look at the air drops in Afghanistan and the way they were touted by the government and the media, even though they had a negligible impact on the people in Afghanistan and were done in a way that violated all sorts of humanitarian principles, to see this point.⁴ And, humanitarians find themselves in the thick of the most brutal conflicts in the world, with no political or military backup, having to negotiate access to affected populations, and frequently finding themselves targets or pawns in the conflict. This is partly because of the changing nature of conflict, and partly because the

⁴ Less than 1% of the projected need for humanitarian assistance was met by the air drops. At least initially, the food was only dropped in areas controlled by forces friendly to the United States, a direct violation of the principle of impartiality. Further, air drops are generally considered to be a last resort, and humanitarian aid practitioners recognize many problems with air drops if they are not used in conjunction with aid personnel on the ground. The packages can fall on people or structures, injuring or killing people on the ground, as well as damaging buildings, all of which occurred in Afghanistan. If aid personnel are not present, hoarding can occur and a black market can come into existence whereby only those with the resources to pay for the aid will actually receive it. This, too, happened in Afghanistan. In addition, the food packets were the same color as the cluster bombs used by the military (themselves fraught with negative humanitarian consequences), which was also the case in Kosovo two years earlier. Even though the Pentagon said that there was no chance that the two could be mistaken for the other because the food packets were were not dropped in the same areas as military operations (not true), it said that they would change the color of the food packets (although it came out later that this would only happen after the original ones were used up). Finally, towards the end of the war, the US was quite reluctant to have any type of peacekeeping operation on the ground to, among other things, protect aid convoys (which was important as regional warlords and factions within the opposition started fighting among themselves and trying to gain control over these resources) for fear that it might interfere with the military campaign, thus laying bare the supremacy of military objectives over humanitarian ones.

way they are used by major powers is slowly stripping away their mantle of neutrality which they could trade on in the past.

Theory

This puts humanitarian organizations in rather difficult circumstances. It also raises a whole host of questions about the role of non-governmental, quasi-governmental and intergovernmental actors on the world scene today. Traditional realist and neo-realist international relations theory ascribes little real relevance to non-state actors, while neo-liberal institutionalists would admit some relevance of such actors. Traditional theories, even those that go beyond mere structure to ascribe agency to actors, focus on states, rather than on individuals and non-state actors. Traditional theories arising out of realist, neo-realist, and neo-liberal perspectives also provide a rather mechanistic account of the creation and development of international governmental organizations—they are created by states to do things for states that states think they can do more efficiently, and they actually do those things. Recent work by Barnett and Finnemore,⁵ who look at the creation and role of IGOs from sociological bureaucratic and constructivist perspectives help us to go beyond this narrow view of IGOs. They point out that bureaucracies frequently do not do exactly what their originators intended them to do. We accept this when discussing, say, domestic foreign policy bureaucracies, but still seem to have a blind spot when it comes to international bureaucratic actors. We assume that these international agencies and organizations are part of the international structure without agency themselves. We also assume that these organizations will only carry out functions they were intended to carry out. It is increasingly clear that both of these assumptions are not entirely accurate.

⁵ Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations," *International Organization* 53 (Autumn 1999): 699-732.

Similar questions can be raised about the role of non-governmental organizations. How do they act on the international scene? Do they impact state behavior? Do they have an impact beyond that which is mediated by states? That is, do they bypass states altogether to do things on the international stage, including things states might not want them to do? How might they constrain states and how, in turn, are they constrained by them?

Further, we can ask questions about the role of norms in the international system. Do they constrain state behavior? Do they affect how states construct their interests? How might states attempt to use them for their own purposes? Does such manipulation provide further evidence that these norms are, in fact, influential and have concrete impacts on international politics? In the area of humanitarian norms, we thus might ask, if the most powerful state in the world turns to humanitarian norms to justify some very un-humanitarian activities, to what extent does this indicate that these norms are “real” and have effect not only in discourse but in practice?

Humanitarian aid practitioners, who might see little use for theory in their daily activities, frequently express amazement at this debate. The first reaction is to ask why haven’t these theorists gone out into the field and seen what really goes on in the real world? It is obvious to them that they are, in fact, significant players in international relations although in puzzling, frustrating, and contradictory ways. Further, the fact that their resources are sought after by all parties to modern conflicts, the fact that some choose to “name names” and publicize atrocities, the fact that some will give assistance to only one side or the other, and the fact that many organizations are dependent upon states and state-based organizations for support, funding, and even political legitimacy, undermine, at least in broad sweep, claims to nonpolitical status.

Politicization, Manipulation, and Resort to International Humanitarian Actors

Sometimes organizations choose to be political, frequently they have it thrust upon them. States turn to them to show to the world and their domestic constituents that they are responding to a conflict in a forgotten, far-flung corner of the world. Take Rwanda for example. The big powers knew the genocide was coming and they knew when it was happening, but it was not perceived to be in their strategic interest to prevent the slaughter. Because of changing international norms, however, it was important that they be perceived as caring. Thus, once the slaughter was done, and many of those from the losing group left the country, the US and others called on the humanitarians to respond. They funded UNHCR's work in eastern Zaire, even while criticizing them for contributing to the growing insecurity emanating from the refugee camps—security problems that they were reluctant to address. Humanitarian action was thus a convenient way to shore up their global image while at the same time providing a convenient diversion from global responsibility.

That states exhibited callous indifference to human life and manipulative, hypocritical behavior is not surprising. What is interesting, however, is the extent to which they now depend on non-state actors to implement elements of their foreign policy. UNHCR is funded overtly in an explicitly political way. Money is given to support operations in places deemed important to the donors—for example in Bosnia where European states were afraid of mass influxes of refugees. Pressure is put on UNHCR to aid people in their country of residence, rather than in a country of asylum, thus shielding countries from the effects of refugees. UNHCR frequently has little choice but to agree to participate in forced repatriation, a direct violation of its mandate and general principles of refugee protection.

Less than 10% of UNHCR's budget is hardwired into the general UN budget. The other 90+% comes essentially from begging—going hat in hand to donor countries. With money comes power. These few examples would lead one to the conclusion that such non-state actors are no more than the proxies of powerful states, dependent upon them for funding and thus selling themselves so that they can at least do some good in the midst of conflict.

But is this the end of the story? I would argue not. Two important questions are missing from the equation. First, what are the implications of such state reliance on non-state actors? Do states turn to them just because of mere expediency, or is something more going on? Borders are becoming increasingly porous—both to people and to information. Attempts to “secure” the US’ southern border frequently merely pushes the flow of unwanted immigrants to another part of the border. The OECD countries spend ten times as much money on border control efforts as they do on humanitarian assistance. Governments also have a hard time controlling information these days. CNN and the Internet bring pictures of starving, brutalized people into our homes on a daily basis, tugging at that core of humanity inside of us. NGOs use global telecommunications to great effect to publicize human rights and humanitarian norms, put pressure on states to follow them, and put a spotlight on situations where these norms are violated. As a result, the so-called CNN effect can push states—particularly Western, democratic states—to respond. Yet political elites and populations have little stomach for casualties. Thus, a check is written to UNHCR for a few hundred million dollars to act as a proxy. Global telecommunications can lead to situations that governments cannot control—they have to act, but have no interest in doing so or feel constrained in the manner in which they do it. Thus, now instead of the cry “send in the Marines,” one now hears “send in the

humanitarians.” This is a clear reflection of states’ losing policy initiative—certainly a worrying development for those concerned about states’ sovereign right to act—or not.

Further, conflicts have increasingly widespread consequences—from refugee flows to regional destabilization. States cannot respond to all of them. Yet, these conflicts do threaten core interests such as regional stability or the unwanted effects of refugees—economic, cultural, and security. Thus, the creation of “safe” areas in Bosnia helped to contain conflict and reduce Western exposure to casualties, as well as keep potential refugees bottled up in their own countries, at a relatively low cost—an important consideration in these days of budget cutting. The fact that these areas were not, in fact, safe, and actually made it easier for slaughter to be carried out misses the point—the West had to do something, or at least be perceived as doing something, but with little risk. The humanitarians made this possible. States have decreasing range of action. Throwing money at humanitarians helps them expand this a bit.

