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POLICY BRIEF

DEVELOPMENTAL HUMANITARIANISM:

Rethinking Aid in Conflict and
Post-Conflict Settings

Making the Case for MENA



FERID BELHAJ



This paper explores the urgent need for a paradigm shift in humanitarian aid within conflict and post-conflict settings in the MENA region, advocating for a 'developmental humanitarianism' approach that integrates immediate relief with long-term development goals. Focusing on the limitations of traditional aid, particularly in protracted crises such as in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Gaza, the paper argues for innovative financing mechanisms and a realist perspective that aligns humanitarian efforts with the political and security realities of the region. By addressing both short-term needs and the underlying drivers of instability, such as governance failures and geopolitical tensions, this approach seeks to prevent the recurrent destruction and ineffective aid cycles that have historically characterized the region's conflicts, offering a more sustainable path to resilience and peace.

FERID BELHAJ

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is one of the most volatile landscapes globally for humanitarian intervention. Conflict zones including Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Gaza are mired in, or are suffering the consequences of, longstanding conflicts that have devastated infrastructure, eroded state institutions, and left millions dependent on international aid for survival. In these contexts, traditional humanitarian approaches have proved invaluable in saving lives, delivering urgent medical care, food, and shelter to those in immediate danger. However, as conflicts persist, the limitations of short-term relief are becoming starkly apparent.

Humanitarian aid, by design, is meant to be a temporary solution. It meets immediate needs but rarely addresses the structural drivers of instability—issues rooted in economic, political, and social dysfunction. In the MENA region, these factors are compounded by deep-seated historical legacies, sectarian tensions, and governance crises, which traditional aid is unable to resolve. The failure of short-term interventions to create sustainable pathways to peace is increasingly evident as the region's conflicts cycle back into violence.

This short paper calls for a rethinking of the existing framework of humanitarianism. This can be done by integrating development goals into immediate crisis response. This 'developmental humanitarianism' should focus on building long-term resilience while addressing the political economy of each conflict through a realist lens. Through this more nuanced approach, international organizations and donor countries can design aid interventions that not only alleviate suffering but also confront the root causes of instability.

THE GROWING INADEQUACY OF TRADITIONAL HUMANITARIAN AID

For decades, the MENA region has been a focal point for global humanitarian efforts. In the aftermath of wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, the international community has poured billions into emergency relief to save lives and stabilize war-torn societies. But while these interventions have successfully mitigated the worst humanitarian outcomes—such as famine and disease—they have increasingly exposed the inherent shortcomings of short-term aid.

In Iraq, massive humanitarian mobilization was required in the wake of the defeat of ISIS. Yet, even after the terrorist group's territorial collapse, many communities remained unstable. The country's deep sectarian rifts and weak political structures, which fueled the rise of ISIS in the first place, have not been resolved. The return to peace and development is fraught with challenges that emergency aid is ill-equipped to address.

Similarly, in Yemen, ongoing conflict has left over 20 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. However, the conflict's root causes—primarily political fragmentation, external interference, and deep poverty—remain unaddressed, leaving Yemen vulnerable to perpetual crises.

Gaza presents perhaps the most emblematic case of the limitations of humanitarian aid. Years of Israeli blockades, compounded by recurring wars and today's outright flattening of the enclave by unrestrained Israeli forces, have annihilated its economy and given the international community—as established by the International Court of Justice—cause to believe that a genocide is occurring before our eyes.

The reconstruction of Gaza has historically been a cyclical process, in which international aid efforts pour in to rebuild shattered infrastructure, only for it to be destroyed by Israel in subsequent rounds of conflict. This Sisyphean cycle of destruction and reconstruction not only wastes precious resources but also erodes hope among the Gazan population, perpetuating a cycle of dependency, instability, and further violence. When the time comes for the international community to break this destructive pattern, there is an urgent need to rethink reconstruction efforts by taking a more creative, politically astute approach. Rather than focusing solely on physical rebuilding, the global response must address the underlying political dynamics, ensuring that reconstruction is tied to meaningful progress on the long-stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process, while providing guarantees against further devastation.

A new framework for Gaza's reconstruction should be rooted in multilateral agreements that ensure long-term stability and accountability. This could involve innovative mechanisms such as international oversight over key infrastructure projects, legally binding assurances to protect humanitarian efforts from future military escalation, and leveraging diplomatic channels to place pressure on Israel and regional actors to prevent recurrent hostilities. Additionally, reconstruction must prioritize not just immediate humanitarian needs, but also foster local economic development, creating sustainable livelihoods and empowering the Gazan population to build resilience against future shocks. The international community can help transform Gaza from a perpetual warzone into a place of sustainable development and hope, if it can incorporate political, legal, and economic dimensions into a more comprehensive reconstruction strategy.

