The British Academy

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Global (Dis)Order
international policy programme

Politically resilient humanitarianism: rethinking principles, power, and partnership in a fragmenting world order

Rebecca Thompson, Independent Senior Advisor on Humanitarian Policy, Stabilisation and Conflict

Abstract

The humanitarian system is entering a period of systemic fragility. Across multiple conflict and crisis settings, aid is increasingly contested as a political tool, while donor governments are reducing funding commitments (Elnakib et al., 2024). These pressures reflect not just operational strain but a deeper fragmentation of the international order, marked by geopolitical rivalries, institutional paralysis, contested norms, and a widening funding gap. For policymakers, the stakes extend far beyond unmet humanitarian need. Weakened humanitarianism risks destabilising fragile states, fuelling mistrust between local and international actors, and undermining global capacity to prevent escalation and manage crises (Cusack 2025; Institute for Economics and Peace 2024). In response, this paper introduces politically resilient humanitarianism – a conceptual lens and an operational strategy to adapt aid systems to fragmentation while safeguarding core principles, sustaining access, and maintaining legitimacy. Drawing on conceptual analysis and practitioner experience, it argues for approaches that blend principled action with political awareness (The New Humanitarian 2024; Stoddard 2020). The paper offers concrete lessons for sustaining humanitarian relevance and effectiveness in an era of instability.

Introduction

The world's humanitarian architecture is faltering. In contexts such as Gaza, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Ukraine, the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence are increasingly contested (Elnakib et al., 2024; Taleb 2025). Humanitarian actors – donor governments, UN agencies, international NGOs, and local civil society organisations – must navigate humanitarian access negotiations with authorities who treat aid as a political instrument rather than a protected activity under international law (Elnakib et al., 2024; Slim 2020). At the same time, the system is facing a deepening financial crisis, with major donors scaling back commitments and treating aid as discretionary rather than a global obligation (AFP 2025; Oxfam America 2025; UK Parliament 2025). These political and fiscal pressures raise urgent questions about humanitarianism's relevance and capacity to respond in a world where its traditional foundations of legitimacy are under threat.

Beyond unmet need, this crisis is also carrying wider systemic consequences. These include the weakening of fragile states, increased mistrust between communities and international actors, and an undermining of the international system's capacity to prevent escalation and manage future crises (Cusack 2025; Institute for Economics and Peace 2024). These questions are not abstract; they matter to policymakers shaping aid and security strategies, to practitioners negotiating access on the ground, to local actors and affected communities whose survival often depends on the system's credibility, and to academics advancing debates on humanitarian reform and global order.

What makes this moment distinctive from past crises is that the pressures now facing humanitarianism are not simply the result of new emergencies but may reflect a deeper crisis within the system itself. Earlier shocks – whether famine, displacement, or conflict – tested capacity but did not fundamentally undermine the international consensus that aid should be protected, principles upheld, and donor commitments sustained. Today, by contrast, protracted wars, climate volatility, authoritarian resurgence, and weakening multilateralism are converging to erode those very foundations (Slim 2024). This amounts to a fragmentation

Earlier shocks – whether famine, displacement, or conflict – tested capacity but did not fundamentally undermine the international consensus that aid should be protected, principles upheld, and donor commitments sustained.

of the global order that is reshaping humanitarianism on multiple levels: geopolitical, through intensifying rivalries; institutional, through paralysis in multilateral bodies such as the United Nations; operational, through increasingly divided delivery lines; and normative, as humanitarian principles are contested rather than assumed. The result is not only greater difficulty responding to humanitarian crises but also a systemic challenge to the funding, legitimacy, and political sustainability of humanitarian action itself.

In response, this paper introduces politically resilient humanitarianism: a conceptual lens and operational strategy designed to help the sector adapt to fragmentation. Informed by thinkers in the fields of humanitarian and development studies – such as Hugo Slim, Mary B. Anderson, Alex de Waal, and Fiona Terry – as well as by practitioner experience, it is defined as an approach that upholds core principles anchored in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) while engaging purposefully with the political systems that shape protection outcomes. Crucially, it rejects a siloed humanitarianism. Independence is treated as operational autonomy within interdependence, and selective, evidence-led engagement with surrounding policy frameworks is encouraged when it enables humanitarian access and better protects civilians.

This paper develops its argument across four dimensions of fragmentation. It begins with the normative level, interrogating the core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. It argues how norms must retain their anchorage in IHL but have their operationalisation re-owned by a broader set of stakeholders, recentring protection outcomes. The paper then turns to the institutional level, examining the funding crisis and how to address the consequences of a funding base dependent on a narrow set of donors that is easily impacted by shifting political priorities. The next section critiques the dominant charity-based model at the operational level, calling for a shift toward partnership that centres local agency to reestablish humanitarian legitimacy. Drawing on experience in Afghanistan, Syria, and Myanmar, the paper then explores how politically resilient approaches have been applied in fragmented settings in practice and what we can learn from these examples at the system level. The conclusion situates these insights within wider humanitarian reform debates and global security trends, arguing that humanitarianism cannot remain marginal to security and peace deliberations or political processes (Anderson 1999), and that politically resilient humanitarianism represents a timely and necessary evolution in an era of fragmentation.

As crises intensify and the global order continues to fragment, humanitarianism's future will depend on whether it can hold to its principles while engaging the architectures that condition life-and-death choices. Politically resilient humanitarianism is one pathway. It will not resolve conflict or close funding gaps, but it recentres humanitarian purpose on protection outcomes, shares power more equitably with actors who have proximity and legitimacy, and builds partnerships better calibrated to contested settings. In the absence of this shift, humanitarianism will be marginalised precisely when it is needed most, becoming both a symptom and potential accelerant of a fragmenting world order.

Humanitarian principles under pressure: a call for new ownership

At the heart of humanitarian identity lies a set of foundational principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Codified in the Geneva Conventions and subsequent instruments of IHL, these principles are intended to guarantee civilian access, protect humanitarian personnel, and ensure assistance is delivered solely based on need (Chatham

House 2016; 2023; ICRC 1999; UNGA 1991). Yet in today's multipolar, conflict-affected landscape, pressure now reaches those normative foundations. Shared meanings and consent are fragmenting across parties and jurisdictions; humanitarian exemptions are uneven and slow to operationalise (ICRC 2023a;2025); deconfliction processes have lost credibility (Human Rights Watch 2019; 2024); and counter-terrorism and sanctions frameworks are collapsing the distinction between engagement with, and endorsement of, non-internationally recognised authorities, narrowing the practical space for impartial humanitarian action (Chatham House 2023; ICRC 2023a). Further, interpretive ownership remains top-heavy – centred in headquarters, donor capitals, and multilateral forums – fuelling a legitimacy deficit and contestation over who holds authority to interpret the principles (Chatham House 2023; ICRC 2025).

