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DISCOURSE IN YEMEN: A HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVE
AND THE SHAPING OF STATE IDENTITY

by
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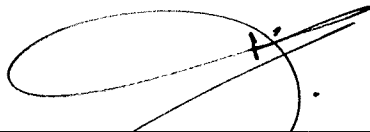
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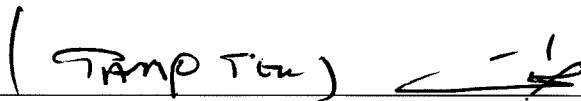
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

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Title: Discourse in Yemen: A Humanitarian Narrative and the Shaping of State Identity

This paper aims to problematize how humanitarian aid organizations communicate on countries in conflict and how this communication may affect the perception of the state's identity. It is centered around three questions which I have interrogated as part of my job with UNICEF Middle East and North Africa's communication office. It begins with a reflective account of the job experience to put the questions in context followed by a brief background of the Yemen conflict.

First, it problematizes discourse and its role in shaping identities. It looks at discourse analysis as a methodology and delves into discussions on choice of emotive words, categorizations, the framing of the conflict, use of data and visual products used by UNICEF to communicate on the conflict while adhering to its humanitarian principles and maintaining its relationships with donors.

Second, it seeks to better understand the responsibility that organizations like UNICEF carry in alleviating suffering through a genealogy of care and humanitarianism. While 'care' was once seen as a state activity towards its citizens, it evolves into non-state action in times of emergencies when states are unable to provide basic public services.

Third and based on the discourse of UNICEF on Yemen, this paper aims to deconstruct the reasons behind the uses of categories such as 'weak' and 'failed' states. It moves through a pattern of: how do we speak? Why do we speak as humanitarians? And how does our narrative shape the subject of our discourse?

Keywords: discourse, power, care, humanitarianism, humanitarian intervention
constructivism, norms, state fragility, United Nations organizations

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: UNICEF, COMMUNICATION, AND ADVOCACY: A REFLEXIVE ACCOUNT

I began my career with the United Nations Children’s Fund, UNICEF, as a fresh graduate with an academic background in Sociology and Communications. Four consecutive years of working with the communications and advocacy department for the Middle East and North Africa Regional Office exposed me to various conflicts and humanitarian aid interventions ongoing in the region. What struck me most among the conflicts which UNICEF was intervening in, was Yemen. This context proved challenging for UNICEF on many levels due to the complexity of the situation on the ground. It had a donor relationship with Saudi-Arabia which is an active member in the line of fire. It was also advocating for peace talks to end the ongoing war. Prior to pursuing my graduate studies in Public Policy and International Affairs, I had a limited understanding of how the functions of UNICEF echo on a wider scale in the academic field of humanitarianism. The bureaucracy of such an organization despite its decentralization is overwhelming and so I spent my first year understanding the structure and the programmes it entails. As my career grew, every year proved very different than the previous one. The more press releases and statements I drafted, the more I saw the patterns in editing. UNICEF has a unique way of communicating on crises because it is one of the agencies that doesn’t struggle with presenting its mandate clearly. It

claims to work ‘for every child’ wherever they are¹. UNICEF was clear about upholding its ‘humanitarian principles’ in the way it carries out its public communication. When I first entered the organization, I underwent several online and in-person trainings which were meant to teach us codes of conduct as humanitarian workers. For communications focal points, trainings and network meetings detailed the way we speak on crises and how we avoid pointing fingers at parties to any given conflict. Generally, there is an understanding that humanitarian organizations function under what they call ‘humanitarian principles’ which are considered an operational framework taken from the seven fundamental principles of the Red Cross². These principles were put in place to ensure the most effective way of going about humanitarian intervention to alleviate suffering without getting entangled in any political context. In short, these principles are: humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. They all translated into my work whereby I had to ensure that the tone of any public communications embodied these principles in a sense that it spoke of the humanitarian aspect of the crisis without referring to parties of conflict by name or insinuating blame. According to Nancy Bruni, who studied how neutrality impacts the practice of humanitarian organizations, we live in a time that is different than “the time when neutrality first emerged as a component of humanitarian aid, today’s conflicts are more often internal as opposed to international” (2005, p.2). As the years passed by, my questioning of the principles arose to problematize the notion of ‘independence’ that humanitarian organizations held tightly as a principle. For the Yemen conflict, independence was a concept I struggled to grasp. Saudi-

¹ UNICEF, 2019, For every child, results webpage, <https://www.unicef.org/results>

² ICRC, 1996, The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0513.pdf

Arabia was involved in a coalition taking part in the war in Yemen from one side and funding humanitarian organizations including UNICEF for programs like health, psychosocial support and education on the other side³. UNICEF's ability to operate in a context like Yemen with political interferences from donor member states, the Yemeni state itself and non-state actors, highly depends on how it maintains its principles of neutrality and impartiality. While different organizations may interpret and apply these principles differently, they all function more or less within these lines in order to maintain their access to people in need and the credibility of their humanitarian image.

This research has become a way of making sense of my job. I questioned less during my first year on why and how I needed to communicate on children in need to get their voices heard. As this changed with the years, different questions which have an echo in the academic field came up. For this paper, I chose three questions I struggled with as a humanitarian aid worker communicating on people in need. I aim to problematize my questions through areas of academic discussions which will enable me to step out of the United Nations bubble to touch on wider deliberations. First, how the communications and advocacy department which holds the narrative of a crisis in its hands became the custodian of writing history from a humanitarian perspective. Second, the genealogy of care and how it had become a currency for humanitarian organizations to spend in times of crises. Third, statehood and the effects on its identity when it is categorized as 'fragile' or 'failed'. The more I dug into this academic research while continuing my job, words came less easily to

³ UNICEF, 2020, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates support UNICEF to meet the needs of children in Yemen, <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/kingdom-saudi-arabia-and-united-arab-emirates-support-unicef-meet-needs-children>

me in describing accounts of what I saw in the field. Editing became a process plagued with a fear of censorship. Therefore, I decided that if I were to move forward with my research for this paper then I had to stay authentic to what most captivated me about my work with a humanitarian organization. My hope for this research is that it won't come out as a simple recitation of humanitarianism and its emergence or a critique, but rather one that opens eyes to the vast responsibility that these organizations hold in shaping the identities of actors through their discourse. I took Yemen as an example for the abovementioned reasons of how it has provoked contradictions during my work. Also because of how, as it will become evident in the coming chapters, hours were spent brainstorming the ways to describe this conflict in the most emotional way to combat what UNICEF feared was compassion fatigue from audiences and the international community.

CHAPTER II

THE YEMEN CONFLICT: A BACKGROUND

Yemen, the poorest country in the Middle East and North Africa region⁴, was propelled into war in 2015 following a failure of political transition at the time of the Arab uprisings a few years earlier⁵. The rebels, namely the Houthi movement, took over Sanaa, the Yemeni capital, in early 2015 forcing the current President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi to flee abroad⁶. Fearing that the Houthis were being backed by Iran's military power, Saudi Arabia and eight other Arab states formed a multinational coalition that same year backed by intelligence support from the United States, the United Kingdom, and France⁷. The Houthis were driven out of southern Yemen in months and the Yemeni government established a temporary home in the southern city of Aden while the president remains in exile⁸. Part of the coalition's military operations in Yemen are naval with the purpose of putting a halt to the alleged smuggling of weapons to the Houthis. An accusation which Iran denies⁹. A partial blockade to the port of Hodeidah, which is controlled by the Houthis and is the largest

⁴ The World Bank, April 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/yemen/overview>

⁵ Amnesty International, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/09/yemen-the-forgotten-war/>

⁶ BBC, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32078817>

⁷ Associated Press, 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.com/members-of-saudi-led-coalition-in-yemen-their-contributions-2015-3>

⁸ Chatham House, 2015, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/events/2015-11-07-yemen-key-players-prospects-peace-meeting-summary_4.pdf

⁹ Reuters, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-kuwait-iran-exclusive/exclusive-iran-revolutionary-guards-find-new-route-to-arm-yemen-rebels-idUSKBN1AH4I4>

seaport and gateway of aid to the country, led to the United Nations naming Yemen: the “world’s worst humanitarian crisis”¹⁰. In mid-2018, the coalition advanced towards Hodeidah with the aim of taking the port which drove masses to the outskirts of the city. The port of Hodeidah, considered a lifeline for Yemeni people, handles 70 per cent of all imports including food and aid¹¹. By the end of 2018 ahead of the Stockholm Peace Talks and after a significant decrease in aid operations through the port, UNICEF aligned their discourses to warn against a possible famine if the blockade and battle over Hodeidah resume¹².

In 2015, a few days after the naval enforcement measures were put in place, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution which established an embargo to stop the supply of weapons to the rebels¹³. As the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen worsened with an outbreak of cholera and a looming famine, nearly 80 per cent of the population amounting to over 24 million people are still in need¹⁴. Following public outcries and official statements including by the European Union, another United Nations Security Council resolution in 2017 worded its concern with the obstacles of deliveries of humanitarian aid which did not result in a lift of the enforcement measures. By the end of 2018, the United Nations Special Envoy to Yemen described the Stockholm Peace Talks as the “first major

¹⁰ Joint statement from UN agencies: the World Health Program, the World Food Program and UNICEF, appealing for humanitarian access and an end to the conflict, December 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/un-agencies-yemen-humanitarian-crisis-worst-world>

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, June 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/26/yemen-minimize-harm-civilians-hodeidah>

¹² UN News, 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/11/1024652>

¹³ UN News, 2015, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/04/495802-security-council-imposes-arms-embargo-yemen-rebels-demands-all-parties-resume>

¹⁴ UNICEF Yemen fast facts, December 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/fast-facts-yemen-crisis>

breakthrough”¹⁵ in which the parties to the conflict reached an agreement on the Hodeidah port among other issues. Commitments were made as part of the Stockholm Agreement to a ceasefire and troops’ withdrawal. At the beginning of January 2019, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution to establish a new special political mission for the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA). Recently, the mandate of the UNMHA was extended until 15 January 2020 which is tasked to oversee the ceasefire agreement in the city and port of Hodeidah¹⁶.

¹⁵ Coverage of Security Council 8441ST MEETING (AM), January 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13659.doc.htm>

¹⁶ UN resolution 2481 (2019), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13881.doc.htm>

CHAPTER III

DISCOURSE AND ITS ROLE IN SHAPING IDENTITIES

There is a wide array of discussions around what ‘discourse’ might stand for. While it is sometimes used to refer to oral or written texts, some academics argue that it goes beyond that to include the social context in which it occurs. According to Marianne Jørgensen & Louise J. Phillips in their book ‘Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method’, there are underlying factors to the word ‘discourse’ which suggest ‘that language is structured according to different patterns that people’s utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life’ (2002, p. 2). Our words are not always neutral in describing our realities and while humanitarian organizations uphold ‘neutrality’ as a principle when they speak of crises, they are not necessarily referring to their choice of words but rather their stand on the political environment which produces them. In a communications office, the person speaking on a crisis or conflict holds the narrative of how events are unfolding and how they are reported on. Humanitarian organizations amplify the voices of people suffering with an aim of adding pressure on the international community to take action against ongoing violence. They do, however, face challenges as Dennis Dijkzeul and Markus Moke, who studied public communications strategies of international organizations, assert. Some of these challenges include communicating on an organization’s core beliefs, attracting donors to a specific cause in order to raise funds, raising awareness on emergencies, maximizing their influence on governments, and rallying local support for their community-centered activities (2005, p. 674-675). There is also a constant battle with compassion fatigue. This “painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 301) is one of the goals of humanitarian organizations such as UNICEF

in their advocacy. Humanitarian narrative has become engrained in the coverage of conflicts in such a way that it develops from an unknown background due to its constant attempt to distance itself from the political context. Organizations use public communications as a way of safeguarding their independence, so they can reach the people affected by conflict more effectively (Dijkzeul and Moke, 2005, p. 691).

Discourse analysis becomes a crucial attempt to deconstruct how meanings are shaped through the communication carried out by humanitarian organizations. Problematizing daily routine work tasks and placing them in a bigger picture provides a space to understand one's work on a deeper level and the structure of an organization. It can also in return benefit the workplace in discovering underlying issues which may unfold throughout the research process. Connecting work tasks to underlying research questions is resonant of what C.W. Mills speaks of in the "sociological imagination" (1959) whereby he calls for a new way of thinking about our daily life which entails asking questions about our surroundings. Although he is aware that man is confined by the routine of a work life when it comes to the bigger picture which include political, economic, and social implications, he finds it crucial to ask the questions which invoke our curiosity on what seems to be mundane. This can be understood by the two distinct elements which Mills presents as 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' (1959, ch. 6). In this case, a personal trouble at work could be the constant wondering of why a specific task is necessary to the job you're undertaking and the constant private questioning of why it matters. This simple act of questioning can open up a debate to regarding something as a public issue worth interrogating.

Taking UNICEF as an example, every year a report is launched to mark the war in Yemen and its effects on children followed by detailing UNICEF's response in the field. What these reports represent and the impact they hope to achieve in countries of crises is an important question to address. This constitutes what Mills calls the sociological imagination

which “enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (1959, p. 6) meaning the ability to problematize situations around us and ask questions by linking history and personal troubles in a way which helps us understand how society functions or in this case how organizations function.

Beyond thinking and brainstorming about an issue which one hopes to look into, there is the part where this issue needs to be tailored into a research question which indicates clarity and timeliness. Here’s where the decision to study how UNICEF’s advocacy in a country of crisis such as Yemen and if it shapes the identity of the state comes in. This journey of exploration demands that qualitative research takes place to stress not just the relationship between the researcher and what is studied but also the constraints which construct inquiry. This is also another way of giving ‘meaning’ to tasks that we do or events which occur. Gurpreet Mahajan explains this point by stating that “actions and outcomes analyzed by the social scientist are not mere happenings or events, they’re structures with meaning” (2011, p. 10). According to Mahajan, events which happen are not merely a frozen period in history, they also consist of how certain events are perceived by others and how they contributed to shaping perceptions around it. Considering that the research topic will be looking into the way certain rhetoric used by organizations can have an effect on discourse and shaping perceptions of the conflict taking place, then a carefully picked method of inquiry is needed. This method should be able to marry both the unpredictability and broadness of studying such a phenomenon and a structured approach to conducting research. However, quantitative research will not be deemed suitable for such an exploration because it risks reducing the research to numbers without meaning thus stripping it of its potential to project trends, uncover implications, and indirectly or directly provide recommendations.

“Writing is knowing” is mentioned countless times by professors especially during undergraduate school and in fields of study such as the social sciences. It’s not a simple pen

to paper act, it's a process of discovery, investigation and most importantly, understanding. For Laurel Richardson, writing is a method of inquiry whereby there is a link between language, subjectivity, social organization and power. Language does not stand as a reflection of social reality only but rather as a creator as well. Richardson states that: "language is a constitutive force, creating a particular view of reality and of the self" (1990, p. 1). Here, language is given an active role in the way we write about a topic and the words we choose to detail it.

According to Robert Weber, discourse analysis "uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text" (1990, p. 117). Studying frames is also an important aspect of discourse analysis because it shows the conscious and unconscious decision of what to say and how to say it. Therefore, it would be quite enriching to the research to discuss how UNICEF frames a crisis through politically correct terms in order to protect its access to countries of crises to deliver humanitarian aid. The political correctness of an organization is an interesting frame to consider studying especially in terms of what Robert Entman calls "saliency and selection" (1993, p. 53). The selection of some aspects of a perceived reality and giving them more importance or making them more noticeable and memorable, in other words making them salient, is a crucial aspect of discourse analysis. While frames redirect attention away from other aspects, the parts which are omitted from the frame are as telling as the parts included. Therefore, the importance of understanding framing for analysis allows the researcher to avoid misrepresenting communicative texts.

Discourse analysis for the purpose of this research can help in describing patterns of communicative texts used by UNICEF on the Yemen conflict. The focus could be on analyzing the terms which UNICEF uses in abundance and the language used to frame what the organizations calls a 'humanitarian crisis'. This is a way of yielding unbiased results because it leaves out the knowledge of the sender and receiver that they are being analyzed.

One of the categories that can be used to understand the texts would be based for example, on whether the public discourse entails pointing fingers at a certain party to the conflict directly or indirectly. While there is no right way to conduct content analysis, reliability and validity are two aspects which need to be considered. The ambiguity of word meanings and category definitions would be the central problem of reliability while carrying out content analysis.

There is an important element to include in a research of this sort which lies beyond the text UNICEF uses in order to disseminate its messages on children in crises. There is a conscious process of selecting the visuals which accompany public reports. The careful choice of these photos says a lot about the emotions and thoughts which UNICEF is looking to incite in the receiver of the message. In other words, how it is looking to construct the reality of Yemen in the minds of the receivers. For example, reports tend to include photos of children who are in distress on the cover but not extreme distress to maintain a balance of suffering and hope. The part of the report which discusses UNICEF's response to the crisis would more likely include photos of children who are joyous and upbeat with lively quotes¹⁷. In Gillian Rose's "Visual Methodologies" she highlights the research method which relates to our vision of things being constructed through mediums producing and disseminating knowledge. This field of inquiry which Rose calls 'visual culture' treats images as active elements of our life that go beyond our act of seeing them. Images are able to showcase an aspect of life which allows us to in return be active as well by engaging in a process of interpretation (2016). The framing of an image is a platform for interrogation in itself because it opens up the debate to what is left out and what is included in an image. Also, it questions

¹⁷ UNICEF, 2020, Humanitarian Action for Children Report, <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/humanitarian-action-children-2020>

how a viewer is engaged in interpreting the feelings which a photo induced as well as how it fits with the text it accompanies.

In his remarks to the press following a visit to Yemen in November 2018, UNICEF's Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa referred to the country as "a living hell not for 50-60 per cent of children. It is a living hell for every single boy and girl in Yemen"¹⁸. An image, as shown below, accompanied the transcription of the press conference as well.



Figure 1 – UNICEF/2018/Yemen - Severely malnourished child in a hospital bed in Yemen smiling at UNICEF's Regional Director as he extends his hand.

The content of the press conference is centered around morality and collective human consciousness in averting a crisis like Yemen. While it contains numbers and figures on the suffering of people, it is also a detailed account of what the Regional Director witnessed

¹⁸ UNICEF, 2018, Conflict in Yemen: "A living hell for children", <https://www.unicef.org/mena/stories/conflict-yemen-living-hell-children>

during his visit. Names of children were also mentioned to humanize the suffering presented beyond the striking numbers. Photos and videos played in the background of the conference room for the attendees to be able to visualize the direness of the situation. There was also the validation of the continuity of UNICEF's humanitarian work in Yemen following the numbers such as the mention that: "every ten minutes, a child is dying from diseases that can be easily prevented". Michael Ignatieff describes such humanitarian narrative as,

"[The] meta stories governing the larger relationship between zones of safety and zones of danger. In the nineteenth century there were the stories of empire: the nexus of interest, economic, geopolitical, religious, and ideological, which bound the metropolis to the periphery. The imperial narrative — bringing civilization to the world of savagery — gave the media a metanarrative, a grand story into which each local event could be fitted and given its meaning" (1999, p. 1).

This narrative on what is happening in Yemen amplifies this idea of morality which UNICEF constantly pushes on the sanctity of human life. On a child's life, to be more precise. This child is broken down into departments of the organization. The brain lies with the education experts, the safety is with the child protection experts, the body is with the health experts, and the psyche is with the psychosocial experts. The advocacy around this focuses on how this child should be educated, protected, fed and vaccinated. However, it is exactly in this sense that the child's 'self' is no longer present, and that they are perceived as a political and moral zone awaiting intervention. Towards the end of the press conference, the Regional Director says:

"in the absence of any solution to the economic crisis, or in the absence of a peace deal, our humanitarian action needs to continue. Where possible, we need to scale up. Where possible, we need to further improve the quality of that assistance because it is paying off" (2018).

While the numbers reflect an extremely grim situation for the children of Yemen, the press conference ends with promises from UNICEF on continuing its intervention to alleviate the suffering. With donors as one of the target audiences of UNICEF, there needs to be a glimmer of hope to balance the dreadful circumstances dictated. There also needs to be tangible results to keep the incentive of donating funds in place. The photo chosen to accompany the transcription is also a cautious choice of striking this balance between the dire needs and the aid provided. Despite the severe malnourishment of the child in the photo, he smiles at the savior lending a helping hand. In his book, 'One-Dimensional Man', Herbert Marcuse speaks of the emergence of one-dimensional thought. While he is speaking of social systems, it remains an interesting idea to apply to the humanitarian discourse. Marcuse speaks of the "universe of discourse" which is constantly sponsored by "the makers of politics" as "populated by self-validating hypotheses which, incessantly and monopolistically repeated, become hypnotic definitions or dictations" (1964, p. 16). The framing of the crisis in Yemen continues to follow a "hero-victim narrative" (Noble, 2013, p. 1-2) whereby heroes should be the providers and the fixers while the victims should only be suffering agents requiring aid. Through both text and visuals, UNICEF was able to frame the visit to Yemen into a discourse which echoed the necessity of their intervention and revalidated their existence as an entity on the ground. The choice of photo not only reiterated the sequence of how the text was narrated at the press conference by the Regional Director, it also added to it as if providing evidence to what has been said. Gilbert Holleufer speaks of images in his article on "Images of humanitarian crises: Ethical implications" where he says "humanitarian work is probably the field most rife with the contrasts that make for powerful images" (1996). He speaks of the blunt reality and the moral cause which it incites. The "tragedy and the

charitable response to it; evil and the good deeds accomplished to combat it”¹⁹. Hereby, a humanitarian discourse is constructed and accepted as part of a constructed normative context of humanitarianism. This construction shapes the consumer of such a discourse to also view the people affected in Yemen as victims. Pierluigi Musarò speaks of such framing as showing “victims represented only in abstract terms, denying agency to those who suffer [...] in a way that boosts fundraising, and stories of suffering are presented without political or historical context” (2011, p. 23).

The obscuring of the Yemeni context in such a way does not only frame the crisis itself in an unrealistic manner devoid of the actualities of how it’s occurring. This places violence and suffering as two elements to be treated, and the people who are affected by them are stripped of their citizenship status in their state and regarded as subjects in need of assistance instead. There is an endeavor to create universal compassion through “one-dimensional thought” as natural and embedded in our moral system which creates a problematic effect on our understanding of reality. According to Ignatieff, “there is nothing instinctive about emotions stirred in us by the television pictures of atrocity or suffering. Our pity is structured by history and culture” (1999, p. 1). The mandate of saving lives, and alleviating suffering of all humans has created a sort of new humanitarian governance which implements its expertise in different areas of danger, on different people in crises. This form of governance reduces people and their histories to mere lives waiting to be saved (Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010, p. 12). Therefore, this gives rise to the construction of the humanitarian

¹⁹ Gilbert Holleufer, 1996, “Images of humanitarian crises: Ethical implications”, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/article/other/57jnct.htm>

discourse as normative which as will be shown in the coming chapters affects the identity of the state on which this discourse is presented.

CHAPTER IV

A GENEALOGY OF CARE AND HUMANITARIANISM THROUGH A CONSTRUCTIVIST FRAMEWORK

The first chapter of this paper focused on the first question I asked myself at the beginning of my career on how humanitarian discourse shapes the reality of a conflict or crisis it reports on. This chapter digs a little deeper to problematize the second question I interrogated throughout my career on how and possibly the reasons why humanitarianism emerges as a normative context.

Why do we care? While this is not a quest into the functions of a brain's parietal lobe, it is a deep dive into where our notions of care come from and how humanitarian organizations came to exist with a discourse of empathy and humanism. In times of conflict and when states are deemed to be 'weak', 'fragile', or 'failed', the question of governance and power arises. The ranking of states in such categories of weakness suffers from clear definitions and lacks theoretical roots. Haggmann and Hoehne argue that the failed state debate falls short in providing analytical tools to understand contemporary statehood (2008). Therefore, they chose to distance themselves from nation-states as 'foundational units of analysis' (2008, p. 44) and instead followed Engel and Mehler's study of emergence of 'new forms of governance beyond the state' (2005, p. 87). While different international actors such as the European Union, The World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund define 'state fragility' slightly differently, themes of commonality exist in their definitions. Fragile states, in this arena, are considered to have a loss of control over their territory or the monopoly of use of force, a lack of legitimate authority, an erosion of basic public services and in some

cases, the inability to take part as a member of the international community.²⁰ While this paper focuses on Yemen as its case study, the conceptualization of power will take on a Foucauldian narrative in the sense that the state will not be considered the origin of power. In Jonathan Gaventa's overview of theories of power, he speaks of Foucault's notion of power being everywhere,

'His work marks a radical departure from previous modes of conceiving power and cannot be easily integrated with previous ideas, as power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them.' (2003, p. 1)

As we break away from the conception of the state being the center or the main source of power, we move towards the notion of power existing when it's exercised, and its presence proven when it is in action. Here, power becomes fluid between different forces. The state is but one of those forces. International organizations which carry the mission of dealing with emergencies or intervening in 'fragile states' such as Yemen become entities functioning within yet beyond the borders of the state. In Mitchell Dean's discussion over Foucault's concept of 'governmentality', he explains how governing is not necessarily tantamount to a state but rather an exercise of 'conduct of conduct' (2009, p. 17). In other words, government

²⁰ International Labour Organization, 2016, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/terminology/wcms_504528.pdf See also UK Department for International Development, 2005, *Drivers of Fragility: What makes states fragile?*

is an ‘attempt to shape behavior according to a particular set of norms and for a variety of ends.’ (Dean, 2009, p. 18).

In a context such as Yemen where the government resides outside of the physical borders of the state²¹, more than eighty per cent of the country is dependent on aid from international organizations²². For people suffering in Yemen, humanitarian interventions have become a lifeline structured in the form of bureaucratic organizations providing aid and speaking on their behalf to shed light on their situation. Now that humanitarian organizations can be seen as bearers of power, it is important to discuss how our notions of care and humanitarianism come to be. Pastoralism, the main form of rule in the twentieth century, was concerned with what Dean calls ‘the salvation of the souls’ (2009). It was modeled by Foucault as the shepherd-flock relationship whereby the shepherd was expected to take care of every sheep in the flock. David Rieff’s ‘A Bed for The Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis’ quotes an International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) delegate who defines humanitarianism as “an effort to bring a measure of humanity, always insufficient, into situations that should not exist” (2002, p. 178). In a similar take on humanitarianism, Peter Redfield who studied the journey of an aid organization delivering medical treatment in emergencies, Médecins Sans Frontières, the assertion that “people shouldn’t die of stupid things” (2013, p. 65) becomes the mandate of the organization to alleviate the suffering of the victims of violence. Redfield’s interest in the redemptive action of saving a human life raises

²¹ BBC, 2015, Yemen Crisis: President Hadi flees as Houthi rebels advance <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32048604>

²² United Nations Security Council, 2018, 8323RD Meeting, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13442.doc.htm>

the question of morality. According to Talal Asad in his 'Reflections on Violence, Law, and Humanitarianism', the subject of "humanity" has been taken for granted as "a large, all embracing category whose members have a single essence" (2015, p. 395). Despite no historical formation to this idea of a collective humanity,

Asad (2015) continues to argue that:

"Yet it is in the name of humanity that the modern project of humanitarianism intervenes in the lives of other beings to protect, help, or improve them; it is in the name of humanity that the progressivist doctrines of freedom are expressed. In other words, it is that is said to suffer, humanity that calls for compassion, defense, and solidarity" (p. 395).

Here it is crucial to look closely at this argument where Asad wonders who and what gives humanitarianism its moral impetus. Who decides whose life is worthier to be saved? More relevant to the topic at hand, who decides whose story and which part of the story deserves more publicity? According to Fassin, humanitarianism is a means of governing which claims to consider all lives equal. This deployment of morality, however, "replaces politics of rights and justice with an ethics of suffering and compassion" (Kloos, 2012, p. 338).

The way the aid provider and the recipient are linked can be studied from the sociologist Marcel Mauss' theory of exchanging gifts. For those suffering, what is delivered as aid by humanitarian organizations cannot be repaid immediately if ever. Therefore, it leaves the recipient and the provider in an asymmetrical relationship. In Mauss' notable words, "la charité est encore blessante pour celui qui l'accepte, et tout l'effort de notre morale

tend à supprimer le patronage inconscient et injurieux du riche ‘aumônier’”²³ (1925, p. 90).

When the recipient has no way of reciprocating what they have received, they are inclined to express gratitude instead. This comes in the form of a thankful discourse on the end of the people receiving aid. There are also sentiments of gratitude expressed by humanitarian organizations to donors for the grants received. These interlinkages of the helper, the helpless, and the donor show the invisible structures created beyond moral duties, compassion and alleviation of suffering. In his ‘Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism’, Michael Barnett speaks of the difference between humanitarianism and simple acts of compassion by saying “what distinguishes humanitarianism from previous acts of compassion is that it is organized and part of governance, connects the immanent to the transcendent, and is directed at those in other lands” (2011, p. 21).

When a country begins to witness conflict, which affects the wellbeing of its citizens, humanitarian intervention by United Nations agencies, international organizations and non-governmental organizations has almost become expected to alleviate suffering. Humanitarian intervention and conflict have become intertwined in a way that they are now somewhat perceived as part of a normative context. Norms, as Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink would define them, are “standards of appropriate behavior” (1998, p. 891). This increased legitimacy of humanitarian intervention as a norm in times of conflict is explored by Steven Dixon through a constructivist framework which focuses on Finnemore and Sikkink’s “Norm Life Cycle”. According to this life cycle, the norm passes through

²³ Translates to: Charity is still hurtful for those who accept it, and all the effort of our morality tends to suppress the unconscious and insulting patronage of the rich ‘chaplain’.

three stages. First, the norm emerges to frame or deal with issues at hand. If a considerable number of states or actors accept this new norm, then a “tipping point” is reached. Finnemore and Sikkink, however, don’t disregard how the norm emerges. They explain that “norms do not appear out of thin air; they are actively built by agents having strong notions about appropriate or desirable behavior in their community” (1998, p. 896). They speak of international organizations as having a role to play in persuading weak states in adopting their norms. Once the tipping point is reached, the norm moves to a second stage whereby international pressure plays a role in states adopting this norm. In the third stage, the norm is internalized and there’s general conformity which with time dissolves its emergence as a question. The example of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is presented in the article in relation to the Geneva Conventions which did not mark the end of the organization’s role. In fact, ICRC became the custodian and agent helping states adhere to the International Humanitarian Law by teaching and training parties to the conflict of all law related matters. Similarly, an example of UNICEF can be given of how its role didn’t end following its World War II mandate of providing healthcare and food to children and mothers²⁴. UNICEF metamorphized into a seventy-three-year-old agency with an expanded mandate covering more than just healthcare in areas of crises. According to Dixon, a realist framework diminishes the motivation to material gain and instead, he problematizes the role of state behavior in shaping the international community which in turn shapes the behavior (2013, ch. 2). One crucial aspect to discuss in the “Norm Life Cycle” are the factors which lead to what Finnemore and Sikkink call the tipping points. These factors include the power

²⁴ UNICEF, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/about-unicef/frequently-asked-questions>

of the state and how much it's wavering at a given point in time, or whether other powerful states are upholding these norms. Also, the timing plays a key role whereby a state of trauma or depression for a country can lead it to look for and adopt new norms (1998, p. 906-909).

Taking a step back to discuss how this framework fits into the research question of whether the identity of the state is shaped through the discourse of humanitarian organizations, it becomes important to discuss the issues that Alexander Wendt proposes in his paper on 'Constructing International Politics'. Wendt claims that international politics are socially constructed as opposed to the realist theory of materialism. He believes that they shape identities beyond behaviors (1995). In a context like Yemen, the narrative by humanitarian organizations like UNICEF is highly focused on the erosion of public services, the people's suffering, and a looming famine²⁵. Whereas realists are more concerned with a material distribution and its effects on behavior, constructivism as abovementioned in this chapter looks at social relationships. According to Wendt, "social structures have three elements: shared knowledge, material resources, and practices" (1995, p. 73). Wendt considers these elements as a rough definition of "discourse". While the humanitarian discourse stems from a seemingly normative context, as if the alleviation of suffering has always existed and it has always been humanitarian actors' duty to respond in times of crises. Relative to the study of discourse and if it possibly affects the identity of a state, norms- their emergence and employment becomes a central factor to problematize. Therefore, constructivism and its exploration of how norms affect behaviors of actors proves to be

²⁵ UNICEF, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/yemen-crisis>

enriching for such a research. Unlike realists who dismiss norms as not having a causal influence, constructivists believe them to be “collective understandings that make behavioral claims on actors” (Checkel, 1998, p. 327-328). This exploration of identity requires a deeper study beyond solely looking at materialism as a constant motive for states or international organizations to behave the way they do.

This paper looks into the discourse of humanitarian organizations such as UNICEF and its ability to construct a narrative around the state with a newly formed identity. Therefore, this framework is of interest in its ability to problematize the social fabric of international affairs. In other words, it is an echoing of Max Weber’s perception of us being “cultural beings with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude toward the world and to lend it significance” (1949, p. 81). In this sense, constructivism delves into this ‘significance’ that is adopted by actors which is essentially socially constructed and how it contributes to shape identities. According to John Gerard Ruggie, “constructivism is about human consciousness and its role in international life” (1998, p. 856) and our consciousness comes from the reality that we experience and how we make sense of it. This reality, as argued above, is a social construction of what we consume to feed our consciousness. Isn’t discourse, maps, concepts, names, categories all part of how we explain our reality? This reality, according to Michael Barnett, is given meaning through such knowledge (2018, ch. 2). Here it becomes essential to discuss the categories under which Yemen has been placed. If these categories are what help us make sense of our reality, then that in itself has an effect on our perception of the state. According to Barnett, such classifications and symbols provide a source of identity to whoever they are placed upon and “help to generate distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (2018, ch. 2).

To mark one year of war in Yemen and shed light on the effects it has had on the country, UNICEF released a report accompanied by a press release titled: “Yemen’s children on the brink as country risks becoming a failed state²⁶”. The United Nations, its agencies, and international humanitarian organizations began embedding Yemen as a fragile state at the risk of becoming a failed one, in their narratives. The opening of the press release states: “a brutal conflict and a fast deteriorating humanitarian situation are devastating the lives of millions of children in Yemen and have brought the country to the point of collapse²⁷”. Again, there is a vacuum of political or historical context when it comes to the causes behind the possibility of the state reaching collapse. The specified reason for state failure is the humanitarian situation devoid of any further explanation which frames the situation in a manner that excludes important occurrences that make up the state of Yemen. This brings me to the third probing question I examined during the construction of such narratives at work. Why do humanitarian organizations use such categories to speak on states as if there is an end goal of a best state status to be achieved with time? What do these categories reflect and what effects might they have on a state’s future?

²⁶ UNICEF, 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/yemen/press-releases/yemens-children-brink-country-risks-becoming-failed-state>

²⁷ *ibid*

CHAPTER V

YEMEN: FROM A 'FRAGILE' TO A 'FAILED' STATE?

In UNICEF's press release to mark one year of war in Yemen in 2016, the Regional Director concludes with a quote saying: "Yemen was already a fragile state due to decades of underdevelopment and intermittent conflicts. Sadly, children always bear the brunt. Without an end to the war, the country now risks becoming a failed state, with far-reaching and long-term consequences for children and their families²⁸." This chapter seeks to briefly discuss the political and historical contexts of such categorizations to better understand the motives and effects of such a humanitarian narrative on Yemen. Neil Robinson studies the emergence of what he calls a 'new problem' in the book "State-Building: Theory and Practice". Robinson believes that state-building has become "universalized and simplified" after the end of the Cold War, globalization and the existing array of weak states following decolonization (2007, p. 2). This universalized idea of state-building places states on a graph of time and development with the weaker states associated with backwardness and stronger states perceived as modern. This also places states which are believed to be more 'developed' as a universal end goal to those who are undergoing crises or failure. Aidan Hehir believes that "state-building is undertaken with a view to bringing certain purportedly failed states up to the standards ostensibly embodied and manifest in what logically must be assumed to be considered 'successful' states" (2007, p. 187). This perception constructs 'weak states' as a new problem in need of international and humanitarian intervention especially if it is

²⁸ *ibid*

witnessing an internal conflict. Despite the existence of ‘weak’ states since decolonization, they now emerge as zones of morality and security in need of assistance. According to Joel S. Migdal in his book “Strong Societies and Weak States”, he defines weak states as ones which don’t have “capacities to penetrate society, regulate social relationships, extract resources, and appropriate or use resources in determined ways” (1988, p. 4). In UNICEF’s humanitarian narrative on Yemen, it points fingers at underdevelopment and conflict as causes for the state’s weakness. While this builds on the idea that stability and development are the new universal norms, weak states struggle to achieve them and thus accepts its identity as weak or failing. According to Robert I. Rotberg in the book “When States Fail: Causes and Consequences”, he believes that states fail

“when they are consumed by internal violence and cease delivering positive political goods to their inhabitants. Their governments lose credibility, and the continuing nature of the particular nation state itself becomes questionable and illegitimate in the hearts and minds of its citizens” (2010, p. 1).

There are various definitions to state failure by different theorists. Similar to Rotberg, some theorists view the state in its capabilities of providing a service to its inhabitants and its lack thereof as weakness. This also lumps states in a graph of development related to the quality or existence of their services. Therefore, disregarding the existing structure of the state or how it came to be historically. In the context of Yemen, this does not provide sufficient explanation as to how this state can be understood beyond such a category. Other theorists such as Robert Jackson focus on ‘sovereignty’ as the main unit of analysis. Following decolonialization, states became recognized as having sovereignty and power over their “conduct of conduct”. Jackson describes state failure as the inability “to control its territory and uphold its monopoly of violence” (Eriksen, 2011, p. 232). While there is no clear

definition of what exactly creates a weak or failed state, the category becomes a slogan plastered onto a country in crisis with complex and deep-seated historical incidents. This reduces the state and its identity which is formed over history into a tick in a box that justifies humanitarian intervention through service provision and international intervention through coalitions taking part in restoring state sovereignty as representatives of the state reside outside its borders for protection. Charles Tilly argues that state failure is not a new phenomenon to be associated with third world countries or the global south, as “most of the European efforts to build states failed. The enormous majority of the political units which were around to bid for autonomy and strength in the 1500 disappeared in the next few centuries smashed or absorbed by other states-in-the-making” (1975, p. 38). Therefore, this link of state failure with backwardness and underdevelopment to justify intervention falls short of providing a sufficient understanding of the Yemeni context. Robinson also concurs this argument that weakness was never a problem to states in the past because “they were not necessarily confronted by stronger states [...] so that their security and sovereignty were not threatened because weakness equaled backwardness” (2007, p. 5). Such categorizations, therefore, add to the creation of a vacuum preventing an enriched and well-rounded understanding of the Yemen conflict and deems it unpredictable and void of linkages or interpretations. Maria-Louise Clausen builds on Hagmann and Hoehne “Failures of the State Failure Debate” to suggest that such identification is “one of the major threats to global security that places international interveners in the role of external saviors with a moral duty to save non-western victims and bring them security” (2019, p. 488). In other words, it also adds to the self-validation of organizations such as UNICEF being present to take over the provision of services in the absence of a government’s ability to do so. While this normalizes the interference of outsiders in Yemen, it also lessens the need for UNICEF to be explanatory about accepts donor funds from states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Yemen as a ‘weak state’ becomes constructed in a way that is different than if Yemen just was a state witnessing a conflict. According to Clausen who studied the use of the words ‘failed state’ by Saudi Arabia to legitimize its intervention in Yemen, “in 2013, Yemen is not mentioned in any discussions that refer to ‘failed states’ in the UNSC [United Nations Security Council], whereas Yemen features in almost two-thirds of discussions that mention ‘failed state’ in 2016 at the UNSC” (2019, p. 493). This narrative creates a fertile ground for aid and external military intervention based on two frames used by Saudi Arabia to intervene militarily on the one hand and alleviate suffering through organizations like UNICEF on the other hand. In a statement issued by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait in March 2015 at the beginning of the Yemeni conflict, the countries expressed concern and ‘great pain’ to the ‘dangerous developments’ in Yemen²⁹. In this statement, the GCC continues to construct Yemen’s instability as a threat to the security of the whole region and to ‘international peace’. The statement also includes a letter received from Yemeni President Hadi outlining the serious developments that are taking place in Yemen and asking for the interventions of his ‘brothers’ in the GCC to save Yemen from its downfall. The letter also mentions the United Nations envoy’s report which confirmed at the time that the Houthis were moving towards the south. He concludes by reiterating in a legitimatizing manner,

“I ask you based on the principle of self-defense in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, and on the basis of the Charter of the Arab League and the treaty of joint Arab defense, to provide instant support by all necessary means, including

²⁹ GCC issues statement on Yemen, 26 March 2015, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/statements/gcc-issues-statement-yemen>

military intervention to protect Yemen and its people from continuous Houthi aggression [...]” (2015).

The two frames presented in this narrative are firstly, the GCC efforts to restore the sovereignty of Yemen and return the monopoly of violence it exercises over its land to its rightful hands through their support. Secondly, the failure of the Yemeni state resulting in a regional threat to security and stability. With a call upon the implementation of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter which states,

“Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Members of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defense shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security” (U.N. Charter art. 51)

The Yemen conflict moved from an internal problem to a regional problem in need of intervention in the name of self-defense. More notably, the Yemeni state also perceives itself now as ‘weak’ or ‘failed’ and in need of humanitarian intervention. UNICEF takes from this legitimacy of its parent, the United Nations, and the call made for intervention in order to mobilize its aid toolbox on the context of Yemen. The acceptance of the support of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates is justified through this request by Yemen to alleviate suffering and give legitimacy to the intervention. This still raises the question of UNICEF’s independence in the act of receiving funds from the same countries that are militarily intervening in the continuation of the conflict. UNICEF justifies this principle of

independence by maintaining that its humanitarian action is never politicized, and that they strive to reach every child in Yemen with all the services they can provide. Drawn from images of a 'weak state' on the brink of failure, a humanitarian discourse is further constructed void of political links from surrounding donors and legitimate humanitarian governance continues in the name of morality.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: PROBLEMATIZING PRINCIPLES, EVERYDAY DISCOURSE, AND MUNDANE TASKS

“The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them” (Foucault, 1971). We have interrogated three areas of that position themselves as a matter of fact in our world today: discourse, humanitarianism and state identities. Each of the areas problematized presented layers of notions that have been constructed socially and historically. While we may see morality as collective and universal, it was important to delve deeper into its roots and how it has become professionalized in such a way that it is used as a tool by humanitarianism. During my four years with UNICEF, the persistent dilemma of aid organizations trying to provide aid without taking away the agency of people became clear. There is a gap between telling the story empathetically to raise the needed funds for support and reporting fully without omitting political frames. The irony sometimes is found in the way the helpers fall helpless in the face of such situations where instead of being able to empower the people in need as active agents, they are only able to provide what they can, so the human body can survive yet another day of suffering. Bond sees it “as a consequence, both humanitarian workers and refugees are “trapped” in asymmetrical relationships in a structure in which accountability is skewed in the direction of the donors who pay for the assistance, rather than the refugees” (2002, p. 3). The mandate of saving lives has created a humanitarian governance which implements its

same expertise in different areas of danger, on different people in crisis. This form of governance reduces people and their histories to mere lives waiting to be saved.

We spoke of the genealogy of care as an institution or regime of control in our world today, not as an ahistorical break but rather as a concept with a history. People are employed by humanitarian organizations in large numbers for emergency countries in specific, to carry their toolbox of expertise and implement it in different areas of crises. Aid workers are expected to witness the unfolding of events on the ground yet maintain the face of their organization and develop a dictionary of neutrality in their press releases, statements, and reports. This shows the extents to which we can care whether it's the state caring only within its *r'aison d'état* or whether it's the actual aid organization within the political correctness of their donor funds. Miriam Ticktin brings up interesting discussions on the politics of care in her book, "Causalities of Care", where she asserts that "regimes of care – which include humanitarianism [...] are a set of regulated discourses and practices grounded on this moral imperative to relieve suffering. They come together through a diverse set of actors [...]. These regimes of care ultimately work to displace possibilities for larger forms of collective change, particularly for those most disenfranchised," (2011, p. 3). Ticktin argues that the meaning of suffering and violence is mediated through social, political, and cultural contexts. Violence, hereby, is beyond a state issue. It is reproduced in different ways through institutions of care as well. The humanitarian mission of saving lives, and alleviating suffering cannot be a mission independent of political contexts. UNICEF in Yemen continues to function in a highly politicized environment and while it asserts its humanitarian principles of 'neutrality', 'humanity', 'independence', and 'impartiality', it also remains the child of a political institution. The United Nations produces discourses such as the one discussed in this paper on state fragility and failure which is reproduced by organizations like UNICEF for humanitarian means. Narratives produced every day and mundane tasks undertaken at work

such as the ones in a communication office of a United Nations Organization shape the way states are perceived and how they perceive themselves. Words and visuals are embedded in our consciousness and are engrained in our social contexts in ways that shapes our realities. Beginning to problematize discourses in such a way that moves them away from the hero-victim narrative and putting an end to the uses of categories that carry no meaning is what humanitarian organizations should begin to embed in their communications and advocacy strategies. Otherwise, we risk losing social and political contexts of crises which keeps us in a loop of reproducing the same wrongdoings validated by empty categorizations.

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