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CONFLICT REPORTING IN THE MIDDLE EAST: MY EXPERIENCE AT MERCY CORPS' HUMANITARIAN ACCESS TEAM (HAT)

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

Renato Moreira Vidigal   for   Master of Arts
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Title: Conflict Reporting in the Middle East: My Experience at Mercy Corps' Humanitarian Access Team (HAT)

In this project, I will narrate some of my experiences while working for the HAT team in Beirut, and analyse it as a facet of the broader organisation, which is Mercy Corps. I will also look at the available literature hoping it will shed some light onto the different ways, formats, and channels through which crisis, and in this case, the Syrian civil war, can be represented to different audiences. My interest lies precisely in analysing how these different channels of representation themselves contribute in delineating what is 'crisis' according to its terms. Alternatively, as is the case here, I will look into the different layers of 'crisis' within the context of a major Middle Eastern civil war with dire implications for the region and the rest of the world. In other words, I want to use my experience at Mercy Corps to reflect upon how groups of self-labelled "international experts" decide on what problems are there to solve and how to solve them. As Kosmatopoulos (2014) drew attention to in his work, I seek to focus on the associations, inventions, and other aspects, that allow Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), think-tanks, and other institutionalised groups of experts "to present [themselves] as an adequate institutional response to a particular problem or question" (p.601).

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It was an early morning of January 2018, when I received a phone call confirming that I had been accepted to intern at the Humanitarian Access Team from Mercy Corps' local office in Lebanon. I needed to complete an internship as part of the course requirements for my master's program at the American University of Beirut. I also wanted to invest my time that semester in gaining meaningful experience towards a possible future career. That call has not only meant that my Spring semester would turn out to be incredibly busier than I had expected. It has also shaped the topic of my final project and given me enough material to put forth ideas acquired during those long hours sitting at HAT's office in Beirut.

The Humanitarian Access Team, commonly referred to as "HAT", was established in Beirut in March 2015 aimed at supporting the humanitarian response to the Syrian conflict.[1] Considering that most of humanitarian and development interventions in Syria are coordinated from outside of Syria, there seemed to be a need to support these operations by providing them with up-to-the-minute and easy to read the information regarding the developments on the ground in Syria. Hence, HAT's project sought to provide a simplified and straight-forward template that would quickly and objectively inform those with stakes in the conflict. Additionally, during its inception, the team proposed also creating a forward-looking platform which would use previous events to guide predictions on future developments on the ground in Syria.

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[1] For more, access https://www.humanitarianaccessteam.org/about

In his critique of the statist approaches, Timothy Mitchell (1991) argued that technologies of power work not from outside (i.e. the State) but from within at the individual level. That is, disciplines work within local domains and institutions producing the modern individual, which is constructed as an "isolated, disciplined, receptive, and industrious political subject" (p.78). Thus, our very individuality is formed as the product of power relations within modern institutions. In this vein, Mitchell questions whether intentions and ideas are distinct from the external world to which they refer. In other words, is there a clear division between a conceptual realm and an empirical one? I want to bring Mitchell's discussion into this paper and ask whether the empirical evidence of, for instance, the crisis in Syria, can be separated from the conceptual realm of Mercy Corps' narrative about a crisis in the Middle East and the need to produce daily reports about it. Hence, my argument is that Mercy Corps' conceptual definition of crisis, for example, in the Middle East, cannot be distinct from what it considers to be the observed reality of its object, in this case, the conflict in Syria.[2]

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[2] As a disclaimer, I would like to acknowledge that all the impressions and opinions stated in this paper are the product of my own recollection and interpretation of events during my internship at Mercy Corps Lebanon. My goal is academic, that is, to use such interpretations as a bridge to promote further dialogue with the current literature on the topic. They do not represent the values or goals of the organisation or of any individual. Indeed, the accuracy of events and details narrated here could be disputed by those working at the organisation at the time.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Governmentality and Technopolitics

In his book Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society, Mitchell Dean (2010) discusses the concept of governmentality. The author starts by distancing himself from the traditional Weberian definition of the State as a 'Sovereign body that claims a monopoly of independent territorial power and means of violence, […] and that is separate from the rulers and the ruled' (p.16). Moving away from this idea of a self-evident power that resides in the State, or the State as a tangible element, emerges the concept of governmentality. Built upon Foucault's definition of government as the 'conduct of conduct', governmentality suggests that different rationalities, or 'mentalities of government', ultimately dictate how we think about governing. That is, the way authority is exercised "draws upon the expertise, vocabulary, theories, ideas, philosophies, and other forms of knowledge that are available" (P.25). Thus, science, or the aggregate knowledge produced, and accepted, by society at a given point in time, and governing are interlinked in such a manner that prevents us from drawing a clear boundary between the conceptual realm of the State and the empirical one of the society (Mitchell 1991, p.82). In other words, the new concept parts with the idea of state power as solely an instrument of coercion, but rather as a productive force that cannot be located in one palpable institution nor separated from the population who are immersed in it. That is to say that human nature and the State constitute each other. Key to understanding this suggestion, is Foucault's idea that 'power is diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and 'regimes of truth'' (Foucault, 1991). Foucault uses this concept of