The consequence is erosion of the presumption of good faith. This is reflected in allocation decisions that favour lower-risk environments over higher-need contexts, the narrowing and/or slow operationalisation of lawful humanitarian access mechanisms, and the displacement of legal and reputational risk from states onto humanitarian actors, encouraging risk-averse delivery and self-censorship rather than principled engagement (Amnesty International 2024; Human Rights Watch 2019; 2024, ICRC 2023a).

In some contexts, the challenge goes even deeper. It is no longer the contested interpretation of the principles which impacts delivery, but the deliberate denial and assault of the legal right to humanitarian action itself. Blockade, siege-style restriction of supplies, and administrative obstruction are paired with attacks on medical facilities, aid convoys, and humanitarian personnel, as well as on civilians attempting to reach assistance (Amnesty International 2024; Human Rights Watch 2019; 2024). In these contexts, aid becomes a lever for population control, bargaining, punishment, or forced movement. The expanding use of commercial intermediaries, private logistics, security contractors, and outsourced service provision is further blurring humanitarian lines of responsibility and complicating principled risk management, particularly where parties to a conflict seek to control who is permitted to operate and on what terms.

Against this backdrop, the task therefore is not to restate the principles, but to re-establish their practical authority in environments where consent, shared interpretation, and good faith can no longer be presumed. A politically resilient approach addresses this gap by clarifying the purpose of humanitarian action in contested settings, making explicit the trade-offs involved in access and delivery decisions, and relocating interpretive responsibility closer to the points at which operational judgments are made. It also requires brief, auditable reasoning for high-risk or contentious decisions to help sustain consent, manage risk transparently, and distinguish principled compromise from erosion of standards. This approach does not seek to replace international humanitarian law, but to support its application under conditions of fragmentation, where universality remains the legal baseline but can no longer be relied upon as an operational assumption.

A politically resilient approach addresses this gap by clarifying the purpose of humanitarian action in contested settings, making explicit the trade-offs involved in access and delivery decisions, and relocating interpretive responsibility closer to the points at which operational judgments are made.

Re-operationalising the principles: humanity first

In a fragmenting world, where shared interpretations of law, political consent, and trust in humanitarian actors are increasingly contested, humanity is the principle most capable of sustaining humanitarian action. Unlike neutrality or independence, which rely on reciprocal recognition by parties to conflict, humanity asserts a prior and non-derogable claim: the protection of life and dignity as a legitimate purpose even where consent is withheld or access is deliberately denied (Chatham House 2023; UNGA 1991; ICRC 1999).

In recent humanitarian contexts, humanitarian practice has arguably shifted to a reliance on compliance – rather than humanitarian outcomes - for legitimacy (Chatham House 2023; Slim 2020). The impact of this shift has weakened our shared understanding of the value and purpose of humanitarian action. Whilst reporting, compliance obligations, sanctions licences, operating approvals, and negotiated access arrangements will always remain essential mechanisms for securing reach and protection; when they are primarily justified through legal and political risk considerations rather than demonstrated humanitarian gain, their authority is less persuasive to affected populations, local partners, and parties to the conflict (Chatham House 2023). By contrast, a humanity-first approach reorients incentives by tying humanitarian presence and engagement to observable protection outcomes, increasing the political and reputational cost of restricting access or instrumentalising aid, even where stakeholders are otherwise indifferent to humanitarian norms.

Practically, this requires articulating at the outset the expected humanitarian gain of major access and delivery decisions; declining modalities that predictably entrench abuse or increase net harm; and revisiting decisions against observed effects rather than relying on procedural compliance alone (ICRC 1999; UNGA 1991). It also entails rebuilding legitimacy through explicit and reviewable reasoning, including documenting decisions that render trade-offs, designing and implementing explicit safeguards in contexts of humanitarian denial, and ensuring residual risks are transparent and auditable. By anchoring decisions in anticipated and observed humanitarian effects, a humanity-first approach also shifts interpretive authority closer to field leadership, where contextual judgments about harm, protection, and consent are made and can be tested in practice whilst remaining subject to organisational oversight. This approach is consistent with scholarship demonstrating that transparency of reasoning enhances credibility and fairness without derogating from legal obligations (ICRC 2025; Slim 2020, 2024). Humanity, in this sense, functions as a documented yardstick, disciplining choice, sustaining consent, and enabling course correction in contested operational environments.

Neutrality requires careful reinterpretation in fragmented environments. It is contested today because counter-terrorism and sanctions regimes, securitised donor conditionalities, disinformation, and proxy warfare often reframe impartial engagement as partisanship and turn routine humanitarian actor contact with stakeholders into alleged alignment (Chatham House 2023; Humanitarian Outcomes 2022; ICRC 2023a). A politically resilient reading would address this challenge by making neutrality evidenced rather than asserted. It would explicitly specify who is engaged, for what operational purpose, and on what terms, rebalancing how neutrality is judged. This approach would require clearly documented ‘no contribution’ safeguards in Humanitarian contexts showing how financial, logistical, information, or symbolic support does not materially advantage hostilities; and it would require clearly documented and evidenced analysis showing how assistance targeting was separated from political conditionality. Where risk allows, it would place commitments and the reasoning behind contentious access calls on the record and pair them with accessible complaint channels, so that neutrality is legible where it is lived. This meaning, defined as principled negotiation (and not retreat) engages political actors while refusing to advance any party’s war aims, bringing operational relevance to neutrality’s definition in IHL (Geneva Convention I, Art. 9; Additional Protocol I, Art. 70; Slim 2020).

Impartiality must be operationalised as negotiated fairness in allocation (Additional Protocol I, Art. 70). In recent years, donor preferences, access constraints, and security considerations have, in practice, often pulled resources along military or state control lines rather than independent assessments (DI 2024; European Commission 2024; OCHA 2023). A resilient reading of impartiality[A2.1] would require co-produced needs assessments safeguarded

against elite capture, pre-stated prioritisation rules – covering equal worth, severity, urgency, proportionality – designed on a context-by-context basis and made reviewable, diversified financing to reduce single-stakeholder distortion, and joint multi stakeholder monitoring capable of triggering corrective reallocations. In this framing, impartiality is evaluated through observable allocation choices and their effects, rather than inferred from donor intent or aggregate funding patterns. Impartiality thus becomes a testable practice that is auditable at field level, redistributing interpretive authority beyond donor tables.