The inadequacies of short-term humanitarian responses are also evident in refugee-hosting nations such as Lebanon and Jordan. These countries have absorbed millions of Syrian refugees, stretching already fragile resources to breaking point. Humanitarian aid to these refugees, while essential for their survival, does not address the broader economic strains on the host nations, which face rising unemployment, housing shortages, and overstretched public services. The disconnect between humanitarian interventions and the long-term developmental needs of both refugees and host communities underscores the need for a more integrated approach.

DEVELOPMENTAL HUMANITARIANISM: A NEW FRAMEWORK

Developmental humanitarianism posits that humanitarian aid must evolve beyond crisis management to include long-term development planning. The aim is not just to save lives but to create conditions that foster stability, economic recovery, and peace. This approach demands a recognition that conflicts in the MENA region are deeply political, often rooted in governance failures, economic inequalities, and social grievances. As such, aid interventions should be designed with these factors in mind.

One promising example of developmental humanitarianism in action comes from the World Bank's projects in conflict-affected MENA countries. In Iraq, the World Bank has worked to rebuild infrastructure, restore essential services, and strengthen local governance. In Yemen, it has focused on supporting local institutions, even amid ongoing conflict, in an effort to maintain a functioning economy. These interventions demonstrate that even in highly volatile settings, there are opportunities to lay the groundwork for long-term development.

However, for developmental humanitarianism to be effective, it must operate within a realist framework that acknowledges the geopolitical complexities of the MENA region. Too often, humanitarian initiatives are hampered by the political dynamics of the conflicts they seek to address. Aid delivery in Syria, for example, is heavily influenced by the regime of Bashar al-Assad, which uses access to aid as a tool of political leverage. Similarly, in Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition and Houthi rebels have both complicated humanitarian efforts to further their own strategic goals. In these environments, international organizations must navigate webs of competing interests, often compromising the effectiveness of their interventions.

REALISM IN HUMANITARIAN AID: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

A realist approach to humanitarian aid emphasizes that interventions must account for the political and strategic interests of both local and international actors. While idealists may view humanitarianism as an inherently neutral endeavor, the realities on the ground often tell a different story. In conflict settings, aid is frequently instrumentalized by warring parties, used as a bargaining chip or tool of influence. Recognizing this, developmental humanitarianism must be pragmatic in its objectives, seeking to align aid efforts with the broader political landscape.

In the MENA region, power dynamics between states and non-state actors complicate the delivery of aid. In Lebanon, for example, the presence of Hezbollah has made some international donors wary of providing certain forms of assistance, fearing that it may indirectly support the group. In Iraq, sectarian militias exert significant control over parts of the country, influencing how and where aid is distributed. Meanwhile, in Gaza, even before the current conflict, the longstanding Israeli blockade created an impossible security and political environment for humanitarian interventions.

From a realist perspective, the success of humanitarian aid depends on understanding these power dynamics and aligning interventions with the interests of influential actors. This does not mean compromising humanitarian principles but rather recognizing that aid efforts must be politically savvy to achieve sustainable outcomes. In some cases, this may involve working with local power brokers—including non-state actors—to ensure aid reaches those in need. In others, it may mean leveraging diplomatic pressure to open humanitarian access, or pushing for political solutions that address the root causes of conflict.

CONFLICT PREVENTION AND RESILIENCE BUILDING

At the heart of developmental humanitarianism is the concept of resilience building—strengthening the ability of societies to withstand and recover from shocks. In the MENA region, this means addressing not only the immediate humanitarian needs of conflict-affected populations, but also the broader socio-economic and political factors that make these populations vulnerable to future crises.

Conflict prevention should be a central component of any humanitarian intervention. This requires a shift from reactive to proactive strategies, focusing on addressing the underlying drivers of instability. For example, in Jordan and Lebanon, where influxes of refugees have strained local economies, aid had to be directed not only at refugee relief but also

at supporting host communities. This included investments in public infrastructure, job creation, and social services, all of which contribute to long-term stability. The World Bank stressed this dimension through its own financing.

