

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Shades of humanity: state sovereignty and humanitarian principles in the Syrian civil war

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## Abstract

In the Syrian civil war, the Syrian government has imposed numerous restrictions and employed violence to assert its sovereignty in humanitarian action, creating significant challenges for humanitarian aid organizations. These organizations, in turn, have had to navigate a complex landscape, contending with political realities that often subordinate humanitarian principles to the primacy of state sovereignty. This research examines this interaction between the state and aid organizations in the provision of humanitarian assistance, focusing on how aid organizations interpret and experience state sovereignty in their work. Based on a survey conducted with aid professionals, I first identify the ways state sovereignty is articulated in humanitarian action and then explore aid workers' perceptions of state sovereignty in relation to humanitarian norms and principles. I demonstrate that the global governance aimed at preserving human lives and mitigating suffering, far from being singular and cohesive, is marked by diversity and shaped by the influence of state sovereignty. While the overarching objective remains consistent—to alleviate human suffering—the very bedrock of international humanitarian norms and principles amidst the conflict constantly undergo negotiation and divergence across humanitarian aid organizations.

**Keywords** Sovereignty, Humanity, International organizations, Aid, Syria

## Introduction

International aid organizations have adopted various approaches and strategies to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to the people in need in the Syrian civil war. Keeping a low profile with no branding, utilizing commercial carriers or directly engaging with armed groups became a modality for many aid organizations to navigate the challenges and obstacles imposed by the Syrian government (Duclos et al. 2019). In an attempt to reach people in need, for instance, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) negotiated directly with armed groups in the northeast Syria and delivered direct, cross-border aid to the population, despite lacking authorization to operate inside the country. However, engaging

directly with non-state armed groups had its repercussions. After having to choose between operating from areas of the country controlled by the Syrian government and those under rebel control, Mercy Corps was forced to close its operations in Damascus (Chulov and Beals 2014). To effectively counter the Assad regime's use of food as a weapon, aid organizations also conducted airlift operations to provide temporary relief for a number of besieged and hard-to-reach communities. As the Assad regime imposed restrictions on aid organizations and diverted aid intended for civilians in areas not under its control, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted a resolution in 2014 allowing the United Nations (UN) to deliver aid across three borders. Nonetheless, despite multiple and diverse approaches to deliver life-saving assistance to the people in need, aid organizations, notably the United Nations, were criticized for letting the Assad government to control and manipulate

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humanitarian assistance in the Syrian civil war. More than 70 aid groups suspended their cooperation with the UN in Syria due to concerns that the Syrian government had gained “significant and substantial” influence over the relief effort in 2016 (Beals and Hopkins 2016). For instance, the World Health Organization’s (WHO) commitment to respecting Syrian government sovereignty limited its ability to prevent, identify, and contain the outbreak (Kennedy and Michailidou 2017). The Assad regime refused permission for WHO operations in rebel-controlled areas, further complicating containment efforts. Similarly, the vast scale of the response strained the World Food Programme (WFP)’s capacity to uphold neutrality and operational independence at the local level, as it aimed to preserve a favorable relationship with the Syrian government (WFP 2018). More recently, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria found that international community and the United Nations failed to deliver urgent and lifesaving aid to northwest Syria in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake in 2023 (United Nations, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this research examines aid workers’ perceptions of and engagement with state sovereignty in humanitarian action, focusing on its relationship to humanitarian norms, principles, and outcomes. As a working definition, state sovereignty provisionally refers to the ultimate authority to make decisions within a territory (Thomson 1995), as it plays a central role in shaping the relationship between aid agencies and governments. Its assertion often creates barriers to humanitarian access, challenging core principles such as neutrality and impartiality (Niyungeko 1991; Weiss 1999). In such contexts, aid organizations face the complex task of balancing respect for state sovereignty with their commitment to humanitarian principles. When confronted with assertive sovereignty—manifested through actions such as bureaucratic impediments or violence—aid workers adapt their priorities and strategies to maintain access while seeking to uphold ethical standards.

In light of these operational challenges, ethical conflicts, and moral compromises in humanitarian action, this research is guided by the following question: How do aid actors perceive and experience state sovereignty in relation to core humanitarian principles in the Syrian civil war? By examining sovereignty as a dynamic influence, this research reveals its role in shaping the ethical and operational landscape of humanitarian action in the civil war. It elucidates how distinct categories of aid organizations experience and make sense of the state sovereignty claims in humanitarian action. While cognizant of potential oversimplifications, the research specifically focuses on the operations of the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC),

international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), and local nongovernmental organizations (LNGOs) at aggregate levels in the Syrian civil war.

In recent decades, amidst mounting criticism directed at humanitarian organizations for their entanglement in politics, numerous studies have probed the principles and identities of aid organizations. Weiss (1999) divides humanitarian actors into two main factions: classicists and political humanitarians. The classicists, exemplified by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), advocate for a strict separation of humanitarian action from politics, while political humanitarians argue that humanitarian efforts are inherently political and should remain so. This division extends to the solidarists, a faction that rejects neutrality and impartiality, often taking sides in conflict. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), founded by former ICRC personnel, serves as a prominent example of solidarists, known for its vocal public advocacy and commitment to assertive impartiality during crises such as the Biafran civil war (Weiss 1999).