Independence should not be read as isolationism; it should instead be read as ethical agency within interdependence. Total detachment is neither realistic nor desirable; the aim is operational autonomy while engaging surrounding policy frameworks (Chatham House 2023; ICRC 2023a; UNGA 1991). However, for humanitarianism to ensure humanity comes first, this implies a minimal set of non-negotiables: no participation in, justification of, or material contribution to IHL violations; no conditionalities that predetermine aid recipients contrary to need; and clear definition of humanitarian aims within the end goals of political actors in messaging and partnerships. Independence, in this sense, is sustained through locally exercised boundary-setting in operational choices and public positioning, where humanitarian actors navigate political and security pressures in real time rather than through formal separation alone. As de Waal cautions, humanitarianism risks absorption into security politics unless its purpose and limits are continuously made explicit and defended (de Waal 2015). Independence, so construed, is not isolation but disciplined engagement that protects agency.

Institutional change

Taken together, this politically resilient reading aims to strengthen the principles and their operationalisation by specifying how they guide action under constraint and by shifting interpretive ownership toward those who bear the consequences most. The objective is to move away from narratives that the principles are unrealistic and to make their protection practical and provable in the places where they matter most. However, shifting interpretations will require, first, a process whereby there can be negotiated agreement within and among the humanitarian system and its interlocutors; and second, subsequent monitored and auditable institutional change. Thus, two central considerations must follow in reform discussions addressing the normative foundations of humanitarianism: (1) the principles must remain a baseline, not bargaining chips; and (2) compromises should be reasoned in public, to the extent that safety allows, so that interpretive authority is shared and auditable (Slim 2015, 2020).

The funding crisis: a catalyst for rebalancing humanitarian governance

Today's funding crisis does not merely threaten delivery; it has eroded the system's ability to uphold its core values and sustain legitimate access.

If the reinterpretation of humanitarian principles provides the normative anchor for politically resilient humanitarianism, financing is its institutional backbone. Without funding arrangements that actively protect neutrality, impartiality, and independence, principles remain declaratory. Today's funding crisis does not merely threaten delivery; it has eroded the system's ability to uphold its core values and sustain legitimate access. In 2025, the US administration cut foreign assistance at an unprecedented scale; reports indicate that over 90 per cent of USAID foreign assistance awards were terminated or suspended (Oxfam America 2025). The UK likewise announced a phased reduction of its overseas aid budget (ODA) from 0.5 per cent

to 0.3 per cent of GNI by 2027 (UK Parliament 2025). By late June 2025, the UN appeal was reported as below 13 per cent funded despite record requirements (OCHA/FTS 2025; Reuters 2025). These shocks landed in a financial system already marked by donor concentration risk and discretionary politics, where a small cohort of state donors has disproportionately determined the tempo and direction of humanitarian response for decades (DI 2024; The New Humanitarian 2024). Seen through the lens of fragmentation, this was not an episodic shortfall but a structural vulnerability (Terry 2022), showing how a few capitals hold de facto veto power over system continuity and how discretionary retrenchment in those budgets cascades into systemwide contraction. Other well-documented consequences of this donor concentration have included skewing incentives toward procedural risk avoidance, as well as upward compliance, privileging process metrics over protection outcomes (ICVA 2025a). Breaking this fragmentation–finance feedback loop thus requires rebalancing who decides, how they decide, and the information on which those decisions rest.

Diversify contributors, decentralise decision rights

A practical route to rebalancing the economy of aid is to move from bespoke bilateral earmarks to neutral pooled windows. These are formal allocation windows within a multilateral trust vehicle that prioritise plurality, transparency, and local majority governance. Existing pooled funds demonstrate some of the mechanics of how to do this; the next iteration should go further and re-emphasise features too often treated as optional. These would include single donor caps to limit dominance, proportionate match funding rules to crowd in additional contributors, and open meetings with published decision records and public oversight that allow scrutiny and course correction (EDI 2024; Elnakib et al.2024). Dedicated subwindows could enable diaspora, faithbased, philanthropic, and corporate contributions under common eligibility and audit standards that minimise ex ante earmarking while preserving visibility through open data (IATI 2024; ICVA 2025a).

Beyond pluralising funding sources, decentralising decision rights would also reconfigure where and how allocation judgments are made (ICVA 2025a). This matters because decisions taken closer to affected populations are better able to respond to shifting needs, access constraints, and protection risks as they evolve (ICVA 2025a). In highly fragmented environments, centralised allocation based on incomplete or delayed information tends to reinforce risk-averse programming and political bias. By contrast, context-proximate governance enables faster course correction and supports more credible claims to impartiality.

Make finance predictable and risk shared

However, neutral pooled funds will not resolve volatility alone. Financing must also become more predictable and riskshared so that political withdrawals do not immediately translate into operational retrenchment and/or collapse (ICVA 2025a). To do this, funding instruments should be given the power to mitigate early donor exits through commitment fees, as well as the ability to enable countercyclical top-ups triggered by preagreed indicators. Predictability also depends on where discretion sits. When all allocation authority is held upstream, political shocks translate directly into operational disruption, whereas distributed decision-making allows systems to absorb funding fluctuations without immediate collapse.

To incentivise donors to agree to these conditions, and so donors can defend budgets at home, performance credibility should also shift from broad value for money claims to publish what you buy practice (ICVA 2025a). While much reporting already exists, it is often fragmented, technical, and inward-facing, making it hard for political leaders to show - simply and credibly -

What is missing is not data, but clarity that stands up under political scrutiny. This requires information that is limited in scope, comparable across providers, easy to explain to non-specialist audiences, and explicit about both results and trade-offs, including where access was denied or outcomes fell short.

what funding has achieved. What is missing is not data, but clarity that stands up under political scrutiny. This requires information that is limited in scope, comparable across providers, easy to explain to non-specialist audiences, and explicit about both results and trade-offs, including where access was denied or outcomes fell short. The aim is to stabilise humanitarian financing under political pressure by making allocations comparable, oversight transparent, and performance legible, so funding decisions reward demonstrable outcomes rather than procedural box-ticking.