In Iraq and Yemen, where governance failures have been a key driver of conflict, aid efforts should focus on strengthening local institutions. This could involve providing technical assistance to local governments, supporting anti-corruption initiatives, and investing in education and vocational training to equip young people with the skills needed to participate in the economy.

In Gaza, where the blockade has stifled economic development, before the war that ravaged the enclave over the last year, the World Bank has prioritized a developmental humanitarian approach by advocating the lifting of restrictions on trade and movement, allowing for the reconstruction of critical infrastructure and the revitalization of the local economy. At the same time, diplomatic efforts must continue to push for a political resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as sustainable development in Palestine cannot occur in the absence of peace.

INNOVATIVE FINANCING FOR DEVELOPMENTAL HUMANITARIANISM IN THE MENA REGION

Financing remains one of the most pressing challenges for humanitarian aid and development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Countries including Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Yemen face complex and protracted crises, exacerbating the difficulties of securing consistent donor funding. In these situations, humanitarian organizations must often rely on limited resources to provide short-term aid, with little potential for long-term recovery and development. To overcome this funding gap and promote developmental humanitarianism—an approach that merges crisis response with long-term resilience-building—there is a need for more innovative financing mechanisms.

THE GLOBAL CONCESSIONAL FINANCING FACILITY (GCFF) IN LEBANON AND JORDAN

One successful example of innovative financing is the Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF), created by the World Bank, the United Nations, and the Islamic Development Bank in 2016. The GCFF provides concessional financing (low-interest or no-interest loans and grants) to middle-income countries that are grappling with large refugee populations because of crises. This has been particularly relevant for Lebanon and Jordan, both of which have been deeply impacted by the Syrian refugee crisis.

Lebanon and Jordan have taken in millions of Syrian refugees since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011. This influx has placed extraordinary pressure on their economies, infrastructure, and social services, exacerbating existing challenges. Lebanon, already facing severe political and economic turmoil, saw its public services stretched beyond capacity. In Jordan, despite relative political stability, the refugee crisis has strained essential services, including water supply, education, and healthcare.

Typically, middle-income countries like Lebanon and Jordan do not qualify for the concessional financing normally reserved for low-income countries. However, the GCFF was

designed to address this gap, offering favorable financing terms to these middle-income nations, allowing them to better manage the humanitarian crisis without overburdening their economies. The funds have supported long-term investments in infrastructure and social services, such as education and healthcare, while also addressing immediate needs arising from the refugee crisis. This dual focus aligns with the principles of developmental humanitarianism, which seeks to link humanitarian assistance with broader development goals.

For instance, in Jordan, GCFF funds have been used to strengthen the education system, upgrading schools to accommodate both Jordanian and refugee children. This investment addresses the immediate need for education while also contributing to long-term development by improving the overall quality and capacity of the national education infrastructure. Similarly, in Lebanon, GCFF financing has been used to support education and healthcare projects, benefiting both Lebanese citizens and refugees. This is crucial to maintain social cohesion in a context in which competition for limited resources could easily lead to further instability.

While the GCFF has not been without challenges—concessional loans still add to the financial liabilities of recipient countries—it represents a promising model for how the international community can support nations facing extraordinary humanitarian crises. By providing middle-income countries like Lebanon and Jordan with affordable financing, the GCFF helps ensure they can continue to meet the needs of both refugees and their own populations, while avoiding deeper debt crises.

The success of the GCFF in Lebanon and Jordan provides a valuable lesson for other countries dealing with similar crises. In fact, this model has been extended beyond the MENA region, with countries in Latin America and Eastern Europe also benefiting from concessional financing to manage refugee inflows and humanitarian emergencies.

OTHER INNOVATIVE FINANCING MECHANISMS: BLENDED FINANCE AND SOCIAL IMPACT BONDS

In addition to concessional financing, other innovative financing mechanisms can support developmental humanitarianism. One such mechanism is blended finance, which combines public and private funding to support development projects. By pooling resources from multilateral organizations, donor governments, and private investors, **blended finance** can help bridge the gap between short-term humanitarian aid and long-term development initiatives. This approach has already been used in conflict-affected countries such as Iraq, where the World Bank has partnered with private investors to rebuild infrastructure, including energy systems that were destroyed by conflict.

Social impact bonds (SIBs) are another innovative tool for financing developmental humanitarianism. These bonds allow private investors to fund social programs, with returns tied to the success of the program in achieving specific outcomes, such as reducing unemployment or improving health services. In conflict-affected regions, SIBs could be used to finance projects aimed at building resilience, such as vocational training programs for young people, or initiatives to improve healthcare access in underserved areas. The focus on measurable outcomes aligns with the developmental humanitarianism framework, which seeks to combine short-term relief with long-term capacity building.

