

*Syria and the Neutrality Trap: Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid through Violent Regimes* by Carsten Wieland, 2021, I.B.Tauris: London. Address: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK. ISBN 978-0-7556-4139-0 (paperback), Pp.200. (Price: £21.99).

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Carsten Wieland is a German diplomat who, in his book *Syria and the Neutrality Trap: Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid through Violent Regimes*, assesses his own experience as a UN consultant and negotiator while working on the Syrian conflict up until 2019. Wieland opens his book by arguing that the previous failure of the US-led invasion to Iraq and the intervention in Libya, which was also controversial, were behind the failure to activate an international Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in the Syrian conflict (p.3). In the introduction of his book, Wieland explains what he means by the humanitarian Neutrality Trap: the decisions-makers aspire, with good intentions, to ease the suffering of people, yet the use of neutrality as a cover transforms humanitarian assistance into a weapon used by the regime against its own people (p.4).

Wieland shows, in chapter two, how bureaucratic and organisational behaviour has substituted idealism and the defence of human rights, drawing examples not only from Syria but from previous conflicts too (p.15). Chapter three focuses on the Geneva Conventions of which Syria is a signatory, and how Syria is still responsible as a state which claims absolute sovereignty; nonetheless, it violates to the maximum level its responsibility toward its own people and, instead of providing humanitarian assistance, uses starvation as a method of warfare (p.30). In chapter four, Wieland demonstrates that the validity of the international legal principles has changed and even weakened over time. Meanwhile, Wieland argues that the Syrian regime has used international law to emphasise its sovereignty but was simultaneously violating it when it did not serve its goals in the conflict (p.40). Chapter five shows that the strategy of dehumanizing the other, which was used in the terrorism narrative after 9/11, was also used by the Syrian regime to legitimize atrocity. Chapter six examines how the Syrian regime was able to bully, influence and most importantly use the humanitarian presence and aids in the country. It shows also how the regime controls the humanitarian assistance through organisations linked to President Bashar al-Assad and his wife Asma (p.58). In chapter seven, the author draws from his own experience and personal

contacts to explain the dilemma of neutrality from a diplomatic perspective. Wieland points out that this dilemma was manifested in the UN's approach; despite the massive violation of human rights and International Law, the UN officials kept emphasising the sovereignty of Syria, not only because they cared about it but because these officials knew that if they became a *persona non grata* it would negatively damage their careers (p.91). As argued in chapter eight, according to Wieland, the UN lost its credibility during this conflict in the eyes of many Western donors, including states and NGOs, which become increasingly disappointed with the UN approach in Syria (p.103). Wieland also elaborates how important it is to understand and assess the measures taken in the Syrian crisis to avoid falling again into the same trap in future conflicts. Chapter nine considers the period following the credibility crisis, when donors diversified their spending (p.112). This new approach violated the principles of neutrality, but it also helped to direct the necessary resources to those who needed it and limit the regime access to this assistance which is used in warfare. However, this new approach was met with some challenges, especially the increasing radicalisation of armed groups (p.115). Chapter ten examines the political circumstances that contributed to the messy situation in Syria. The author also presents the problems that led to the Neutrality Trap in the Syrian context. In Chapter 11 Wieland offers some recommendations to avoid a similar failure in future crises.

Throughout the book, the author succeeds in presenting strong arguments and supporting them with valuable information about the mechanisms of humanitarian assistance, including his own experience in this conflict and valuable primary sources. Wieland's book clearly presents how the Syrian regime succeeded in dehumanising its rivals, rendering its excess use of violence more legitimate (p.5). He also examines the deficits of the international system in which the multilateral instruments were paralysed, showing how these deficits caused an inability to use effective means to contain the conflict and stop humanitarian disaster. Nonetheless, under the 'Neutrality Trap', the humanitarian actors, mainly the UN, had to continue to work with a regime that was killing its own people and violating international law (p.138). The Syria regime, as Wieland argues, was highly critical of humanitarian assistance; ironically, however, it was very keen to receive and benefit from it as an asset in warfare (p.145).

One of the most tantalising points in the book is that Wieland, who used to work for them, criticizes the lack of accountability among senior staff of the UN, hinting implicitly at

possible corruption. Significantly, he concludes his book by pointing out: the so-called neutrality of the UN helped the Syrian regime to survive and, concluding with the words of Syrian actor Mr. Jamal Suleiman, this ‘neutrality’ killed Syrians “softly with silk rope” (p.150). Despite some repetition of ideas and chapters that could have been merged for better cohesion, Wieland’s book presents an excellent insider-account that helps illuminate the weaknesses and limitations of humanitarian aid in war zones in general and in Syria in particular.

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