Address the predictable objections

Objections to change will be familiar. Many of the strongest concerns are likely to come from those that currently hold disproportionate influence over humanitarian financing; whom, perversely, are also a main reason for fragmentation when funding contracts. These concerns will extend beyond the decentralisation of decision rights, to include perceived loss of control over allocations, increased exposure to financial and reputational risk, and reduced ability to demonstrate compliance and value for money. Some will also argue that local majority governance weakens international donor state policy coherence; others will worry that diversified funding pools, shared risk mechanisms, and locally informed allocation compromise independence or invite capture (ICVA 2025a).

These concerns are best addressed through clear rules that apply to everyone, rather than through one-off decisions or special exemptions. Counter arguments need to demonstrate how this approach does not remove donor influence but shifts it from direct control to shared oversight which can have benefits for donor states interests as well. Donor caps and pooled funding may limit how much influence any single donor carries, but they also limit individual risk, while still allowing donors to see where their money goes. Conflict-of-interest rules and open contracting would show how allocation decisions are made and help prevent capture. Proportionate, risk-based monitoring would concentrate scrutiny where financial or reputational risks are highest, instead of slowing all programmes equally. Humanitarian exemptions and formal de-risking measures would set the minimum legal standard; locally rooted governance, pooled finance, and open, standardised reporting would strengthen accountability beyond that minimum.

Pilot, evaluate, enforce

Adoption of new financing models could proceed through time limited pilots in two or three priority contexts, with evaluation plans agreed at the outset and renewal or scaleup only if results warrant it. Participation in pilots (pooled windows or any parallel cofinancing) would require open publication of spending and contracting information in standardised formats, alongside proportionate monitoring and evaluation. Rules would set donor caps, along with requirements for match funding, decisions would be made public, and local majority boards would be made mandatory - with clear consequences for breaches. Regulators would be engaged from the start to align humanitarian exemptions and anti–money laundering/counter-terrorism financing rules, so lawful payment channels remain open.

What financing reform can and cannot do

These measures will not, on their own, resolve the funding crisis or compel political support where it is actively withheld. However, what they can do is change incentives and expectations within the system. By making funding decisions more rule-based, transparent, and comparable, rebalancing humanitarian financial governance reduces the scope for abrupt or opaque

withdrawals to be treated as cost-free and increases the political and reputational visibility of disengagement. In contexts where humanitarian action is restricted or denied, such arrangements would help distinguish principled constraint from political obstruction, preserve a record of unmet need and foregone protection, and create a clearer basis for re-engagement when conditions shift. In this sense, governance and financing reform cannot substitute for political will, but it can shape behaviour at the margins and limit the damage caused when that will is absent.

From charity to partnership: reframing the humanitarian compact

By concentrating authority far from the contexts in which legitimacy is negotiated, these arrangements render humanitarian action vulnerable when consent is contested, conditional, or withdrawn.

If fragmented financing exposes how humanitarian action is governed, it also lays bare the political relationships on which the system depends and the asymmetries they reproduce. Donor-concentrated funding and compliance-driven accountability do not merely shape how aid is financed; they structure who sets priorities, who bears risk, and whose consent ultimately sustains access. By concentrating authority far from the contexts in which legitimacy is negotiated, these arrangements render humanitarian action vulnerable when consent is contested, conditional, or withdrawn. In such environments, a charity-based model of assistance that is defined by externally determined priorities, centralised programme design, and the downward transfer of operational risk without corresponding decision-making power, proves not only inequitable but politically fragile.

Under this charity-based model, three structural problems have become increasingly visible. First, local organisations with the greatest contextual knowledge are systematically excluded from strategic decision-making, constraining the relevance, credibility, and adaptability of humanitarian responses. Second, in situations of conflict, engagement with parties to that conflict (including states) and armed actors is often treated as a residual or technical task rather than a core political function, resulting either in avoidance that restricts access or in informal compromises that erode humanitarian boundaries. Third, accountability remains overwhelmingly one-directional. Authority and compliance flow upward to donors and regulators, while operational, reputational, and political risk is transferred downward to communities and local partners without meaningful recourse or shared responsibility (Barbelet et al. 2021; Roepstorff 2020). Together, these dynamics weaken trust, undermine access negotiations, and reduce the system's capacity to sustain impartial action in contested environments (Howe et al. 2019).

Building on the institutional conditions set out in the previous section - local majority governance, transparent decision-making, and proportionate controls - politically resilient humanitarianism requires a shift away from top-down charity towards a partnership compact that redistributes authority as well as responsibility. Addressing these power asymmetries is not only an ethical imperative but a strategic one. International actors cannot credibly sustain claims to neutrality or impartiality unless operations are rooted in locally grounded leadership and shared political ownership (Barbelet et al. 2021; Howe et al. 2019). Reform efforts that support a new partnership compact would therefore help rebuild trust, decentralise authority, and strengthen the resilience of humanitarian action in a fragmenting and increasingly contested global order.

The partnership compact: co-decision, co-risk, co-accountability

Recognising local actors as equal decision-makers would be the first operational pivot. Under the charity model, local actors - community organisations, local NGOs, or local governance structures - are often treated as passive recipients while international organisations decide what aid is needed and how it should be delivered (Barbelet et al. 2021). Partnership instead positions local actors as decision-makers whose embeddedness improves access, cultural fit, and legitimacy. Evidence shows that local leadership yields more sustainable, context-appropriate responses and helps insulate operations from external political agendas (Barbelet et al. 2021; Hillhorst et al. 2025; NRC 2024; ICVA 2025b). In Syria, where assistance has mirrored political and military control lines, elevating local leadership has been essential to restoring credibility (Khoury et al. 2024). Practically, this means direct eligibility to lead and co-lead programmes, shared roles in needs analysis and targeting, joint staffing and secondments, common security/context analysis, agreed adaptive programme management triggers, transparent procurement, and routine publication of decisions.

A second pivot would be strengthening principled engagement between humanitarian actors with states and armed groups. In many humanitarian contexts, access is controlled by political or military actors, and reaching people requires structured negotiation (Geneva Call 2023). Drawing on Hugo Slim's concept of humanitarian diplomacy (2019), politically resilient humanitarianism proposes that engagement is treated as upholding, not diluting, international humanitarian law. Core practice would include clearly laid out prohibitions (e.g. no material support to parties to conflict), explicit IHL expectations for counterparts, documented decisions for access talks, separation of assistance targeting from political conditionality, context-specific liaison protocols and security assurances, independent third-party monitoring, and community feedback channels that can trigger operational adjustments (Barbelet et al. 2021; Hillhorst et al. 2025; ICVA 2025b, 2023b).