CROWDFUNDING AND DIASPORA BONDS

Crowdfunding and **diaspora bonds** offer additional avenues for mobilizing resources to support humanitarian and development efforts. In countries such as Lebanon, for which the diaspora plays a significant role in the national economy, crowdfunding platforms can be used to raise funds for a variety of projects, from rebuilding schools to providing medical care for refugees. Tapping into the financial resources and social networks of diaspora communities allows humanitarian organizations to secure funding for projects that might otherwise be overlooked by traditional donors.

Diaspora bonds are particularly effective in countries where the diaspora maintains strong ties to the homeland and has a vested interest in its development. By offering attractive financial returns, diaspora bonds can encourage investment in projects that contribute to both immediate humanitarian relief and long-term development. This mechanism has been used successfully in countries including Israel and India, and it could be adapted for use in the MENA region to fund infrastructure projects or social services in conflict-affected areas.

ENHANCING COORDINATION AMONG DONORS AND HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

Innovative financing mechanisms alone are not enough to ensure the success of developmental humanitarianism. There is also a pressing need for better coordination among donors and humanitarian organizations, to ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively. In the MENA region, aid efforts have often been fragmented, leading to the duplication of efforts and the waste of valuable resources.

A more coordinated approach, with a clear division of labor between humanitarian and development actors, is essential to maximize the impact of aid. This requires the establishment of clear guidelines and frameworks for cooperation, and a commitment from donors to provide predictable and flexible funding that can be adapted to the evolving needs of crisis-affected countries.

THE ROLE OF MULTILATERAL ORGANIZATIONS

Multilateral organizations including the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) play a crucial role in promoting developmental humanitarianism in the MENA region. These institutions possess the resources, technical expertise, and political influence necessary to implement large-scale development projects in fragile and conflict-affected states. However, to be effective, they must adopt more flexible and adaptive strategies that integrate humanitarian and development efforts.

The World Bank, for instance, has been at the forefront of efforts to link humanitarian aid with long-term development goals through its **Fragility, Conflict, and Violence (FCV) strategy**. This strategy focuses on building resilience and preventing conflict by investing in governance, institutional strengthening, and inclusive economic growth. By addressing the root causes of conflict, such as poverty and political exclusion, the FCV strategy aims to create the conditions for long-term stability and development.

The success of multilateral organizations in the MENA region depends also on their ability

to understand and navigate the local political and social context. Development efforts must be grounded in a deep understanding of the political economy of conflict-affected regions, and of the interests and motivations of key actors. This requires greater collaboration with local stakeholders, and a more nuanced approach to project design and implementation.

CONCLUSION: A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENTAL HUMANITARIANISM

The MENA region continues to face some of the world's most complex and protracted humanitarian crises, driven by deep-rooted political and economic instability, sectarian tensions, and external interventions. While traditional humanitarian aid has saved countless lives, it is clear that this approach alone is insufficient to address the underlying drivers of conflict and instability. A more strategic, developmental approach to humanitarian aid—one that combines immediate relief with long-term development goals—is needed to build resilience and prevent future conflicts.

Innovative financing mechanisms such as the GCFF, blended finance, social impact bonds, and diaspora bonds offer promising ways to bridge the gap between short-term humanitarian needs and long-term development objectives. These tools, combined with better coordination among donors and humanitarian actors, can help ensure that resources are used effectively to create lasting positive change in conflict-affected countries.

For the global humanitarian community, the challenge is to move beyond traditional models of aid and adopt a more integrated, strategic approach that will address the root causes of conflict in the MENA region. This will require not only more innovative financing mechanisms but also a deeper understanding of the political and economic dynamics driving instability in the region. If this can be done, the international community can help build a more stable environment for the millions of people affected by conflict in the MENA region.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



FERID BELHAJ

Ferid Belhaj is the former World Bank Vice President for the Middle East and North Africa. He also served as the Chief of Staff of the President of the World Bank Group and held various positions at the Bank including Director for the Mashreq countries, Director for the Pacific department and Special representative to the United Nations.

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Policy Center for the New South

Rabat Campus of Mohammed VI Polytechnic University,
Rocade Rabat Salé - 11103
Email : contact@policycenter.ma
Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04
Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54

www.policycenter.ma