Actors

The second question has to do with the extent to which humanitarian actors actually have some sort of maneuvering room and independence of action, and whether they, in fact, have an impact on international politics. This question has two parts—first, do they derive maneuvering room from the reliance that states have on them, and second, independent of this, do they have impacts on the ground. In addressing these questions, I’d like to refer to three different types of international humanitarian actors—those affiliated with IGOs (specifically UNHCR), quasi-nongovernmental organizations (or QUANGOs—particularly the ICRC), and NGOs.

An official from a French NGO recently expressed to me nothing but contempt for UNHCR for acquiescing to global power politics. He saw it as completely at the mercy of Western powers. UNHCR would like to see itself as something else. Yes, it is an arm of the UN, and thus enmeshed in the politics of the UN and great powers. But, it has also been able to gain power and resources, expand its mandate, and influence states throughout its 50-year history. Right from the very beginning it gained the ability to raise funds beyond those initially allotted to it, thus loosening the grip of states, at least initially. In 1953, it was a grant from the Ford Foundation, rather than states, that allowed it to insert itself into the refugee crisis in West Berlin.⁶ In the years after its creation, it gained the ability, on its own initiative, to provide material assistance to refugees, thus going beyond its original mandate of legal protection. In fact, UNHCR has, through the initiative of activist High Commissioners, expanded its mandate so far beyond legal refugee protection, that it now has the preeminent humanitarian assistance capability in the world, and its involvement in humanitarian disasters runs the full gamut from preventive activities, to traditional refugee protection, to in-country protection of internally displaced persons, to post-repatriation assistance, to a wide variety of development activities. It now recognizes about 27 million people as being “of concern” to UNHCR more than double the 12 million refugees around the world. This includes internally displaced person, returnees, and other war affected victims.

In terms of spreading international norms, it was able to have a significant impact on states, particularly recently decolonized states that wanted to be accepted by the international community and be seen as respecting international norms. Thus, Africa, especially, had a very broad and generous implementation of refugee protection norms. This developed for

⁶ Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics: A Perilous Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 8.

a number of reasons, most notably the fact that these new states gave asylum to those fleeing from apartheid and colonial violence, but the role of UNHCR is recognized as being significant. For a while, it was also very involved in refugee status determination in many countries, and is still the primary or sole agency doing status determination—an activity that states are supposed to do—in a few countries.

Today, however, it has been, in some ways, too successful. From a budget of \$300,000 in 1950, it peaked in 1993 with a budget of \$1.5 billion. Recent years have seen it spending a bit less than \$1 billion. As noted, more than 90% of its operating budget comes from direct donations from states, rather than the basic UN budget. This, of course, gives states leverage over UNHCR, and also lets states dictate which humanitarian crises are funded and at what level. The comparative per capita figures for funding in Africa versus the former Yugoslavia, for example, are quite striking. Because UNHCR is so well recognized as a prominent “do-gooder,” it of course gains the attention of a variety of international actors who would like to use this “do-gooder” ethos for their own ends.

UNHCR, from soon after its creation, demonstrated agency by taking the initiative to acquire funds beyond what the UN gave it and by actively promoting refugee protection norms. Why was UNHCR created? It was created to help Europe deal with 400,000 so called “hard core” refugees left over from World War II. It had a mandate of three years and a budget of \$300,000. It was not necessarily meant to actually protect refugees. Rather, it was created to help states address a situation they could not deal with themselves. Yet, right from the beginning it insinuated itself into a variety of situations, such as the Hungarian crisis and the Algerian crisis, gained a reputation, a more permanent mandate, and many more resources. It spreads norms and criticizes and

cajoles governments to respect the rights of refugees. It delivers staggering amounts of material aid, and it has bit by bit acquired a de facto mandate that goes far beyond what its state creators originally intended. It has thus demonstrated both agency and the ability to go beyond state wishes.

UNHCR is frequently criticized for focusing too much energy on delivering humanitarian assistance, often at the expense of its core protection mandate. Others argue, however, that it would not be involved in so many different situations if it had not taken the initiative to develop its premier assistance capability. They argue that with assistance come access, and without access you cannot do protection. UNHCR has exhibited a certain entrepreneurial spirit in recent years especially, which has given it the ability to grow, gain resources, and become a player on the international scene. Yet, it has also done the bidding, or at least is perceived to have done the bidding of states in many instances. As noted previously, it has acted as a substitute for state action. And, at the same time—literally—those same state actors have criticized it. Even as UNHCR was being used as a façade by the great powers after the genocide in Rwanda, those same countries were criticizing it for helping to foster a dire security situation along the Rwanda/Zaire border. That is, UNHCR was being blamed for contributing to a situation which was quite threatening to Rwanda—and other states—by setting up refugee camps in Eastern Zaire, thus providing a base from which Hutu militants could conduct raids against the new government in Rwanda. The fact that all the states involved left it with no choice does not undermine the fact that UNHCR, by following its humanitarian mandate, helped to change the facts on the ground. The Hutu rebels would not have been able to hide in the camps and, if one follows the logic of the unfolding events there over the past 8 years, Mobutu Sese Seko might not have been overthrown, and Africa might not today be experiencing

its first continental war, if those camps did not exist. Yet, if those camps had not existed, thousands, probably tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of more people might have died. Humanitarian actors are thus caught in a vicious circle embedded within the logic of modern war and the precepts of humanitarianism. Their humanitarian mandates force them to act, but by acting they are caught in the middle of circumstances that they cannot control, even as they affect them, in sometimes profound ways.

The ICRC, which might be regarded as a quasi-nongovernmental organization, is specifically given agency in the Geneva Conventions. It is recognized as the protector of humanitarian norms, and it is explicitly given the right of initiative to offer humanitarian assistance. And, even if a state declines them access to affected populations, it may provide such assistance, at least in cases where non-state actors, such as rebel groups, control the affected territory. It does not do state bidding. In fact, it tries to stay away from state pressure as much as possible. Instead, it tries to cajole states to respect international humanitarian law through the deployment of international norms. Further, Nicholas Berry⁷ has recently argued that not only does the ICRC intervene in wars in ways that states might not like, but it actually works to undermine the very institution of war itself. By working through private communications, it helps to cajole the international community to intervene in conflicts. By having a presence on the ground and monitoring situations, it constrains the level of violence. By providing assistance to all sides, it helps to stalemate wars. By pushing states and other parties to comply with international humanitarian law, it restricts the use of force and undermines its effectiveness as a way to decisively resolve conflicts. It supports UN peacekeeping, war crimes tribunals, and other antiwar activities. It supports mediation rather than armed conflict. Because conflicts today are internal and

⁷ Nicholas O. Berry, *War and the Red Cross: The Unspoken Mission* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

thus smaller, the role of outside parties, such as the ICRC, is magnified.

Nongovernmental organizations are also problematic for IR theorists. They are not created by states, although some depend upon states for funding. They frequently do things that states do not want them to do; sometimes, wittingly or unwittingly, they do states' bidding. They do not have military power, but they sometimes are able to force states to do things they might not otherwise want to do. That they are perceived as threats to state interests can readily be seen in the French government's decision to blow up Greenpeace's boat the Rainbow Warrior. We know that NGOs have played a significant role in spreading human rights norms and helping to protect human rights around the world. They were crucial in setting the international agenda with regard to land mines and making the land mine treaty a reality. Epistemic communities play a significant role in setting the terms of debate for a variety of issues, including the environment. Many international humanitarian NGOs specifically disregard state wishes and insinuate themselves into the middle of conflicts where states would prefer they not operate. NGOs are part of international civil society. They certainly do not function as international structure in the neo-realist conception. They act. They do things. By delivering material assistance, medical services, and other resources to victims in the midst of conflict they demonstrate agency. NGOs also do many of the things that the ICRC does to undermine war as a useful institution.

Of course, humanitarian NGOs can have very different views and perspectives about their roles. Some subscribe to the neutrality ethos. Others, such as *Medecins Sans Frontiers* (MSF), may take a particular stance in a conflict and see it as their job to "witness". Even within the MSF movement, however, there can be disagreements. One such disagreement erupted in Eastern Zaire after the Rwandan genocide. As noted previously, there was

concern that the refugee camps were providing a convenient base for Rwandan Hutu militants, and thus contributing to regional insecurity. MSF France pulled its operations out that area because it thought its activities undermined its broader humanitarian and ideological mission. MSF Holland and MSF United Kingdom stayed because their humanitarian ethos dictated this.

The sometimes perverse and contradictory logic of humanitarianism affects how these organizations perceive their role, conceptualize their mission, and then act. Take for example the phenomenon of groupthink, where group dynamics can mean that certain alternatives are not discussed and decision makers overestimate their capabilities. Humanitarian organizations are vulnerable to the same dynamics. In particular, one type of groupthink relates to a situation where the group perceives itself as having a particular inherent morality. This prevents the group from considering the consequences of its actions. This type of thinking is inherent in humanitarian organizations. They are the good guys, the “do gooders”, and thus whatever they do must be good. All too often organizations may take this for granted, and do not consider the consequences of their actions or alternatives, some of which might violate their code of doing good. This is beginning to change, as organizations become more reflective about their role in conflict, but it is still a significant issue. The very fact that non-governmental actors need to worry about this underlines the effects they can have on the ground, for both good and bad.

Under What Circumstances Do IHOs Affect International Politics?

So the question is not whether or not humanitarian actors have demonstrated agency or initiative, or whether or not they have had an effect on international politics. They obviously have. Rather, the question is when, under what circumstances, and whether

these circumstances are changing. During the post-colonial period, newly independent states were eager for international recognition. They were also eager to participate in the struggle against colonialism and apartheid. Thus, they were an easy sell for UNHCR's efforts to spread international norms for refugee protection. Developed states had their own ideological reasons for being open to refugees, at least those coming from certain countries. Now, the cold war is gone, anti-immigrant sentiment is becoming more widespread in many countries, especially in the developed world, apartheid is dead, decolonization has ended, and governments in the developing world increasingly have to respond to their citizens. Thus developed states are closing their borders, and developing states are following suit. UNHCR is having a tougher time selling its protection ideas and services. In other words, the circumstances in which the refugee regime was created have changed dramatically. The question then becomes the extent to which the entire edifice upon which refugee protection was based has fallen apart as a result of these new circumstances. And, in this new environment to what extent do humanitarian actors have an impact not only on state behavior, but also international politics beyond the narrow confines of states?

The second part of this last question is important because it is obvious that frequently humanitarian actors see states or the institutions created by states, most importantly sovereignty, as either irrelevant or an impediment to their jobs. They thus many times evade state actors and violate state created norms. Yet, many are also reliant on states for funding. Thus, an apparent dichotomy begins to emerge. Humanitarian actors are mucking around in the developing world, against the wishes of these weak governments, while at the same time carrying out the agendas of the governments who are footing the bill. However, while this may be partially accurate, it is not the whole story. The situation

becomes more complex if we recognize that many of the humanitarian agencies receive money from more than one source. In this situation, as William DeMars points out, one of three things may happen. All of the donors may be of a like mind, and the agencies receive one message regarding goals and methods. Or, there may be competing agendas, and the NGOs might be pulled among different funders. A third option is premised on the possibility of divergent donor agendas, but NGOs might actually *gain* operational autonomy. This is because NGOs do things that states want done. Or, at least, using NGOs provides an illusion that things are being done. To the extent that all donors perceive an interest in an ongoing operation, they may restrain themselves from pushing too hard. They have an incentive for self-restraint. Pushing too hard for an agenda might alienate another partner with a similar, but somewhat different, agenda, and as a result of too much competing pressure, might imperil the entire operation.

Assuming that each partner wants to keep the operation alive, then none would choose to dictate NGO policy to the point of alienating another essential partner. By attempting to use NGOs to advance some external agenda, powerful partners create incentives for self-restraint in how hard they push that agenda. To push too hard would risk destroying the tool and its usefulness.⁸

Thus, as states more and more rely on these actors, they find themselves restricted in how much they can push them.

One example of this might be UNHCR and the refugee regime. Even as states more and more push the limits, and violate, international norms, they also recognize that both the norms and the actors are still useful. The right to seek asylum acts as a pressure valve—in certain cases a situation in a country might be even worse and end up having even wider international consequences if displaced persons were not allowed to leave their country during a conflict or as a result of persecution. UNHCR is useful for states. If states bend it

⁸ William DeMars, “NGOs, Networks and World Politics,” presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Washington, DC, February 17-20, 1999, p. 12.

too much, the organization itself might break, thus being of no use to anyone. Of course, this analysis rests upon certain assumptions about the rationality and unitary nature of state actors, which are not necessarily always relevant or in evidence. Many governments, for example, have to pay attention to domestic constituencies. If those constituencies want to close borders, governments may have to respond, thus closing that safety valve. Doing that long enough might actually lead to the previously mentioned wider consequences.

Humanitarian Norms

As noted above, many different actors either violate or attempt to manipulate humanitarian norms. Some would call into question whether these norms even actually “exist.” Certainly, the main architects of Bush administration foreign policy have a rather ambivalent relationship with such norms, or international norms in general—witness Condoleezza Rice’s discussion of “illusory ‘norms’” and her condemnation of the Clinton administration’s “epidemic” of pursuing international norms.⁹ Yet, the very fact that the Bush administration has attempted to manipulate “illusory ‘norms’” would suggest that they do, in fact, have meaning and effect in global politics. Further, consider the uproar over the Bush administration’s policies regarding Taliban and Al Qaeda prisoners being held in Guantanamo Bay. The Administration’s initial inclination was just to say that while it does not consider them to be prisoners of war and not covered by the Geneva Conventions, it was still treating them humanely and more or less in accordance with the Geneva Conventions. This statement, in and of itself, would seem to indicate a recognition of the standing of certain norms.

⁹ Condoleezza Rice, “Promoting the National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs* 79 (1 2000): 48.

Yet, through widespread international condemnation, and probably an internal reassessment of its interests,¹⁰ the administration was forced to backpedal from its initial statements somewhat and say that the Geneva Conventions (i.e. international humanitarian norms) did apply to the Taliban prisoners (at least to certain extent, given that they were still not accorded prisoner of war status), although not Al Qaeda. Thus, even an extremely realist administration feels the oppression of international norms. This in turn, further problematizes realist and neo-realist conceptions of the way the international system works, at least insofar as they are reluctant to recognize that such insubstantial things as international norms could constrain state behavior.

Conclusions

To conclude, then, it is increasingly obvious that international humanitarian organizations and norms have increasingly become embedded within the very fabric of modern armed conflict. States turn to these norms to justify conduct, indicating that they have real force within international society. And, states turn to these actors to carry out particular agendas. At times, these organizations do so. At other times they do the exact opposite of what states want. They are political players, whether they like it or not. Neutrality, impartiality, and independence have become myth—partly because of actions by the organizations themselves, and partly because combatants and other interested parties see them as ripe targets for manipulation. Once this is recognized, the question then becomes if and how they respond to and use this unique status.

¹⁰ Apparently, the initial policy was created by the White House without consultation with other important entities. Once the policy came to light, many in the military, in particular military lawyers were concerned, first that the policy violated recognized international law, and second, that by not applying the Geneva Conventions, this could put US soldiers who might captured in the future at risk.

The very idea of humanitarianism is useful for states. States will continue to use humanitarianism and humanitarian actors for their needs. The interesting question is to what extent this continued use of humanitarianism will serve to reify these norms and actors, thus solidifying the effect of these norms and forcing states to deal with them, further enmeshing them in the humanitarian regime.