A third pivot would require reconfiguring accountability. The charity model places formal responsibility with international organisations but shifts compliance burdens onto local actors who lack design power, entrenching hierarchical dynamics and procedural accountability with donors, rather than accountability with communities or other local actors (Barbelet et al. 2021; Stoddard et al. 2017). A partnership compact would make accountability shared among donors, UN agencies, international NGOs, local organisations, and political authorities (Hilhorst et al. 2025; ICVA 2025b; NRC 2024). Standards would be co-designed and oversight reciprocal, with accountability to affected people by default – complaints handling, participation in targeting, and public reasoning for trade-offs – paired with proportionate assurance. Joint monitoring by mixed teams and community oversight committees, alongside public dashboards on access, delivery times, leakage, and protection outcomes, would operationalise this shift (DI 2024).

Recognising the barriers

A common objection to a new compact is that humanitarian country teams (HCTs) have already attempted these shifts through previous humanitarian localisation and reform initiatives and have not succeeded (Howe et al. 2019;). Yet what many within the system would argue is that what has largely been tried are charity language reforms – pledges, guidance, toolkits – layered onto unchanged decision rights and incentives (Hillhorst et al. 2025). The partnership compact switches the unit of change from projects and onto governance and enforceable practice.

Public reasoning would reduce opaque gatekeeping; locally co-led negotiation structures would align engagement; and pre-agreed adaptive triggers would authorise rapid pivots in geographic targeting, modality, or partner choice to improve humanitarian effectiveness.

By committing to a new compact, authority would be transferred through local majority co-chairing of strategies and clusters and with voting rules requiring local concurrence for major targeting frameworks and reprogramming. Accountability would become reciprocal so that internationals are answerable for timeliness and predictability as much as local actors for compliance. Public reasoning would reduce opaque gatekeeping; locally co-led negotiation structures would align engagement; and pre-agreed adaptive triggers would authorise rapid pivots in geographic targeting, modality, or partner choice to improve humanitarian effectiveness. These levers move HCTs beyond 'we tried' into observable practical change. Taken together, these actions translate principles into day-to-day practice, replacing a charity logic ill-suited to contemporary conflict with a partnership compact that is ethically grounded and operationally robust, capable of sustaining impartial access and credible protection outcomes in contested settings.

Operationalising politically resilient humanitarianism: insights from practice

Building on the conceptual framework of politically resilient humanitarianism, this section turns next to recent practitioner experience in Afghanistan, Syria, and Myanmar. In each context, humanitarian actors have operated in politicised, fragmented environments by engaging de facto authorities and/or developing localised alternatives where recognised governance and clear system-wide guidance were absent. These cases show that negotiated access, decentralised delivery, and locally led decision-making can preserve humanitarian space where traditional models falter. They are not anomalies but early prototypes of politically resilient humanitarianism. Crucially, none of these approaches resolved the full scale or complexity of needs in their contexts; impacts were partial, uneven, and bounded by hard political constraints. However, the core lesson, while modest, is that these need not be treated as anomalies; elements that have worked could be expanded and tested more widely, allowing field practice in fragmented settings to inform system-level adaptations as fragmentation becomes more common.

Afghanistan: pragmatic access and locally anchored delivery

Following the Taliban's return in 2021, development aid was largely suspended and formal recognition withheld, with severe consequences for services and livelihoods. Yet humanitarian actors sustained presence by engaging de facto authorities at subnational levels and prioritising localised delivery, community negotiation, and context-specific access arrangements (Humanitarian Outcomes 2023). Mechanisms such as the Afghan Humanitarian Fund (AHF) offered one of the few viable channels to keep programmes moving without conferring political endorsement. While imperfect (compliance burdens were high and access to the fund for national organisations was uneven) the combination of subnational engagement, funds awarded to women-led and community-based organisations, and flexible operational choices helped sustain essential services (Gossman & Abbasi 2024, Humanitarian Outcomes 2023). These adaptations did not reverse the collapse of public services, end movement restrictions on women, or ensure coverage across contested areas; however, they mitigated harm without fixing systemic deterioration. The practical takeaway is that consistent,

documented engagement at the level where authority is exercised – paired with locally led delivery – can protect some humanitarian space when full-scale disengagement would have worsened protection outcomes.

Syria: navigating fragmentation through adaptive delivery

Syria's governance fragmentation produced a deeply politicised humanitarian operating environment. In response, international NGOs and local civil society developed decentralised field systems that mixed cross-line access agreements with local partnerships and context-appropriate modalities, such as multi-purpose cash. Innovations in humanitarian analysis – for example the Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team (later Crisis Analytics) and COAR (Centre for Operational Analysis and Research) – enabled real-time situational awareness and agile reallocation, supporting a pattern of adaptive delivery under pressure (Abo Rass et al. 2024, Humanitarian Outcomes 2022, Stoddard 2020). These approaches helped maintain services through offensives and shifting front lines by aligning decisions to granular access conditions rather than to static plans (IAHE 2025). Even so, access remained inconsistent, siege tactics and bureaucratic impediments continued to distort targeting, and some populations were chronically underserved; adaptive delivery improved reach but did not depoliticise the operating environment. The broader implication was that normalising flexible crossline operations – with clear engagement criteria and published decision records where safe – had strong protection benefits for Syrians in need of life saving humanitarian assistance.

Myanmar: dual-track humanitarianism and the cost of disengagement

Post-coup Myanmar forced agencies to choose between withdrawal and politically risky engagement. Politically resilient actors adopted dual-track approaches: negotiating access in areas under military junta control, while bolstering community-based providers and ethnic civil society through cross-border support (Holiday et al. 2025, Kaur 2024). During the 2025 earthquake, these locally grounded networks proved more capable of delivering aid than international partners operating under the restrictions of the military junta because they combined proximity, contextual legitimacy, and operational agility (HADRI 2025). The Myanmar experience underlines that principled engagement – documented interactions, clear behavioural expectations, separation of assistance targeting from political conditionality – can preserve some humanitarian function.

What worked – and what didn't: trade-offs and limits

Across all three settings, common strengths and constraints are visible. On the plus side, decisions followed context (taken where power actually operated); engagement was structured (shared criteria, documented decisions made public); operations were adaptive (pre-agreed triggers for shifts in modality, or partners; accountability was reciprocal (community feedback with response timelines, internationals answerable for timeliness and predictability); and analysis was embedded (local partners and access/analysis teams informing real-time choices). Limits were also equally clear: structural restrictions on movement and association (especially for women); continuing coercion and bureaucratic obstruction; uneven coverage across control lines; high residual protection risks; and compliance demands that local actors struggled to meet without sustained accompaniment. These approaches mitigated political constraints; they did not remove them.