'regimes of truth' to explain that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding and 'truth' (Gaventa 2003). It is important to mention that Foucault defines power not as a negative, or coercive force, but rather as a positive, productive one: "In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault 1991, p.194). Thus, the concept of governmentality is based on Foucault's suggestion of an inseparability between power and knowledge. Elaborating on the same basic principles, Mitchell argues that advocates of a political system approach, similar to the state-centrist theorists, fail to provide an explanation to the nature of a phenomenon like the State. Both approaches try to delineate a distinction between a conceptual realm to an empirical one without questioning its validity. In other words, can we objectively draw boundaries between State and society? (p. 80-83).

It is in the context of governmentality that the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics emerges to explain a shift of politics as the rule of the prince over its polity to "a form of politics entailing the administration of the processes of life of populations" (Dean 2010, p.117). Starting in the eighteenth century, this shift occurs through a process of governmentalisation of the State, in which the government of the State becomes the administration of and through processes of life (and welfare) of the population. Biopolitics then is concerned not with the administration of the State itself but with issues of the population such as health, hygiene, birth rate, life expectancy, housing and working conditions, etc. The aim of biopolitics is to enhance the lives of a population. Furthermore, the author explains the governmentalisation of the State, or the government of and through processes of life, through four distinct components: the dissociation of government from sovereignty; the elaboration of practices and rationalities of

government; the transformation of the exercise of sovereignty by government, and the emergence of a distinctively non-political sphere constituted by processes that can be represented as being outside government (p.122).

Moreover, Dean (2010) explains that the governmentalisation of the State implies the notion of an 'art of government' that is independent of the sovereign-territory relation. That is, the government through processes of life does not depend on the "question of sovereignty in that it is separated from the activity and person of the sovereign" (p.123). In addition to its autonomy from the sovereign, the government of the State is also autonomous from individual citizens in that its rights and properties cannot be reduced to that of the people (Dean 2010). Dean also discusses sovereign power, based on its Foucauldian definition as the right "to take life and let live" (Foucault 1978, p.136). In this sense, sovereignty can be understood as a 'deductive' power for it has the right to kill. Agamben (1998) also offers an interesting discussion of the deductive nature of sovereign power. According to the author, the sphere of sovereign decision is that which is able to suspend the law in a state of exception (i.e. when society confronts its enemies). In addition to its right to take life, the author also refers to the sovereign right to reduce life to a bare minimum, for example, by sentencing an individual to life in prison. De Larrinaga & Doucet (2008) also talk about the sovereign right to suspend the law in a state of exception by referring to the controversial Camp Delta at Guantanamo Bay, where the U.S. government defends itself from international accusations by invoking its sovereign 'right' to suspend the law in a state of exception (i.e. national security threat). As Agamben further acknowledges on sovereign power to take life:

"The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life – that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed – is the life that has been captured in this sphere […] What is

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captured in the sovereign ban is a human victim who may be killed but not sacrificed: homo sacer […]The sacredness of life, which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life's subjection to a power over death and life's irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment" (1998, p.53).

Differently, as the rationality of government that is concerned with life itself, biopower is distinct from sovereign power for it is a positive, productive force that seeks to improve life, or to "increase the means of subsistence, to augment the wealth, strength and greatness of the state, to increase the happiness and prosperity of its inhabitants, and to multiply their numbers" (Dean 2010, p.125). Thus, rather than taking life or reducing it to its bare minimum, biopolitics is concerned with our growing capacities to control the vital capacities of human beings as living creatures; what Nikolas Rose (2007) refers to as a politics of "life itself" (p.3).

In the context of international government, and more specifically that of military interventions, I take the position, based on contemporary literature, that biopolitics does not substitute sovereignty but is rather interweaved into it (see Dean 2010, Dillon 1995, Hindess 1998, De Larrinaga & Doucet 2008, Agamben 1998, Butler 2004). That is, the governing of the populations need independent sovereign states to operate, in the same way that independent states with territorial integrity are themselves "a governmental product, and a consequence of the 'external' dimension of doctrines of 'reason of state' (Dean 2010, p.126). Agamben (1998) goes further away from the Foucauldian distinction between sovereign power and biopower to argue that "the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power" (p.11). That is, the author rejects the notion of any separation between sovereign power and biopower and argues that, in fact, one constitutes the other. Again, in his own words:

"Placing biological life at the centre of its calculations, the modern State therefore does nothing other than bring to light the secret tie uniting power and bare life, thereby reaffirming the bond (derived from a tenacious correspondence between the modern and the archaic which one encounters in the most diverse spheres) between modern power and the most immemorial of the arcana imperii". (p.11)

B. Biothreat and Crisis

The idea of preparedness, as acknowledged by Andrew Lakoff (2008), has emerged over the last three decades as a new way of thinking about and acting upon threat, particularly the threat of contagious diseases. The concept sprung from the Public Health field where the imminent possibility of an infectious disease outbreak led public policy officials in the United States to start using a new type of rationality. A different way of approaching health (and security) threats needed to be developed; one that encompassed constant readiness for emergencies and crisis. On the one hand, one could argue that the widespread use of new technologies of information and surveillance in the twenty-first century has made us more prepared than ever before. Nonetheless, as admitted by the U.S. health official, Mary Selecky, in 2005, "Are we fully prepared? Absolutely not. We are more prepared than we were several years ago but not prepared enough" (quoted in Lakoff, 2008). It became clear then that prevention was no longer enough to act upon future biothreats. U.S. officials were instead concerned with a systems-wide preparedness designed to protect Americans of potential future pandemics. Thus, the question we ask, which had not been asked to Mary Selecky at the time, is "how did we come to be so 'unprepared'?".

As explained by Lakoff (2008), this new way of thinking about the future has led to the development of a new type of technique, the scenario-based simulations. This type of rationality has infiltrated not only Public Health strategists but has also come to underlie much of strategic thought within national security circles. As the author further

clarified, different from risk assessment techniques which are based on probability calculations, the 'imaginative enactment' done in scenario-based simulations are purely a creative exercise. They have got no previous episodes to draw comparisons from. As Luhmann (1998) asserted, the threat of an imminent epidemic is an event whose likelihood cannot be known, and whose consequences cannot be controlled. Hence, old methods of statistical calculations of risk developed from past events were not suitable for dealing with the unpredictability of a catastrophic disease event.

Nonetheless, "imagined futures" have gained such importance as to guide political action in the present. I would go a step further and claim that provisional foresight and 'anticipatory knowledge' has become the basis of technopolitcs in a time of high-speed communication. Here I draw direct comparisons with the work developed by the HAT team in Beirut. Much of the senior researchers' time and attention was spent enacting possible future scenarios aimed at predicting future events in the Syrian crisis. Without any possible way of calculating the probability of such events occurring, the researchers drew on their own experiences in the region and certainly some amount of 'gut feeling' to arrive at predictions for the future. The reports containing such conclusions are then submitted to NGOs, embassies, and other international organisations with a presence in Syria to take immediate action upon perceived threats.

The concept of preparedness led to the formulation of a new way of preparing for possible future pandemics - one involving "ongoing, vigilant readiness for emergency" (Lakoff 2008). As the author further explains, the concern here is not the protection of either the national territory or the population itself, but rather "the critical systems that underpin social economic life" (p.403). Hence, imaginative enactment exercises are used to detect vulnerabilities which would undermine the continuous functioning of vital

systems in the event of a catastrophe – what the author calls vital systems security. Preparedness rather than prevention is the measure to protect crucial systems should a catastrophe occur. In the public health field specifically, biopreparedness is the response to the rise of a "catastrophic disease threat" (Falkenrath 2006, cited in Lakoff 2008). A clear problem with the vital systems security approach, as shown by Laurie Garrett (1994) is the shift of focus from the population itself to state infrastructures. Poverty, income inequality, and other living conditions of populations are not a priority in biopreparedness models.

C. Knowledge Production in an Age of Crisis

In an age of information overload, the way we organise, collect, and present information is becoming an increasingly central component of how we understand behavioural determinants. Politicians, CEOs, policymakers, and even academics make critical decisions based on compact bullet points, and numerical indicators prepared for them by someone else. Interlocution and its contingent flexibility have been drastically reduced (Eriksen 2016). This fragmentation of thought, oversimplification of complex ideas and cognitive overload that we experience today impact not only the way policies are drafted, and decisions are made, but alter the way we think, learn, and understand everything around us and about us. As suggested by Foucault's quote at the beginning of the paper, technologies of power/knowledge have constructed our own "psyche, subjectivity, personality, consciousness" (Foucault 1978, p.29). Manipulating facts is now as important as presenting them clearly, in a time when we are continually trying to squeeze complex ideas and problems into short briefings, numerical scores and ranking

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systems. Focus has shifted to having more information rather than more in-depth thinking. Processes have been pushed aside for there is no time to digest anything more meaningful.

In Post-Orientalism, Hamid Dabashi (2009) argues for the contemporary emergence of a form of knowledge "that is devoid of agential subjectness", what he calls epistemic endosmosis. That is, a form of interested knowledge produced and disseminated in the media, think tanks, and other private or semi-private institutions, that has come to dominate public discourse. According to Dabashi, this form of knowledge production feeds into the imaginary of U.S. imperial dominance, and the postmodern predicament of its illusion of sovereignty, legitimacy, and authority (p.213). As the author further acknowledges, the incorporation of Middle Eastern studies into matters of American foreign policy, national security, human rights and democracy has limited knowledge production in the field to that which is compatible with the dominant ideologies of our post 9/11 world. Consequently, the rise of highly funded think tanks, working in collaboration with U.S. military establishment institutions, have managed:

"to bypass the paraphernalia of an academic life for the faculty – peer review employment and promotion, peer review publications and a sustained record of peer reviewed scholarship, or above all the training of the next generation of scholars – and go straight for the articulation of American national security concerns (Dabashi 2009, p.218)."

Bringing the discussion on imperial supremacy over knowledge production to more recent times, Dabashi (2009) acknowledges the different ways through which information is produced and shaped by the interests of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. This is particularly visible in areas of global governance where large International organisations such as the UN System, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) take the lead. The control over knowledge production by such

influential organisations, further expands this idea of the 'West' as the standard-setter and the 'Orient' or the 'Rest' as the place to be measured according to these standards. The author claims that such institutions feed into this contextual narrative by creating an excessive amount of information that is not based on coherent, in-depth analysis and observations, but following their own agendas. In this sense, knowledge production is mostly at the service of the interests of imperial powers that control its creation, usage, and dissemination. Thus, Dabashi argues that our age is witnessing the death of deep thinking and serious intellectual work. In fact, Merry et al. (2012) also show that the growing production and use of indicators in the last few decades has not been accompanied by a systematic study on the implications and possible pitfalls of this practice. Neither has much reflection been done about it. The authors wonder about the lack of research in the field and ask questions such as: "What social processes surround the creation and use of indicators?"; "How do the conditions of production influence the kinds of knowledge that indicators provide?"; "How do the production and use of indicators affect the distribution of power between and among those who govern and those who are governed?"; "What is the nature of responses to the exercises of power through indicators, including forms of contestation and attempts to regulate the production or use of indicators?" (Merry et al. 2012, p. 4).

Moreover, as Stone (2012) shows, the use of indicators can be a subtle yet effective way of legitimising desired policy outcomes. Such legitimacy is particularly relevant in cases where multiple actors at different hierarchical levels, and in different scales (i.e. domestic, international) are competing for control over policy priority. Consider, for example, the position of developing countries where international donors, the UN system, and other international NGOs exert considerable influence on local

governance. In such a context, an abundance of competing indicators and overlapping datasets are likely to emerge clogging the communication channels of already overwhelmed government employees. As the author exemplifies in the excerpt below:

"No sooner is a data system purchased to calculate one set of indicators than the clerks are directed to find the data needed for a different set. The result, as one aid official put it to me, is that many developing countries are littered with the carcasses of failed indicator projects – the consultants paid and gone, and those charged with administering justice increasingly cynical about time wasted on measurement when there is real work to be done" (Stone 2012, p.282).

For those invested in advancing a specific policy agenda, the goal is then to align such indicators with their own interests. Thus, the use of indicators becomes a crucial tool to legitimise authority.

In a 2004 publication, Calhoun elaborates on the construction of 'crisis', or 'emergencies', as a new world order. According to the author, a system of emergencies now represents the new 'normal' in an international arena that is governed not only by national governments but also by multilateral agencies, NGOs, think tanks, and others. Under the motto of 'saving lives', these international organisations have created a system of constant alertness, whereby agency is dictated by the next big crisis. Thus, a collective imaginary emerges giving shape to "the definition and rhetoric of emergencies, the ways in which they are produced and recognised, and the organisation of intervention" (Calhoun 2004, p.373).

Crisis and emergencies have become the most important term when mentioning conflicts, catastrophes, and other incidents that cause suffering. In this context, crisis is understood as a new form of interpretation to events, a way of imagining them which emphasises their seeming unpredictability, abnormality, and brevity (Calhoun 2004). The author compares this notion of 'emergency' and 'crisis' with that of 'nation', in that both

produce a basic structuring framework for how we understand the world (Calhoun 2004 p.377). Hence, this logic assumes the existence of a crisis-free static normality which we hope to return. It also presumes that every international emergency can and should be managed. It evokes the mobilisation of the technopolitical apparatus of nation-states through the mediation of international organisations, NGOs, and in some cases their own military capability. Thus, the ubiquity of crisis-thinking shapes all sorts of international interventions: from more traditional military operations that are now designed to only provide quick surgical intercessions, to humanitarian assistance, financial mediations, and public health emergencies. As further alluded to by Taylor (2002), this notion of 'emergencies' is produced and reproduced through a social subjectivity that is split between clear principle and the embodied understanding of habitus.

Calhoun (2004) points out three potential problems in a world order that is governed by an emergency mindset which I think is worth mentioning. First, it naturalises events that are the consequence of human action. That is, it puts violent conflict, war, and other types of social disruptions in the same category of natural catastrophes such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Consider the way landslides caused by floods are reported, for example. The focus is usually on the unusual amount of rainfall in a particular place compared to the average from previous years. The social inequalities and bad urban planning that led to one specific segment of society to build houses in areas of high risk are rarely mentioned as part of the problem. It gives an air of naturality to what is ultimately the consequence of human action. Second, the emergency mentality presents what are usually long-standing problems, or progressively developing, predictable events as sudden, unpredictable, unavoidable and temporary. Third, it brings to a local context what are, to a certain extent, broader problems produced by global dynamics. As the

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author puts it, it "dislocates the standpoint of observation from that of the wealthy global north to a view from nowhere" (Calhoun 2004, p.377).

CHAPTER III

WORKING AT THE HUMANITARIAN ACCESS TEAM
(HAT)

Mercy Corps is a leading humanitarian aid organisation with headquarters in Portland, Oregon, U.S., and Edinburgh, Scotland, U.K. From these two central locations, it reaches out to more than 40 different countries, where it seeks to: "alleviate suffering, poverty and oppression by helping people build secure, productive and just communities", according to its mission statement.[3] As per the official website, the organisation employs nearly 6,000 'team members', with 90% of them being natives to the local community. Mercy Corps prides itself of its 'localism', whilst the executive seats are filled almost exclusively by white North Americans and Europeans.[4]

Housed within Mercy Corps Beirut branch, the Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) was created in March, 2015, to address the perceived numerous security challenges faced by the international response in Syria. Its creation aimed to form a research and analytical team to focus exclusively on providing political, social, economic, and security analysis to the broader humanitarian and development community working in Syria either remotely, or on the ground. According to a senior analyst from HAT at the time, their approach is unique in that it provides a multi-disciplined and crosscutting analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from local communities. The team also prided itself for producing 'independent' and 'academic' quality reports.

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[3] See https://europe.mercycorps.org/en-gb/who-we-are
[4] https://europe.mercycorps.org/en-gb/who-we-are/our-team

The information gathered by the HAT team is sent out to all signatories through daily and biweekly reports. Daily reports are short briefings, detailing any new attacks and perceived changes of movements within Syria. Its format and language resemble that of a breaking news report from an international news organisation – focused, condensed, and on the alert. Differently, biweekly reports offer a more in-depth analysis of new developments in the Syrian conflict and the persistent trends in the country. HAT reports are made available to donors, humanitarian and development actors, local embassies, UN agencies, and donor government entities. In fact, anyone with an academic or institutional-affiliated email account can potentially register to access these reports online, given the approval of the HAT director.

These periodic assessments produced are then synthesised into 'strategic analysis' and 'forecasting' which the HAT directors proudly refer to as unique features of its reports. Thus, HAT attempts to enable its partners to conduct effective and well-informed interventions in Syria by giving them this forecasting tool. For instance, in each daily report, one can find the level of imminence of a future government or non-government-led offensive in a given area of Syria. The predictions are based on recent events, trends, the overall picture, as well as some 'guessing' made by the team.

My role at the HAT team was to provide research assistance in one of the topics to be covered by the biweekly reports. I have also occasionally helped with the text of daily briefings. To me, this role felt quite daunting, especially in the beginning, and to a lesser extent throughout my time there. There were four main reasons for that, which I will describe in the following paragraphs. First, I was given no exclusive access to any news sources. It did not matter that we were based in Beirut, Lebanon. I was writing my analysis and drawing conclusions from the same online sources that anyone else in the

world with access to the internet would have. That is, I would search the topic of interest on google and then scroll through the many links trying to find any subscription-free article that I could somehow access. It was incredibly frustrating to me that Mercy Corps would not provide a subscription to any news outlet. On one occasion, I asked our senior analyst, where did he find sources for a report that we were writing about a recent UN meeting with Syrian and western leaders. He dodged the question. I later found out that he had written a whole text based solely on an article published at the Russian government-funded RT News website.5

The second challenge I faced in my position had to do with the actual informants we had from Syria. Only one person in our office, this gentleman called Ahmed, seemed to have direct contact with the 'sources on the ground'. Ahmed is a Syrian national who fled to Lebanon after the war started and somehow ended up in the humanitarian field after having worked elsewhere for all his life. His degree in Geography had initially granted him an interview with the HAT team as they needed help with the drawing of maps. Nonetheless, after some time, the team realised, to Ahmed's benefit, that he could reach out to his vast web of connections in Syria to gather more information about what was happening in the field. Ahmed had gradually become a centrepiece for the team.

Overall, the informants from Syria were mainly acquaintances, friends, relatives, or former colleague of someone at HAT. Very little was discussed regarding who these individuals were, and what sort of vested interest could be hidden behind the information that they provided. Communication with them was done mainly through WhatsApp, and Ahmed was usually the first person to receive them. I remember Ahmed telling me that

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5 https://www.rt.com/news/

one of these contacts was a former merchant from the Daraa region who lost his prominence when the war started but kept in contact with his network. How reliable were these sources? It is hard to say, but this has never been a topic of discussion in the office. The given assumption was that since they are Syrians, living in Syria at the time, then undeniably they should know what was happening. How could I dare to question that? That was never an option. That whole situation made me think of the year that I had lived in Iraq during the height of the ISIS insurgency. I remembered how much harder it had been to make sense of what was happening once it becomes part of your daily routine. Conflict itself seems to diffuse reality into opposing sides which have entirely cut communication across their ideological boundaries – once one becomes a part of it, he/she cannot see the other side. Perhaps, this lack of contextualisation of the sources was what perturbed me the most while working at HAT.

The third issue is related to translations, or the lack thereof. As it would be expected, language barriers were part of the daily routine in an internationally staffed office like that of Mercy Corps Beirut. Within the HAT's team, in particular, I had hoped they would have Arabic-English translators in the office in charge of making relevant information coming from Syria available for all. These translations would be especially important considering that none of the senior analysts, senior researchers, and directors were able to read Arabic. Much to my dismay, that was not the case, and it created numerous obstacles to everyone. Hence, all the news stories coming from 'the ground', in Arabic, was only read in its integrity by one of the three Lebanese or Syrian nationals working with us. Occasionally, they would shout out in English, over their laptop screens, the summary of something interesting they had read. But that was it. Only these few individuals had read the primary source, and now everyone else in the office only knew

about their occasional reaction to it. During my time at the office, I never witnessed any kind of discussion upon the different ways one could interpret a primary source of news. There was only one interpretation available which was that of the one out of three individuals who had read it. It also created a clear divide in the team between locals – being those who had access to the sources, versus internationals – those who could write beautifully in English, nonetheless devoid of any real depth. In hindsight, it does not surprise me that the non-Arabic speakers in the office resorted to summarising news articles from RTnews.com.

My fourth concern has to do with the issue of duplication. The HAT's team idea, back in 2015, to create a platform to gather and issue periodical reports with updates on the situation in Syria was certainly not a novelty. Other large international organisations such as the Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International (AI), The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Relief Web (RW), to name a few, were already doing so. Moreover, they all seem to produce their reports from an utterly isolated world with very little communication and information sharing amongst them. In fact, according to accounts from directors at HAT, the only way to gain access to some of these publications is to become a sponsor or contributor. Information is the product they sell; hence it is kept under lock and key. It was more a matter of gaining competitive advantage, rather than achieving the overall goal – that is, to provide factual information to policymakers, key stakeholders, and the global public about the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

On the other hand, one could argue, competition can provide a stimulus to the production of better reports. Nonetheless, that does not seem to be the case. One reason for that is the contradictory nature of information coming from a battleground like Syria.

The multitude of actors involved and the interest each group has in propagating a specific agenda contributes for that. Additionally, the ever-increasing severity of the crisis, and the many losses of lives it claims daily, leave very little time for duplication of efforts. Thus, my argument is that this avalanche of unconnected, unverifiable information incessantly produced by competing actors further contributes to a lack of clarity of what already is a very intricate war.

CHAPTER IV

THE SUBJECTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE

Adding to the debate above, I will in this section summarise the current literature on subject formation as a relevant discussion to help us further contextualise the practices of the HAT team and its conflict reports.

According to Foucault (1982), the process of disciplinary subjects formation is a violent one, which encompasses: (1) the use of specialised scientific disciplines and organised fields of expertise, and (2) practices of division, seclusion, and surveillance (Kosmatopoulos, forthcoming). Foucault's definition sheds light into the materiality of subject formation as opposed to a more organic interpretation of this process. I use material here in the Marxist sense as being the product of economic, political, and ideological forces (Karhu 2016). This distinction is particularly important to our understanding of who qualifies as the analysts, in our case the HAT's team, versus the object their analysis, that is the conflicting parties taking part in the long-standing Syrian conflict. Thus, a critical distance on the grounds of moral deficit or technical incompetence is established between experts and the subject they specialise in. This distance contributes to removing the political agency from subjects while "promoting a view that sees past conflict or future crisis as expert domains that transcend the political subjectivity of the actors involved" (Kosmatopoulos, forthcoming).

Here, I would like to allude to what Latour (1987) and Eyal (2006) refer to as the 'obligatory point of passage'. That is, the expertise of the crisis analyst is not a "quality they possess by virtue of their education or their skills but inheres in the fact that they managed to position themselves […at] a point through which must pass all the different

flows of information arriving from agents and informers, monitors of the press," etc (Eyal 2006, p.186). This became rather evident to me while a member of the HAT team, as there was a clear division between the English-speaking analysts at the top of the organisation and the information-gathering, Arabic-speaking agents, working under their directives. Here, I find it relevant to mention that the very well-paid director of HAT was a former U.S. military contractor with no research, or academic background that only became prominent at Mercy Corps Lebanon for his entrepreneurial spirit and perceived 'understanding' of the Middle East.

Furthermore, Eyal (2006) shows that the notion of intelligence work as 'passive' – that is, the information gathering, monitoring, and merging them into a full or partial picture - is false. This is especially the case in scenario-building exercises and attempted predictions, which is an essential part of the daily routine of analysts at the HAT team. In other words, the very existence of intelligence and the experts cannot be conceived apart from the principles of distance and erudition which created them (Eyal 2006).

Keeping this suggested material distance between experts and subjects in mind, another vital concept to consider is what Eyal (2006) refers to as the 'interpretation of intentions'. That is, the attempt to translate and coordinate the interests of opposing camps participating in information networks. It follows that the practical operation of intelligence expertise structures depends on this perceived ability to interpret mutual signals and the intentions behind them. Here the author alludes to the formation of 'active elements' which serve to create links between experts and subjects. In his words:

> "[…] intelligence assessments are involved in a certain game of communication with the adversary. They are not simply the opinion of the intelligence community about what is likely to take place, but also and inescapably a 'message' to the adversary" (Eyal 2006 p.187).

Bringing this discussion to our case, I argue that it highlights the importance of contextualising HAT's decision to integrate forecasts to their daily and weekly reports and the active role such statements play in the Syrian conflict. I write this considering that HAT's reports are widely adopted by international organisations, NGOs, western embassies in the Middle East, among others. Thus, it becomes clear to me the influence conflict reporting might exert to different actors in their assessments and depth of involvement in Syria.

Moreover, it is crucial to first historicise and contextualise the Middle East as a postcolonial geographical setting where what constitutes violence itself is defined by hegemonic processes (Kosmatopoulos, forthcoming). As exemplified by Benedict Anderson (1991), the innovation of systematic quantification systems used by colonial powers had a very concrete and specific purpose, that is "to keep track of those on whom taxes and military conscription could effectively be imposed" (p.246). Along the same line, Timothy Mitchell (1988) had also demonstrated how colonial material practices were used to discipline and 'enframe' colonial subjects, thus creating the modern subject as the product of an internal division between self and other, reality and representation (Mitchell 1988, 2002; see also Kosmatopoulos, forthcoming):

"The absolute opposition between the order of the modern West and the backwardness and disorder of the East was not only found in Europe, but began to repeat itself in Egyptian scholarship and popular literature, just as it was replicated in colonial cities. Through its textbooks, school teachers, universities, newspapers, novels and magazines, the colonial order was able to penetrate and colonise local discourse" (Mitchell 1988, p.171).

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Thus, this attempt to delineate safe areas from insecure zones has given rise to a world order where structured and organised systems (i.e. Western European capitals and the U.S.) are the space of decision-making or 'policekeeping' in the words of Dean (2010), whilst the space of crisis (i.e. the Middle East) are characterised by chaos and an infinite possibility of crisis and events that require constant policing or surveillance, such as crisis reporting, "on the grounds of universal values and priorities" (Kosmatopoulos 2014, p.613).

Moreover, in the postcolonial context of the Middle East, particularly in the last thirty years following the growing presence and visibility of international humanitarian organisations, morality has also played an important role as an inherent power for the creation of modern subjects (Kosmatopoulos, forthcoming). The concept of human rights as inalienable rights has encompassed a common rationality extended to all humans regardless of national states' borders. This ideal has prompted international organisations to seek to protect the rights of individuals located anywhere in the globe against perceived abuses. Thus, an element of international governmentality has emerged, for example, as a fundamental principal of international law, a justification to military intervention, or a guide for the treatment of displaced peoples (Kosmatopoulos 2014, p.247). Peter Redfield (2013) brilliantly exemplified how the prospect of "saving lives" is the common point of moral reference of our century. In his in-depth study of the group Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), Redfield claims that the concern for life itself should be historicised. That is, the humanitarian sensibilities characteristic of our time, however universal they appear, have not always existed - human beings "have not always sought to maintain life or alleviate suffering" (p.40).

Furthermore, Redfield shows that politicians often seek to validate their actions (i.e. military interventions) through a narrative of saving lives. As he puts it, "as a moral precept the preservation of human life offers the allure of simplicity: whatever else holds in the complexity of human affairs, surely helping others live should be a good thing" (p.1). Ticktin's concept of "armed love" further clarifies this point: the moral imperative to care, or the "practices of care", is often accompanied, "explicitly or implicitly, by practices of violence and containment" (Ticktin 2011, p.5). Particularly after 11 September, 2001, the ideals of a liberal peace expressed through concepts such as 'peacebuilding', 'human security', and the 'responsibility to protect' has consistently been used by Western powers as a moral narrative to justify humanitarian as well as military interventions. As explicitly expressed in the 2001 International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) report, which was sponsored by the Canadian government at the time, coercive military strategies aimed at 'preventing conflict' are appealing both from the point of view of "a liberal humanitarian ethos and that of a Realpolitik, national-security logic" (Chandler 2004, p.73). The 'responsibility to protect' narrative, one could argue, is a shift in discourse used to further legitimise sovereign power concerning the new demands of biopolitics.

A. Normative Violence

Continuing from Foucault's conceptualisation of subject formation, I want to bring the focus here to the violence he describes as being inherent to this process. The late American rapper Tupac Shakur once wrote that "death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside while still alive".[6] The rapper was referring to a 'loss

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[6] https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/80268-death-is-not-the-greatest-loss-in-life-the-greatest

of life' experienced during incarceration. The quote is also a broader reference to the systemic violence suffered by many African-Americans who are denied the chance of living up to their full potential from the moment they are born. This latter interpretation may resonate well with the "black lives matter" movement, which dominates the news as I write this essay. In the past few weeks, we have witnessed an increasing number of activists across the globe come out to defend the fact that "not all lives matter until black lives do".7 In the same vein, Butler (2004, 2009) reflects upon the dehumanising of particular groups in contemporary responses to war and violence. According to the author, violence is produced by discourse itself with the exploitation of targeted populations as lives who are "lose-able" and "ungrievable" (Butler 2009, p.31). Thus, it becomes easier to wage war against them, because such lives have already been lost within the normative frames we have for those who are already "in the state of deadness" even while living (Butler 2004, p. 33-34; see also Karhu 2016 p.836). In the author's own words:

> "… when such lives are lost they are not grievable, since, in the twisted logic that rationalises their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of 'the living'." (Butler 2009, p.31).

Following a similar logic, I will refer here to 'epistemic violence' (Spivak 1999) as the creation of a violent framing of the 'third-world' subject. It is violent to the degree that "it denies the very possibility of agency, devaluing the one represented as subject" (Assis 2019). Thus, here the dangers of discursive representation are highlighted for the one who speaks about a subject undeniably participates in the construction of their subject-position (Alcoff 1991, Assis 2019):

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7 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52969905. Accessed on 8 June 2020.

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"…if the practice of speaking for others is problematic, so too must be the practice of speaking about others, since it is difficult to distinguish speaking about from speaking for in all cases. Moreover, if we accept the premise [...] that a speaker's location has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims, then both the practice of speaking for and of speaking about raise similar issues" (Alcoff 1991, p.9).

Thus, discursive practices here are understood along the lines of Foucault's description of discursive power as dispersed relations "that produce, normalise, and regulate subjectivities along the historical axes of normal and abnormal" (Karhu 2016, p.833). In this manner, expert-controlled publications are able to depict a war-prone third-world/ middle eastern subject that is articulated through moral precepts and technical procedures (Kosmatopoulos, forthcoming).

As Butler (2009) further recognises, the difference between making and finding the subject of recognition is a rhetorical one. That is, normative frameworks often arbitrarily presuppose certain features (to the detriment of others) when defining particular subjects as their objects. To this extent, recognition is part of a process where "the very practice of ordering and regulating subjects" is decided within the frames of pre-established norms (p.141). For example, when a group of individuals in Syria are defined as 'pro-government' and in opposition to those who are 'against the government', then the very Syrian national identity, along with other cultural/ religious traits, which once united them needs to be erased so that the new subject can exist. In this dual relationship, one cannot exist without the other for no subject can live without it being differentiated. Butler's argument follows a post-structuralist logic in which difference not only preconditions the construction of identity but becomes more essential than the identity itself. Thus, the proposed subject in expert-controlled reports will gain its distinction by defining itself in opposition to that which is outside itself. This process of

external differentiation is, therefore, central to the construction of internal differentiation as well (Butler 2009, p.142). The construction of such distinctions is particularly problematic in Syria as a country of complex, overlapping, and "often interdependent religious, class, regional, and ethnic identities" (Salamandra 2004, p.7). As further acknowledged by Rousseau (2013), the arbitrary classification of Syrian groups according to pre-established norms is often made through an oversimplification of their identities and loyalties. Hence, as conflict experts attempt to recognise and classify subjects within the Syrian civil war, they "only further muddle foreign understanding of an already complex conflict" (p.5).

Reiterating Butler's argument, violence is produced by discourse itself through a process of rationalisation and eradication of those populations whose "lives do not matter" (as the aforementioned slogan would put it). Particularly within violent and post-violent contexts, normative frames will determine who are the humans whose lives are worth 'fighting for', as opposed to those whose lives have already been lost even while living (Butler 2009). The author explains that inherent to this process of discursive violence there are racist norms that deliberately single out the third-world subject, such as the Arab, or "anyone who looks vaguely Arab in the dominant racial imaginary", as a threat to those lives which are 'real' and 'livable' (Butler 2004, p.39). Chambers (2007) recognises that Butler's concept of "normative violence" offers an important contribution to political theory as it highlights the fundamental violence of norms. That is, Butler offers a clear account to how the formation of subjectivity connects intrinsically to discourse itself, and other discursive practices, in violent and post-violent contexts.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have narrated some of my impressions as an intern junior-analyst at The Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) at Mercy Corps Lebanon. I have delved into the available literature on crisis reporting, as an attempt to look at HAT's practices in perspective. I did not presume to arrive at a final conclusion, or to provide any recommendation on best practices for the organisation. Alternatively, I have analysed the parameters through which 'crises' and 'emergencies' are defined as such by those who claim expertise in the field. The legitimacy of such international experts can be questioned through the lenses of post-colonial theorists who contextualise and historicise western knowledge production as a way to further propagate and secure the interests and power of rich nations over their former colonies and other poorer nations. I used Timothy Mitchell's argument (1991) as the background for my discussions on the impossibility of an epistemic separation between the anecdotal realm of narratives and discourse from that of the empirical evidence provided by the crisis expert. Finally, I have discussed epistemic violence and normative frames that constrict subjects to distinct groups of those whose lives must be preserved as opposed to those whose lives have already been lost.

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