As Weiss (1999) highlights, these differing perspectives lead to what is often described as a “dilemma” in humanitarian practice—where the pursuit of one principle, such as neutrality, can result in the violation of another, like impartiality. Weiner (1998) builds on this idea by examining the conflicting norms that international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) face, suggesting that the selection of one norm often entails the sacrifice of another. Likewise, Barnett (2009, 2001) argues that humanitarian organizations, while promoting universal humanitarian principles, often have to adapt to the political and sovereign interests of states. Del Valle and Healy (2013) highlight the complex, often symbiotic relationship between humanitarian agencies and authoritarian states, where agencies rely on states for access and security, while states manipulate aid to reinforce their legitimacy and control, creating significant ethical and operational challenges. Barnett (2013) further challenges the traditional frameworks of international humanitarian governance, recognizing the role of NGOs in exerting pressure on states to adhere to humanitarian standards, but also acknowledging the complex and often contested nature of the norms driving these actions. O’Hagan and Hirono (2014) examine the diversification of humanitarian norms and practices in East Asia, highlighting the importance of historical, cultural, and political contexts in shaping regional approaches to humanitarian action.

Humanitarian governance is not a singular or uniform institution, as Agier (2010) observes. Rather, it operates across multiple forms, often intertwined with political interests. This aligns with Barnett’s (2009) notion of

a multilayered architecture of humanitarian governance, where humanitarianism manifests in diverse ways, sometimes serving political ends, as Agier (2010) argues, “the left hand of empire.” The post-Cold War era saw a significant shift in this dynamic, as the principle of national sovereignty became increasingly subordinated to the protection of individual human rights (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). This shift reflects a broader trend in humanitarian action, wherein the priorities of international organizations and donors can challenge the sovereignty of states, especially in contexts where aid is politically contested.

The conclusion of the Cold War marked a pivotal moment in the relationship between states and international aid organizations. This transformation is well-documented in the literature, where scholars like Peters (2009), Duffield (2012), and Kahn and Cunningham (2013) note the impact of changing humanitarian priorities on traditional concepts of sovereignty. Harvey (2013) underscores the growing assertiveness of states in asserting their sovereignty, urging humanitarian organizations to respect the primacy of state responsibility. In this evolving landscape, Bradley (2022) argues that political humanitarianism manifests in at least five distinct forms, reflecting how organizations navigate the ethical, operational, and strategic challenges posed by state authority, donor agendas, and conflict dynamics.

A key issue that emerges in the literature is the practical difficulty of applying humanitarian (2012) principles across diverse and complex contexts. Weiss and Minear (1991) analyze the political and ethical challenges faced by humanitarian actors during Sudan’s civil war, highlighting the difficulty of maintaining neutrality and ethical integrity in such a highly politicized environment. Several scholars also have explored these challenges, focusing on how the application of these principles often leads to tensions between respecting state sovereignty and addressing human suffering in conflict zones (Terry 2011; Harvey 2013; Fast 2015; Labbé and Daudin 2015). Rubenstein (2015) argues that INGOs operate in a complex intersection of humanitarian ideals and the realities of state politics. Sharpe (2023) shows that the core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence are not fixed in their legal or normative content, leading to varying interpretations in different operational environments.

Dunn (2012) frames humanitarian aid as a form of power that can simultaneously generate chaos and vulnerability while striving to establish order. This dual nature of humanitarian assistance—both as a tool for alleviating suffering and as a source of power dynamics—further complicates the application of humanitarian principles in practice. As such, these dilemmas and the need for nuanced approaches are a consistent theme in

the literature, illustrating the complexity of humanitarian action in a world where state sovereignty and humanitarian norms often collide.

While previous scholarship has examined the principles guiding humanitarian action and the influence of state sovereignty on its practice, this research provides further evidence on sovereign practices, varied perceptions of sovereignty held by aid organizations, and their impact on humanitarian behavior and outcomes in the context of the Syrian civil war. Through a comparative analysis of different types of aid organizations, it assesses the impact of state sovereignty on humanitarian norms and principles, with a particular focus on how aid workers conceptualize and enact the principle of humanity in relation to state authority. By doing so, this research first demonstrates that international humanitarian assistance provides valuable insights into the meanings and articulations of state sovereignty. Then, it explores the influence of sovereign acts on norms and principles. By presenting granular findings based on different types of aid organizations, it contributes nuanced perspectives to the ongoing debate on the relationship between sovereignty, humanitarianism, and the politics of aid.