From ad hoc successes to system norms

To carry politically resilient humanitarianism beyond isolated pilots, the features outlined above should be embedded as standard operating practice – written into mandates, budgets, partner compacts, and oversight. Institutionalising what worked in Afghanistan, Syria, and Myanmar (and other humanitarian contexts in fragile settings) will not neutralise the structural drivers of crisis or deliver universal coverage. It will, however, raise the floor, making impartial access more durable, protection outcomes more credible, and decision-making more transparent and auditable in contested settings. The objective is a shift from discretionary wins to repeatable, principled operations – institutionalised, resourced, and externally reviewable, with feedback loops that allow adaptation over time. In short, we normalise what has proven to work, while remaining candid about constraints and trade-offs.

The objective is a shift from discretionary wins to repeatable, principled operations – institutionalised, resourced, and externally reviewable, with feedback loops that allow adaptation over time.

Politically resilient humanitarianism and the future global security architecture

Having outlined the core features and field-level applications of politically resilient humanitarianism, this final section now considers its strategic relevance for global crisis management and the future of international cooperation.

The international security system – designed to stabilise inter-state relations after 1945 – struggles with today's crisis ecology. The proliferation of non-state actors, weakening multilateral consensus, and recurrent state erosion in fragile contexts reveal a growing mismatch between existing frameworks and geopolitical realities (UN 2023). Humanitarian action, though grounded in international law, remains marginal to security deliberations and often siloed from political and peace processes, which blunts its effectiveness and deprives security actors of grounded situational awareness (De Lauri & Turunen 2022, Stoddard 2020).

Politically resilient humanitarianism does not resolve these systemic deficits, but by institutionalising practices already visible in Afghanistan, Syria, and Myanmar it offers a pragmatic interface between humanitarian action and security governance – one that protects principles while improving collective management of risk. It works on the assumption that humanitarianism's future cannot be secured in isolation from the security architecture that shapes the global order around it (Anderson 1999). For security actors, this approach could provide early warning insights, diplomatic footholds, and legitimacy in contexts where traditional instruments of statecraft are ineffective or absent.

In practice

A first implication is analytical. Political analysis should be systematically embedded within humanitarian strategies and programmes – not to align with political agendas, but to map power, anticipate constraints, and guide principled engagement with non-recognised authorities. At present there is no global UN template for such engagement, leaving practice ad hoc and politically vulnerable. Standardising decision records for access negotiations, maintaining the separation of assistance targeting from political conditionality, and documenting how community feedback alters operational choices would also need to be adopted to make humanitarian reasoning legible to political and security counterparts without

subordinating humanitarian aims (De Lauri & Turunen 2022; Geneva Call 2023; Slim 2019)

A second implication is institutional. Coordination across humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development spheres must move from rhetoric to design. Joint planning cycles anchored in a small set of shared indicators – access, protection outcomes, delivery timeliness, and complaint resolution – can clarify complementary roles. Predictable liaison between HCTs and regional security organisations, along with routine channels for humanitarian perspectives to be heard before sanctions are adopted or mandates renewed, would reduce avoidable harm while preserving coercive intent where required. Standing humanitarian briefings to the UN Security Council and sanctions committees, including assessments of likely humanitarian impact and mitigation options, would make these interfaces more reliable (De Lauri & Turunen 2022).

A third implication concerns capability. Purpose-built humanitarian diplomacy units, at headquarters and country level, can professionalise principled engagement with de facto authorities, consolidate documentation of talks, and preserve organisational memory across staff rotations (Slim 2019). In parallel, access and analysis teams that include local organisations should be normalised so that real-time insight informs both humanitarian adaptation and the security system's situational awareness. Data governance must follow humanitarian ethics – data minimisation, role-based access to data, and data protection protocols (between assistance information and coercive instruments) must become the norm, to avoid exposing communities or staff.

Whether these interfaces require new architecture remains contested. One view holds that recalibrated mandates and coordination mechanisms within existing institutions – the Security Council, regional organisations, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the cluster system – are sufficient if consistently applied (de Waal 2015). Another argues that fragmentation is so deep now that new platforms are needed where humanitarian, peacebuilding, and security actors can engage as equal interlocutors (Myint-U 2025). Politically resilient humanitarianism is compatible with either route. In a recalibration track, reforms would re-enforce locally co-chaired strategies, standardise engagement criteria and decision-making processes, and embed humanitarian briefings in sanctions and mandate processes. In an innovation track, regional pilots of new architectures could test co-equal governance around shared indicators and escalation protocols, with rigorous evaluation and clear safeguards for humanitarian independence.

In either track the responsibility to implement would be shared. Donor governments would incentivise cross-pillar design by supporting joint planning requirements and proportionate assurance that values access and protection outcomes alongside fiduciary control (DI 2024). UN entities and HCTs would institutionalise locally co-chaired strategies, establish predictable liaisons with security actors, and publish decision making for major access and targeting choices. International NGOs and local organisations would consolidate partnership models that share risk, context analysis, and operational control; document engagement consistently; and maintain community oversight mechanisms that trigger course correction. Security actors, for their part, would formalise pre-decision humanitarian consultations, integrate humanitarian impact assessment into sanctions and operations planning, and respect operational firewalls that protect humanitarian data and decision autonomy.

Expectations, however, should be realistic. Politically resilient humanitarianism will not resolve conflicts, rebuild state capacity, or eliminate coercive practices. Its promise is more modest (and more attainable): it aims to change how the international system manages the interface between humanitarian action and security policy so that impartial access and protection are more likely to be sustained under stress. If humanitarian institutions embed

political analysis without politicisation, redistribute operational authority towards actors with proximity and legitimacy, and engage security institutions as peers rather than afterthoughts, humanitarianism can act as both stabiliser and bellwether within a fragmenting order.

Humanitarianism: restoring trust, sustaining relevance and effectiveness

Humanitarianism today stands at a critical juncture, in need not just of reform but of recalibration, to reflect the fractured political realities in which it operates. This paper has offered politically resilient humanitarianism as one pathway – as an approach that neither abandons core principles nor pretends that politics can be ignored. Instead, it recognises that sustained access, legitimacy, and effectiveness increasingly depend on engaging with complex political landscapes in principled, informed, and context-sensitive ways. For policymakers, this requires rethinking how humanitarian support is financed and governed, ensuring flexibility, enabling local leadership, and embedding political analysis into operational design. For those on the front lines, especially local actors navigating shrinking space and increasing risk, it affirms what many have long known: that principled humanitarian action is possible, but only when grounded in the realities of power, adapted to context, and shared in responsibility. Restoring trust in humanitarianism – and reaffirming its relevance to global peace and security – begins with acknowledging where it falters and listening to those closest to the consequences. By taking this path, the system can perhaps be remade: principled in purpose, resilient in politics, and accountable to those it serves.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to the British Academy for providing the funding grant that enabled the completion of this paper and my participation in the Global (Dis)Order series, co-hosted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. I also extend my sincere thanks to the University of London and the Refugee Law Initiative (RLI) for hosting me as a Research Fellow. Particular thanks go to Dr Nicholas Maple for his thoughtful supervisory support and guidance throughout this process. Having spent many years as an independent rostered Deployable Civilian Expert (DCE) consultant, and Humanitarian Advisor to the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), I remain committed to contributing to future UK government policy and response. I would like to thank all my former colleagues whose support – both practical and moral – helped shape the development of this paper. A special thanks goes to Dr Emanuela Gillard of the University of Oxford, whose friendship, mentorship, and intellectual rigour have been a source of both encouragement and challenge! I am also grateful to the Algorand Foundation (a layer-1 blockchain), HesabPay (an Afghan fintech company), and Pioneers for Sustainability and Social Impact (a Syrian social enterprise) for engaging me as a consultant advisor in Syria over the past year. Their commitment to exploring private sector partnerships and decentralised humanitarian finance solutions has been both timely and inspiring. Returning to Damascus was personally and professionally humbling – and has only deepened the convictions that underpin this paper. Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to all those working in and on conflict zones. In the face of rising needs, risks, and pressures on

the multilateral system and its core values, I remain committed to working in partnership and solidarity from the ground up towards a more equitable and peaceful world for all.

References

Abo Rass, M. & Pawson, M. (2024), 'Joy and pain in Aleppo as residents ask: What's next?', The New Humanitarian, 23 December. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/12/23/joy-and-pain-aleppo-residents-ask-whats-next

Additional Protocol I, Art. 70 70. Available at: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-70'Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)'. (1977) 1125 UNTS 3, Art.

AFP (2025), 'State Department announces major cuts to foreign aid programs', Associated Press, 24 January. https://apnews.com/article/trump-usaid-foreign-aid-cuts-6292f48f8d4025bed0bf5c3e9d623c16

Amnesty International (2024), 'Human Rights in Israel and the Occupied Territories'. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/gaza-israeli-attacks-on-medical-facilities-and-personnel-must-be-investigated-as-war-crimes/

Anderson, M.B. (1999), Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—or War (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers).

Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. & Davey, E. (2021), Interrogating the Evidence Base on Humanitarian Localisation: A Literature Study (London: Overseas Development Institute). https://media.odi.org/documents/Localisation_lit_review_WEB.pdf

Chatham House (2016), Humanitarian Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups: The Legal Framework. https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-04-29-NSAG.pdf

Chatham House (2023), Rethinking the Role of Humanitarian Principles in Armed Conflict. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/12/rethinking-role-humanitarian-principles-armed-conflict

Cusack, J. (2025), Reimagining Humanitarian Action: Insights from CrossBoundary at the 2025 World Bank/IMF Spring Meetings. https://crossboundary.com/emerging-humanitarian-action-dfi-investment-advisory-worldbank-spring-meetings/

De Lauri, A. & Turunen, S. (2022), Forms of Humanitarian Diplomacy (Bergen, Chr. Michelsen Institute). https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/8311-forms-of-humanitarian-diplomacy.pdf

Development Initiatives (DI) (2024), Falling Short? Humanitarian Funding and Reform. https://devinit.org/resources/falling-short-humanitarian-funding-reform/

De Waal, A. (2015), The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power (Cambridge: Polity Press).

Elnakib, S., Aly, S., Asi, Y.M. & Shawar, Y.R. (2024), 'The Humanitarian System: Politics Cannot be Avoided', The Lancet, 404(10458): 1105–1106. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(24)01648-9

European Commission (2024), Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2024. https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/publication/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2024_en

Geneva Call (2023), Annual Report 2023. https://www.genevacall.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AR_Final_Version_GC-2023_FOR_WEB.pdf

Geneva Convention I, Art. 9,Geneva Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field. (1949) 75 UNTS 31, Art. 9. https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gci-1949/article-9

Gossman, P. & Abbasi, F. (2024), 'How to engage with the Taliban, if you have to', The New Humanitarian, 11 July. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2024/07/11/how-engage-taliban-if-you-have-afghanistan

Hilhorst, D., Alburo-Canete, K.Z, Aparicio, J.R, Milabyo Kyamusugulwa P. & Woldetsadik T.K (2025), 'Humanitarian observatories: insights for reforming humanitarianism from below', Journal of International Humanitarian Action. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-025-00172-1

Holliday, I. Myat, A.K & Cook, A. (2025), 'Humanitarian engagement with Myanmar in the wake of the 2021 coup', Journal of Asian Public Policy:1-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/17516234.2024.2448035

Howe, K. & Stites, E. (2019), 'Partners under pressure: Humanitarian action for the Syria crisis', Disasters, 43(1): 3–23. https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12298

Human Rights Watch (2019), Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria. https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/06/28/rigging-system/government-policies-co-opt-aid-and-reconstruction-funding-syria

Human Rights Watch (2024), Sudan: Ethnic Cleansing in West Darfur. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/09/sudan-ethnic-cleansing-west-darfur

Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief Institute (HADRI) (2025), Myanmar Earthquake & Conflict: Reaching Underserved Communities with Deepening Vulnerabilities. 08 April. https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_Myanmar_Earthquake_Conflict_Reaching_Underserved_Communities_with_Deepening_Vulnerabilities_HADR_08Apr2025.pdf

Humanitarian Outcomes (2022), Aid Worker Security Report 2022: Collateral Violence. https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/awsr_2022.pdf

Humanitarian Outcomes (2023), Navigating Ethical Dilemmas for Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan. https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/ho-ukhih_afghanistan_final_6_21_23.pdf

Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) (2025), Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the response to the earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria: Final report. Geneva: IASC, August. https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/iahe-evaluation-report-turkiye-and-syria-main-report-english.pdf

International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) (2024), IATI Standard: rules and guidance. https://iatistandard.org/en/iati-standard/

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (2025), A Call to Make International Humanitarian Law a Political Priority. https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2025/02/06/a-call-to-make-international-humanitarian-law-a-political-priority/