This research argues that the interpretation and application of humanitarian principles are in a continual state of negotiation and divergence among aid organizations, particularly when faced with assertive expressions of sovereignty. These principles, far from being universally fixed, are reshaped and contested in response to the complex dynamics of state authority. Ultimately, the dynamics between assertive state sovereignty and humanitarian principles significantly influences the outcomes of humanitarian action in the Syrian civil war, resulting in diverse and actor-specific responses. Drawing from a survey administered to aid professionals, I demonstrate that the global governance aimed at preserving human lives and mitigating suffering, far from being singular and cohesive, is marked by diversity and tailored to different actors. Aid professional working for different types of organizations, namely UN, ICRC, and international and national nongovernmental organizations, have divergent perceptions, thoughts, and experiences on humanitarian norms, principles, state sovereignty, and its articulations. This highlights the divergent conceptualizations of sovereignty among various aid organizations, thereby influencing the strategic responses they adopt in the realm of humanitarian action.

This research, while focusing on state sovereignty and humanitarian principles, also acknowledges other factors, such as donor preferences and organizational principles, which shape divergent humanitarian approaches. However, these aspects fall outside the scope of this study. Additionally, it does not examine the consequences

of strictly adhering to state sovereignty in humanitarian efforts, nor does it explore the way non-state armed groups obstructed, manipulated, or diverted aid during the civil war.

This article is structured as follows: I begin with a brief background outlining the contextual dimensions of humanity and sovereignty within the Syrian civil war, setting the stage for the subsequent discussions. Following this, I establish the theoretical and methodological framework, clarifying the conceptual lenses and research methodologies guiding our investigation. Subsequently, I present the empirical findings derived from the survey analysis, unveiling the intricate dynamics of humanity and sovereignty within the Syrian civil war. Finally, I consolidate the findings to elucidate connections and offer insights for policy implications.

### **Humanity and sovereignty in the Syrian civil war**

The escalation of violence by the Syrian government, including the extensive use of airstrikes and heavy artillery to suppress protests, triggered a humanitarian crisis in the early days of the conflict. By the summer of 2011, the regime had implemented brutal military tactics, such as sieging towns and indiscriminately bombarding civilian areas, which displaced and killed many Syrians (Human Rights Watch 2011). The scale and scope of the violence, combined with increasing fragmentation of the conflict and the emergence of multiple non-state armed groups, prompted the ICRC to classify the situation as a non-international armed conflict in June 2012, thereby triggering the application of international humanitarian law (ICRC 2012). In response, the United Nations and its partners expanded their humanitarian efforts to address the growing crisis and emphasize the need for unhindered humanitarian access.

However, as the humanitarian situation worsened, the Syrian government imposed various bureaucratic and administrative obstacles in the provision of humanitarian assistance. As Ben Parker, Head of OCHA in Damascus, noted in 2012, aid distribution in government-controlled areas was subject to extensive negotiations, with the Syrian government controlling “what, where, and to whom” aid was distributed (Parker 2013). MSF also criticized the aid system’s inability to address the worsening conditions, emphasizing that aid efforts were hindered by bureaucratic red tape (MSF 2012). The government also systematically denied visas to international workers, controlled staff recruitment, and placed restrictions on humanitarian activities, particularly targeting medical supplies and assistance to opposition-held areas (Seven 2024).

In February 2014, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2139, urging the Syrian government to grant access for humanitarian aid and emphasizing

the importance of both crossline and cross-border aid delivery. Despite this resolution, the Syrian government continued to emphasize its sovereignty, opposing any cross-border aid deliveries without government consent. On July 14, 2014, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2165, which authorized cross-border aid delivery without Syrian approval, a measure met with strong opposition from Damascus, which argued that such actions undermined Syria’s sovereignty (Aljaafari 2014).

As the conflict deepened, the Syrian government’s rhetoric emphasized the protection of national sovereignty, often using humanitarian access as a tool for political leverage. The government manipulated aid delivery to punish opposition-held areas and diverted funds for its own objectives while limiting the autonomy of aid organizations operating within the country (Human Rights Watch, 2019). This strategy led to a highly complex humanitarian landscape, where organizations had to navigate state-imposed conditions while striving to deliver aid in an impartial, neutral, and independent manner. Aid organizations faced challenging dilemmas, often being forced to choose between accepting government-imposed terms to sustain access to affected populations or facing significant repercussions for noncompliance. For instance, Mercy Corps was forced to shut down its Damascus operations due to its activities in opposition-controlled areas (Chulov and Beals 2014).

Humanitarian organizations faced immense challenges in navigating government-imposed barriers to deliver aid in Syria. To bypass these restrictions, they adopted discreet methods, such as reducing the size of shipments, minimizing the visibility of aid convoys, and utilizing commercial carriers for delivery. In besieged and inaccessible areas, aerial delivery became a vital lifeline for reaching civilians in desperate need.

Despite these adaptive strategies, the UN faced significant criticism for allegedly enabling the Assad regime’s control over humanitarian aid. Investigations revealed instances where the UN was accused of aligning too closely with the Syrian government, compromising humanitarian principles in the process (Al Jazeera 2016; Hopkins and Beals 2016). A World Health Organization (WHO) report on the 2013 polio outbreak highlighted the influence of the Syrian government in controlling the distribution of vaccinations, specifically excluding opposition-held areas like Deir Ezzor from the campaign (Al Jazeera 2013). By 2016, 73 aid organizations suspended cooperation with the UN, citing the regime’s manipulation of relief efforts for political gains.

### **Sovereignty as a social construction**

The focus of this research is on the intersection of state sovereignty and humanitarian principles. Therefore, as

I investigate the dynamics of interaction between state and aid organizations, I situate sovereignty in its social environment in humanitarian action. Here, the social environment refers to the interactions and engagement between the Syrian state and international actors at multiple levels. This includes the involvement of local leaders, such as the mukhtar in a Syrian village, in dialogues with representatives from international humanitarian organizations.

Though sovereignty is one of the most ambiguous and ubiquitous concepts in political theory, for the purposes of this research, as a departure point, state sovereignty refers to the ultimate authority to make decisions within a territory. Supreme authority is at the core of sovereignty (Thomson 1995). Building on this provisional definition, I empirically demonstrate that sovereignty is neither fixed nor ontologically stable. In doing so, I adopt Weber's (1994, 1998) conceptualization of sovereignty as a social construct, alongside Biersteker and Weber's (1996) collaborative work, to demonstrate that sovereignty is not an inherent attribute but rather the outcome of dynamic social relations. States claim to sovereignty is constructed in a social environment in which they interact with the international society, and this mutual interaction is constructive for states themselves. It is constructed through interaction, contestation, and negotiation in its social environment. The production of sovereignty as a normative conception connects authority, territory, population, and recognition "in a unique way and in a particular place (the state)" (Biersteker and Weber 1996).

Cynthia Weber's understanding of sovereignty is influenced by her poststructuralist approach, which challenges traditional notions of sovereignty as a fixed and absolute authority held by the state. Weber (1994) argues that sovereignty is not a static concept but is continually constructed and negotiated through discourse and power relations. According to Weber, sovereignty is not simply a property of states but is produced and maintained through discursive practices that shape how authority, legitimacy, and governance are understood. She suggests that sovereignty is performative, meaning that it is enacted and reinforced through language, symbols, and actions. In this view, sovereignty is not inherent but is contingent upon the recognition and acceptance of authority by both domestic and international actors. This perspective helps us understand the power struggle between the Syrian government and aid organizations in the provision of humanitarian assistance, where the Syrian government imposes its will, blatantly violating international humanitarian law.

Through this theoretical lens, I explore the interactions between aid organizations and the Syrian state in the civil war. In simpler terms, there is a dynamic relationship

between the Syrian government and the international community in humanitarian action. The Syrian government seeks to assert its supreme decision-making authority, while aid organizations strive to uphold international humanitarian law. In this social interaction, I interpret the bureaucratic, administrative, and operational barriers imposed by the Syrian government, alongside state violence, as expressions of sovereignty, in line with Biersteker and Weber's argument. I pay special attention to state violence, given that sovereignty is a form of authority grounded in violence (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). These acts of sovereignty were influenced by international efforts to address human suffering, which, operating at both global and local levels, inadvertently challenged state authority under the guise of humanitarianism. This in turn provoked a calculated response from the Syrian regime.

### Methodology

This research constitutes the quantitative component of a mixed-method study. Building on the data collected in the phase with semi-structured interviews, an online survey was developed. Thus, the qualitative method informed the quantitative data collection survey in order to obtain representative and statistically comparable data (Creswell and Clark, 2017). The survey consisted of 33 questions with a 5-point Likert scale and lasted 45–60 min to complete. It included questions to explore experiences, thoughts, attitudes, or perceptions related to aid professionals' involvement in provision of humanitarian assistance in Syria's civil war. Respondents were also provided with the option of no opinion or space to expand their opinion if they need. To collect data, the online survey was created through Microsoft Forms. The online survey link was shared through social media, including LinkedIn, personal contacts, and direct emails to invite respondents. Respondents were provided online consent before taking the survey. The data collection phase spanned from October 15th to November 30th, 2021, during which 85 aid professionals participated in the survey. The respondent distribution was as follows: 28 from the United Nations, 24 from international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), 13 from local nongovernmental organizations (LNGOs), and 6 from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Notably, 13 respondents who were not currently employed or affiliated with any aid organization were excluded from the subsequent analysis. The agreement levels of the respondents were rated on a scale 1 = "not at all," 2 = "very little," 3 = "somewhat," 4 = "quite a bit," and 5 = "a great deal."

The quantitative data were analyzed using the R statistical software program. Descriptive statistics, including

frequencies and percentages for categorical variables, and mean ± standard deviation for continuous variables were computed. The normality of the data distribution was assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk normality test. Since the data did not follow a normal distribution, non-parametric tests such as the Mann–Whitney *U*-test and Fisher’s exact test (for group frequencies less than 5) or chi-square tests (for group frequencies greater than 5), as well as the Kruskal–Wallis test (for three or more categorical variables), were employed for comparisons of variables of interest.

Statistical significance was evaluated at the 95% confidence interval with a significance level set at  $p < 0.05$ . Pairwise comparisons were adjusted using the Bonferroni method. In instances where analysis of variance tests yielded significance, post hoc tests were conducted to discern differences between groups.

**Findings**

Within the dynamic interaction between the state and humanitarian actors in the Syrian civil war, the exercise of state sovereignty is evidenced through multifaceted actions. As detailed in Table 1, these sovereign acts manifest as state violence, barriers, constraints, and diverse challenges strategically aimed at reasserting governmental decision-making prerogatives within the realm of humanitarian action. Foremost among the challenges faced by aid organizations are state violence and security, with bureaucratic, administrative, and operational obstacles imposed by the Syrian government following closely behind.

The sovereign actions through which the Syrian government seeks to assert and consolidate its decision-making authority unfold within the complex and contested landscape of international humanitarian action in the

country. These actions are not only a reflection of the state’s quest to reclaim control over its territory but also a strategic response to the broader dynamics of international humanitarian principles, which often challenge or intersect with state sovereignty. In this context, the interpretation and application of humanitarian principles by aid organizations are profoundly shaped by the priorities of the Syrian government and the political realities on the ground, where state violence serves as a restricting factor in upholding these principles.

The next section of this analysis shifts the focus toward exploring how different aid organizations engage with the practices of state sovereignty in relation to humanitarian norms and principles. Specifically, this section investigates how the United Nations (UN), international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), local nongovernmental organizations (LNGOs), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) engage with the sovereign acts of the Syrian regime in the Syrian civil war, contextualizing it within humanitarian action.

Table 2 presents an analysis of the perspectives of aid professionals, employed across various types of aid organizations, regarding factors influencing program and project design and implementation across Syria. These professionals, representing organizations ICRC, INGOs, LNGOs, and UN agencies, provided their agreement levels on a scale of 1 to 5 for different aspects of humanitarian action in the country. The Kruskal–Wallis test was applied due to the presence of categorical variables. The *p*-value helps assess the relationship between the explanatory variables and the outcome variable, which is the impact on program/project design. If the test yields statistical significance, a post hoc analysis is conducted to examine the differences between the types of organizations.

**Table 1** Main obstacles experienced in the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection in the Syrian civil war

	<i>n</i>	%
Violence and security concerns	46	54.1
Limited access to, movement, and visits both in the Syrian government and opposition-controlled areas	42	49.4
Risk of arrest and detention	34	40
Denial by the government of Syria that restricts operational environment	30	35.2
Administrative processes limiting ability to operate independently imposed by the Syrian government	28	32.9
Rejections of project/program proposals by the Syrian government on arbitrary grounds	26	30.5
Mandatory partnering with the government’s official partner, i.e., the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and Syria Trust for Development	25	29.4
External interference in staff (aid workers) recruitment processes	23	27
Unverified data provided by the Syrian government on needs assessments	23	27
Selective issuance of visas to international humanitarian staff	21	24.7
Denials at checkpoints	17	20
Unfair advantage in the tender process through the government intervention	15	17.6

**Table 2** The analysis of the relationship between organization types and agreement level (1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal) for the factors impacting on program/project design and its implementation across Syria

Organization				H*	p
ICRC (X ± SD)	INGO (X ± SD)	LNGO (X ± SD)	UN (X ± SD)		
Factors impacting on program/project design and its implementation across the country					
Basic needs of the affected population				16.447	.000a
3.83 ± 1.3	4.26 ± 0.9	3.38 ± 0.7	4.56 ± 0.6		
Government of Syria's strategic priorities				4.489	0.213
3.2 ± 1.3	3.16 ± 1.5	2.67 ± 1.12	3.71 ± 1.2		
Interventions from non-state armed groups				3.928	0.269
3.6 ± 0.9	3 ± 1.3	2.67 ± 0.1	3.25 ± 1		
Safety and security concerns				5.342	0.148
4.33 ± 0.8	3.83 ± 1.3	3.82 ± 1.17	4.48 ± 0.9		
Donor engagement and preferences				0.672	0.879
4.2 ± 1.3	4.61 ± 0.6	4.46 ± 0.88	4.35 ± 0.9		

\* Kruskal–Wallis test

<sup>a</sup> Statistical difference between UN and LNGO and between LNGO and INGO

The analysis reveals a significant variation in the mean agreement levels among aid professionals from different organizations concerning the impact of the basic needs of the affected population on humanitarian project design ( $p < 0.000$ ). Post hoc test highlights significant differences between the UN and LNGOs, as well as between LNGOs and INGOs, indicating varied perceptions and approaches. Particularly, those who work in an international NGO had more strongly agreed on the effect of the basic needs of the affected population on program and project design and its implementation across the country comparing to those working at local NGO ( $p < 0.001$ ), and those who work at the UN had more strongly agreed on the basic needs of the affected population effect on program and project design and its implementation across the country comparing to those working at LNGO ( $p < 0.001$ ).

While significant disparities exist in the perceptions related to the impact of the basic needs of the affected population among aid professionals from different organizations, there is a relative consensus on other factors such as the government priorities, interventions from non-state armed groups, safety concerns, and donor engagement. The findings also suggest that donor engagement and preferences have significant impact on project design for all types of aid organization.

Table 3 presents an analysis of the perspectives of aid professionals from various organization types regarding the rationale behind the necessity for coordination with the Syrian government. The agreement levels, rated on a scale of 1 to 5, shed light on the differing viewpoints among these professionals on key aspects related to humanitarian action in Syria.

The findings reveal a marked discrepancy among organization types concerning the necessity of coordinating with the Syrian government to ensure business continuity within the nation. Statistical analysis reveals a significant difference in mean agreement levels ( $p < 0.001$ ). Notably, post hoc tests elucidate significant disparities between the UN and both INGOs and LNGOs, with the UN exhibiting a markedly higher agreement level. On perspectives on the necessity of coordination to respect state sovereignty, a notable difference in mean agreement levels among organization types is evident ( $p = 0.001$ ). The post hoc test highlights significant disparities, particularly between the UN and international NGOs. Finally, those working for local NGOs had statistically lower level of agreement on that ensuring access in different parts of the country is the rationale behind the coordination necessity with the Syrian government than those working for the UN and ICRC.

Table 4 presents an analysis of the viewpoints held by professionals from various aid organizations regarding the interaction between Syrian state sovereignty and humanitarian norms and principles. The responses, categorized by organization type, shed light on nuanced perspectives within the humanitarian community. The analysis uncovers a significant difference among organization types regarding the necessity of respecting and recognizing state sovereignty in the context of the Syrian civil war ( $p < 0.018$ ). Notably, respondents from the United Nations were more likely to agree with this statement compared to other organizations. The variation in odds ratio estimates indicates that aid professionals working for the United Nations are more strongly associated with the belief that respecting and recognizing state

**Table 3** The analysis of the relationship between organization types and agreement level (1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal) for the statements best describing the rationale behind the coordination necessity with the Syrian government

Organization type				H*	p
ICRC (X ± SD)	INGO (X ± SD)	LNGO (X ± SD)	UN (X ± SD)		
Aspects best describing the rationale behind the coordination necessity with the Syrian government					
To ensure business continuity in the country				20.858	.001a
3.67 ± 1.2	2.94 ± 1.3	2.44 ± 1.6	4.54 ± 0.6		
To ensure the safety of operations in regime-controlled areas				8.690	.033b
4.25 ± 1.5	3.87 ± 1.13	2.7 ± 1.6	4.24 ± 1.0		
To respect state sovereignty				11.131	.001c
3.33 ± 1.5	2.71 ± 1.21	2.67 ± 1.5	4.05 ± 1.1		
To ensure access in different parts of the country				10.716	.013d
5.0 ± 0.0	3.50 ± 1.4	2.90 ± 1.7	4.33 ± 0.8		

\* Kruskal–Wallis H-test with post hoc

<sup>a</sup> Statistical difference between UN and INGO and between UN and LNGO

<sup>b</sup> Statistical difference between UN and LNGO

<sup>c</sup> Statistical difference between UN and INGO

<sup>d</sup> Statistical difference between ICRC and LNGO

**Table 4** The analysis explores the relationship between organization types and the presence of agreement regarding the interaction of Syrian state sovereignty and humanitarian norms and principles, where agreement is categorized as either “yes” or “no”

Organization				χ <sup>2</sup>	P*
ICRC n (%)	INGO n (%)	LNGO n (%)	UN n (%)		
Thoughts on the interaction of the Syrian state sovereignty and humanitarian norms and principles					
Restrictions imposed by the government are a sign of sovereignty					
Yes	1 (16.66)	6 (25.0)	1 (7.69)	4 (14.28)	2.376
No	5 (83.33)	18 (75.0)	12 (92.3)	24 (85.71)	
State sovereignty takes precedence over humanitarian norms					
Yes	0 (0.0)	4 (16.67)	0 (0.0)	5 (17.85)	3.533
No	6 (100.0)	20 (83.33)	13 (100.0)	23 (82.14)	
Respect and recognition of sovereignty are necessary in the civil war					
Yes	1 (16.66)	1 (4.16)	1 (7.69)	10 (35.71)	10.904
No	5 (83.83)	23 (95.83)	12 (92.3)	18 (64.28)	
Humanitarian norms should override state sovereignty					
Yes	2 (33.33)	13 (54.16)	9 (69.23)	12 (42.85)	1.812
No	4 (66.66)	11 (45.83)	4 (30.76)	16 (57.14)	
Dilemma and ambiguity of state sovereignty exist in practice					
Yes	2 (33.33)	7 (29.16)	5 (38.46)	12 (42.85)	1.845
No	4 (66.33)	17 (70.83)	8 (61.53)	16 (57.14)	

An odds ratio closer to 0 suggests a weaker association, while an odds ratio closer to 1 suggests a stronger association

\* Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test

<sup>a</sup> Statistical difference

Odds ratio estimates: ICRC: 0.2, INGO: 0.043, LNGO: 0.083, UN:0.55

sovereignty are necessary in the context of the Syrian civil war, while others are less strongly associated with this belief.

While there is general agreement across organization types on several aspects regarding the interaction

of Syrian state sovereignty and humanitarian norms, there are nuanced differences in perspectives, particularly concerning the respect for state sovereignty in the midst of the civil war.

Table 5 focuses on state violence targeting civilians as a sovereign practice and the way how aid workers perceive the meaning of this violence. This focus is pivotal as sovereignty is conceptualized as the “ability to kill, punish, and discipline with impunity”(Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Understanding perception on the objective of state violence sheds lights on sovereignty and its articulations.

The findings reveal notable differences in how various types of organizations perceive the objectives of state violence. Specifically, there is a statistically significant difference among organization types regarding the perception of preventing the creation of an alternative political order as an objective of violence ( $p=0.049$ ). Post hoc tests reveal a notable distinction between local NGOs and ICRC, as well as between local NGOs and international NGOs, indicating diverse perceptions among these organizational categories.

**Discussion**

While the fundamental humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence underpin humanitarian action (United Nations 2007), this research reveals how the sovereign acts of the Syrian government significantly influenced the perception and enactment of humanitarian norms, thereby shaping the humanitarian response during the civil war. These sovereign acts, expressed in various forms — from direct violence to selective issues of visas — led to diverse approaches and interpretations within humanitarian action. This underscores the inherent diversity within the humanitarian order, highlighting variations in how

humanitarianism is understood and enacted. It further supports literature that frames humanitarianism as a form of governance, shaped by political power and practiced differently across contexts (Barnett 2013; O’Hagan and Hirono 2014; Bradley 2022).

A key finding of this research highlights the delicate balance that aid organizations must maintain between respecting state sovereignty and upholding humanitarian principles. There is no clear consensus among aid organizations on how sovereignty should be navigated in the conflict, but the findings indicate that aid organizations are forced to make trade-offs. The UN, as an international organization founded on the principle of the sovereign equality of all states, for instance, aligns more closely with the idea that sovereignty must be respected, even if this means compromising on the impartiality or neutrality of aid. This view is shaped by the UN’s broader mandate to work within its foundational principles and resolutions and cooperate with governments in crisis settings. On the other hand, aid workers employed by local NGOs show full agreement that state sovereignty does not take precedence over humanitarian norms.

The findings reveal a stark contrast in ways different humanitarian organizations view the need for coordination with the Syrian government. This is most noticeable between the UN and international NGOs (INGOs) and local NGOs (LNGOs). The UN’s strong agreement with the necessity of coordinating with the Syrian government highlights a strategic approach aimed at ensuring the continuity of operations within the country. This is driven by the practicalities of working within a sovereign

**Table 5** The analysis of the relationship between organization types and agreement level (1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal) on the aspects best describing the objective of violence targeting civilians and state-like institutions

Organization				H*	p
ICRC (X ± SD)	INGO (X ± SD)	LNGO (X ± SD)	UN (X ± SD)		
Aspects best describing the objective of violence targeting civilians and state-like institutions					
Syrian government’s desire to show its power and sovereignty				7.080	.069
2.33 ± 1.15	3.83 ± 1.61	4.30 ± 1.15	2.94 ± 1.79		
Deliberate displacement/punishment of civilians				7.278	.064
2.50 ± 1.91	4.27 ± 1.31	4.63 ± 0.92	3.70 ± 1.49		
Making affected communities’ lives impossible				2.575	0.462
2.50 ± 1.91	3.88 ± 1.40	4.09 ± 1.30	3.75 ± 1.61		
Punishment and weakening opposition groups				1.874	0.599
4.66 ± 0.57	4.21 ± 1.22	4.72 ± 0.64	4.36 ± 0.95		
Preventing the establishment of an alternative political order				7.876	.049a
4.00 ± 0.81	4.26 ± 1.19	5.0 ± 0.0	4.43 ± 0.81		
Preventing humanitarian aid delivery				6.789	.079
1.0 ± 0.0	3.57 ± 1.42	4.10 ± 0.99	3.16 ± 1.58		

\* Kruskal–Wallis test

a Statistical difference between LNGO and ICRC and between LNGO and INGO

territory, where access to certain areas often depends on negotiation with the government. Given the scale of the crisis and the UN's role in overseeing large parts of the humanitarian response, ensuring business continuity and operational safety often requires aligning with the state's interests, even if it compromises certain humanitarian norms. This strategy aligns with the UN's core principles, guiding its on-the-ground actions. The UN's commitment to respecting state sovereignty sheds further light on Leenders and Mansour's (2018) argument suggesting that UN-led humanitarian aid served as a conduit for the Syrian regime's deliberate deprivation tactics and reinforced authoritarianism during the civil war.

In contrast, INGOs and LNGOs demonstrate more skepticism toward the necessity of such coordination, particularly when it comes to respecting state sovereignty. This divergence speaks to the different priorities and constraints these organizations face. For local NGOs, whose work is often more grassroots and directly linked to local communities, there may be a greater emphasis on the immediate needs of the population rather than the political dynamics that govern state access. Meanwhile, international NGOs, while recognizing the importance of coordination, find themselves more willing to navigate political complexities in order to protect the neutrality and independence of their operations. These organizations are often seen as more independent in their approaches compared to the UN, which may have more diplomatic obligations. This aligns with Rubenstein's (2015) argument that INGOs operate in a challenging terrain where their humanitarian missions are often shaped, and sometimes compromised, by the political interests of states, donor nations, and other powerful actors. The ICRC, similarly, shows a tendency toward recognizing the primacy of state sovereignty, yet its operational focus is more on ensuring access to populations in need. This positions the ICRC somewhat differently from the UN in terms of the direct political engagement with the Syrian government. The ICRC's neutrality and impartiality are often tested in such settings, where state violence and humanitarian access are in constant tension. Its focus on ensuring aid delivery—regardless of the political implications—reflects a pragmatic approach that prioritizes the immediate needs of civilians.

Another theme this research highlights is the role of the basic needs of the affected population in influencing humanitarian program and project design. The data reveals a stark contrast between the perspectives of professionals from different types of aid organizations regarding how these needs impact the design and implementation of programs. Aid workers from international NGOs and the United Nations consistently rated the basic needs of affected populations as having a stronger

influence on their work compared to those working for local NGOs (LNGOs). Aid workers employed by local NGOs demonstrated the lowest level of agreement regarding the impact of basic needs on project design. This finding suggests that international organizations may prioritize broader and more standardized responses, perhaps driven by the scope and scale of their operations or the imperative to align with international standards and donor preferences. Local NGOs, however, appear to be more attuned to the immediate and local needs of the population, as emphasized by Roborgh (2023).

Accordingly, the findings also show that divergent way local NGOs perceive the objectives of state violence. While ICRC and INGOs largely view violence targeting civilians and state-like institutions through the lens of punishment and suppression of opposition, local NGOs appear to be more attuned to the idea that state violence is also aimed at preventing the emergence of an alternative political order. This difference suggests a more nuanced understanding of state violence by local organizations, which are often directly affected by these practices and have a deeper, more localized understanding of the political dynamics at play.

## Conclusion

This research first demonstrated the various sovereign acts the Syrian government employed to claim its decision-making authority in the humanitarian space. These acts, as Weber (1998) argues, are not static and fixed but develop in a wider environment in which the Syrian government interacts with the international community. It then focused on the perceptions of these sovereign acts by aid actors in relation to their humanitarian work. In doing so, the research uncovered a spectrum of perspectives among aid professionals across different types of organizations concerning the factors shaping humanitarian project design, humanitarian principles, state sovereignty, and violence.

The assertive state sovereignty pushed aid organizations to navigate a challenging environment characterized by violence coupled with bureaucratic obstacles and restrictions through various strategies and approaches in parallel with their organizational and humanitarian principles. This in turn led to the emergence of diversity in humanitarian action. By highlighting these divergences and convergences among aid organizations, the research provided insights into the ongoing debates about the interplay between state sovereignty and humanitarian principles, underscoring the central role of state sovereignty in shaping humanitarian action. Particularly, as Harvey (2013) noted, states are becoming more assertive in exercising their sovereignty and constraining the work of international

humanitarian actors. The civil war in Syria has starkly revealed this trend. The trend prioritizing humanitarian norms over state sovereignty, emerging in the post-Cold War era, has faced a significant challenge in the context of the Syrian civil war. This conflict has underscored the enduring significance of state sovereignty, overshadowing the ascendancy of international humanitarian norms and principles. This nuanced understanding of sovereign practices and their influence on humanitarian behavior and outcomes can inform policy frameworks and operational strategies, enabling policymakers and aid practitioners to navigate the complex dynamics of sovereignty and aid more effectively.

It is noteworthy that the UN's unwavering dedication to upholding state sovereignty sets it apart from other international organizations. This prompts critical reflection on the potential ramifications of an overly strong adherence to state sovereignty though this aspect lies beyond the scope of the current research. From a policy perspective, recognizing bureaucratic, administrative, and operational hindrances imposed by a state as exercises of sovereignty relative to the actions of aid organizations can inform the design and implementation of more effective humanitarian projects. This insight also enhances our understanding of the dynamics within humanitarian negotiations, revealing that adherence to normative principles and international law could potentially hinder efforts to ensure humanitarian access, echoing observations made by Grace (2020).

Also, the findings also revealed that local NGOs provide distinct perspectives compared to the UN, the ICRC, and INGOs regarding state sovereignty, the objectives of state violence, and the influence of basic needs on program and project design. This divergence in viewpoints highlights the need for the international humanitarian community to more effectively incorporate local perspectives into localization initiatives. Such efforts are essential for amplifying local voices in project design and ensuring that global humanitarian governance aligns more closely with the realities and priorities of affected communities.

In conclusion, this research highlights the complex nature of global governance in humanitarian efforts, revealing a lack of a monolithic consensus despite a shared goal of alleviating human suffering. Each organization operates with its unique priorities and strategies, often requiring nuanced trade-offs between respecting sovereignty and upholding humanitarian principles.

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#### Data availability

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#### Competing interests

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