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (2023a), Russia-Ukraine International Armed Conflict: The value of neutrality for humanitarian work. https://www.icrc.org/en/article/russia-ukraine-international-armed-conflict-value-neutrality-humanitarian-work

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (2023b), ICRC Engagement with Armed Groups in 2023. https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2023/10/10/icrc-engagement-with-armed-groups-in-2023/

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (1999), Fundamentals of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/external/doc/en/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0513.pdf

International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) (2025a), Risk-Sharing in Pooled Funds: Insights for Donors, Fund Managers, and NGOs—Advancing Risk-Sharing and Localisation. Geneva. https://www.icvanetwork.org/resource/risk-sharing-in-pooled-funds/

International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) (2025b), Equitable Partnerships and Localisation Pocket Guide, Geneva https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2025/04/ICVA-HF-Pocket-Guide-Equitable-Partnerships-Localisation_250410.pdf

Institute for Economics and Peace (2024), Global Peace Index 2024: Measuring Peace in a Complex World (Sydney, Institute for Economics and Peace). https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GPI-2024-web.pdf

Kaur, N. (2024), 'Denial of humanitarian assistance is a death sentence in Myanmar', The New Humanitarian, 11 June. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2024/06/11/denial-humanitarian-assistance-death-sentence-myanmar

Khoury, R. B. & Scott, E. K.M. (2024). 'Going local without localization: Power and humanitarian response in the Syrian war', World Development, 174:1-11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106460

Kozack, J. & Lauwers, B. (2025), How the IMF Finances Itself and Why It Matters for the Global Economy (Washington, D.C., International Monetary Fund). https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2025/06/25/explainer-how-the-imf-finances-itself-and-why-it-matters-for-the-global-economy

Myint-U, T. (2025), 'As the UN turns 80, Thant Myint-U argues it should be retooled for a less internationalist age' (The Economist). https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2025/06/17/as-the-un-turns-80-thant-myint-u-argues-it-should-be-retooled-for-a-less-internationalist-age

Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) (2024), Toward local humanitarian engagement: Reflections on engaging local partners in hard-to-reach areas (Oslo, Norwegian Refugee Council). https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/toward-local-humanitarian-engagement/toward-local-humanitarian-engagement---full-report.pdf

Oxfam America (2025), 'After Trump administration's 90-day US foreign aid review, the human toll is immeasurable', 28 April. https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/brief-after-trump-administrations-90-day-us-foreign-aid-review-the-human-toll-is-immeasurable-and-will-grow-exponentially/

Reuters (2025) 'UN cuts aid appeal after donors slash budgets', 16 June. https://www.reuters.com/world/un-cuts-aid-appeal-after-donors-slash-budgets-2025-06-16/

Roepstorff, K. (2019), 'A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action', Third World Quarterly, 41(2): 284–301. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160

Slim, Hugo. (2019), 'Humanitarian diplomacy: the ICRC's neutral and impartial advocacy in armed conflicts', Ethics & International Affairs, 33:67-77. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679418000904

Slim, H. (2020), 'You don't have to be neutral to be a good humanitarian', The New Humanitarian. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/08/27/humanitarian-principles-neutrality

Slim, H. (2024), Humanitarianism 2.0: New Ethics for the Climate Emergency (London: Hurst).

Start Network (2025), 'Start Ready Risk Pool 4: Structuring Report (May 2025–April 2026)'. London: Start Network. https://startnetwork.org/learn-change/resources/library/start-ready-risk-pool-4-structuring-report

Stoddard, A. (2020), 'Traversing the minefield: A professional humanitarian for a new world of risk', Research Outreach. https://researchoutreach.org/articles/traversing-minefield-professional-humanitarian-new-world-of-risk/

Stoddard, A., Haver, K. & Czwarno, M. (2017), Efficiency and Inefficiency in Humanitarian Financing (New York: Humanitarian Outcomes). https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/humanitarian_financing_efficiency_.pdf

Taleb, W. (2025), 'Humanitarian action under siege: a comparative study of the Algerian war of independence and contemporary humanitarian challenges in Gaza', Journal of Peacebuilding & Development. https://doi.org/10.1177/15423166251358971

Terry, F. (2002), Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

The New Humanitarian (2024), 'Trends driving humanitarian need in 2024 (and what to do about them)', The New Humanitarian, 2 January. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2024/01/02/trends-driving-humanitarian-need-2024-and-what-do-about-them

UK Parliament (2025), 'UK to reduce aid to 0.3% of gross national income from 2027', 28 February. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-to-reduce-aid-to-0-3-of-gross-national-income-from-2027/

United Nations (2023), Our Common Agenda: Policy Brief 9 – A New Agenda for Peace (New York: UN). https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4015374

United Nations General Assembly (1991), 'Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance of the United Nations'. GA Res. 46/182, 19 December. UN Doc. A/RES/46/182. https://www.oas.org/dil/Res_46-182_UN_eng.pdf

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2023), 'OCHA Annual Report 2023' (New York, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/ocha-annual-report-2023

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Financial Tracking Service (OCHA/FTS) (2025) 'Global funding overview: 2025'. https://fts.unocha.org/global-funding/overview/2025

The Global (Dis)Order international policy programme is a joint initiative of the British Academy and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to generate fresh insights and creative thinking for the awareness of and uptake by policymakers and practitioners. Today's international system is in flux and fragmenting, with the need to navigate competing power aspirations and nodes of order. The programme focuses on understanding the history, current nature, and potential future trajectories of global orders, aiming to examine the diverse and often contested understandings of orders and disorders.

About the British Academy

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. From artificial intelligence to climate change, from building prosperity to improving wellbeing - today's complex challenges can only be resolved by deepening our insight into people, cultures and societies. We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engaging the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone.

About the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace generates strategic ideas and independent analysis, supports diplomacy, and trains the next generation of scholar-practitioners to help countries and institutions take on the most difficult global problems and advance peace. In addition to its offices in Washington, DC and California, Carnegie has established global centers in Asia, Beirut, Berlin, Brussels, and New Delhi. As a uniquely global think tank, Carnegie leverages its network of over 170 experts to better understand the threats and opportunities affecting global security and well-being, and to prepare the next generation of foreign policy leaders through training and mentorship.

The British Academy
10–11 Carlton House Terrace
London SW1Y 5AH

Registered charity no. 233176

thebritishacademy.ac.uk

Published February 2026

doi.org/10.5871/global-disorder/9780856727238

The British Academy | CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE