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Research Article

International Humanitarian Corridors: An Analysis of Diplomatic Challenges

Munia Zaman Mim^{*1}; Kazi Shah Hamza¹; Paval Ahammed Nijum¹; Md Nahidur Rahman Nabil¹; Prof. Dr Kazi Abdul Mannan²

¹Department of Science and Engineering

²Department of Business Administration

Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Corresponding Author Munia Zaman Mim, Email: muniamin1909@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the diplomatic challenges associated with establishing and operating humanitarian corridors during armed conflict, focusing on three case studies: Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia. By employing both realist and constructivist theoretical lenses, the study investigates how legal ambiguity, strategic interests, normative divergence, and institutional limitations undermine the effectiveness of these life-saving mechanisms. Findings indicate that while humanitarian corridors are conceptually grounded in international humanitarian law, their implementation is often thwarted by states' prioritisation of sovereignty and strategic advantage. The study also highlights the critical role of mediators, the influence of public perception, and the impact of trust deficits on diplomatic negotiations. Constructivist analysis reveals that divergent interpretations of neutrality, civilian protection, and humanitarian intent contribute to diplomatic failures. Realist perspectives highlight the instrumentalisation of corridors for military or political advantage. The paper concludes by recommending actionable measures, including clearer legal frameworks, more empowered mediators, and early diplomatic intervention. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of humanitarian diplomacy and offer practical guidance for improving the use of humanitarian corridors in future crises.

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1. Introduction

In times of armed conflict and humanitarian crises, the international community has frequently turned to humanitarian corridors as a means to alleviate suffering and protect civilian populations. Humanitarian corridors are demilitarised zones established temporarily to facilitate the safe passage of humanitarian aid and the evacuation of civilians from conflict areas. Rooted in the principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), these corridors are premised on the universal obligation to protect non-combatants during hostilities (ICRC, 2016). However, their establishment and operationalisation are far from straightforward. Despite their legal and moral justifications, humanitarian corridors frequently become entangled in the complex web of international diplomacy, political interests, and military strategies.

The use of humanitarian corridors gained prominence during conflicts in the 1990s, notably in Bosnia and Somalia, where they were implemented under the auspices of United Nations peacekeeping operations. Since then, humanitarian corridors have been proposed or established in various conflict settings, including Darfur, Gaza, Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia. While the theoretical appeal of such corridors is high, practical outcomes have often been inconsistent, marred by violations, coordination failures, and ceasefire breakdowns. In many instances, the safe zones intended for protection have become militarised or used for propaganda, eroding trust in the mechanism itself (Slim, 1997; Ferris, 2020).

One of the primary challenges lies in the diplomatic negotiations required to establish these corridors. These negotiations often involve a broad range of actors: national governments, rebel or non-state armed groups, international organisations such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and sometimes regional organisations or neutral third-party states acting as mediators. Each of these actors may possess different priorities, strategic goals, and levels of commitment to international norms, complicating the process of reaching a consensus (Weiss & Daws, 2007).

Furthermore, humanitarian corridors must navigate a tension between the principle of state sovereignty and the imperative of humanitarian access. While International Humanitarian Law (IHL) obligates parties to allow aid to reach civilians, states often invoke their sovereignty to resist or control external intervention. This has created situations where the negotiation of humanitarian access is as politically sensitive and diplomatically charged as military ceasefires or peace talks themselves (Kellenberger, 2008). Compounding this are challenges such as asymmetric warfare, where non-state actors may not recognise international legal norms, and multi-party conflicts, where identifying and engaging all relevant actors becomes a daunting task.

This paper examines the diplomatic challenges associated with implementing humanitarian corridors through the lens of international relations. Specifically, it seeks to address the following research questions:

- What are the primary diplomatic challenges to establishing humanitarian corridors?
- How do different theoretical frameworks in international relations explain these challenges?
- What lessons can be drawn from recent case studies involving Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia?

By applying a dual theoretical lens of Constructivism and Realism, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of why humanitarian corridors succeed in some contexts and fail in others. Constructivism emphasises the role of norms, identities, and non-state actors in humanitarian negotiations, whereas realism highlights the role of state power, strategic interests, and geopolitical rivalry. These frameworks, when combined, offer a comprehensive analysis of the diplomatic landscape surrounding humanitarian corridors (Wendt, 1999; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing literature on humanitarian diplomacy by focusing specifically on corridors as both a practical tool and a

diplomatic challenge. It argues that meaningful reform in the way humanitarian corridors are negotiated and implemented requires not only stronger legal mechanisms but also a recalibration of international diplomatic practices to prioritise human security over strategic gain.

2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the diplomatic challenges in implementing humanitarian corridors requires a theoretical lens that captures both the normative aspirations of international humanitarianism and the strategic calculations of global actors. To this end, this study adopts a dual-theoretical framework rooted in Constructivism and Realism, two foundational theories in international relations (IR) that offer complementary insights into the motivations and constraints faced by state and non-state actors.

2.1 Constructivism

Constructivism in international relations emphasises the significance of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping the behaviour of states and institutions (Wendt, 1999). Unlike materialist theories that focus solely on power or economic interests, constructivism posits that international politics is socially constructed through the interactions of actors who internalise shared beliefs, values, and norms. From this perspective, humanitarian corridors are understood as manifestations of the evolving normative commitment to civilian protection, human dignity, and the responsibility to alleviate suffering during armed conflict.

Constructivist theory sheds light on how humanitarian norms—codified in instruments such as the Geneva Conventions and promoted by organisations like the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross—gain traction among international actors. These norms not only influence state behaviour but also create expectations that non-compliance will result in reputational costs or international condemnation (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). For example, the invocation of humanitarian principles during negotiations over corridors in Syria and Ukraine

reflects an effort to align state behaviour with normative standards, even amid competing interests.

However, constructivism also reveals the diplomatic challenges that arise from contested identities and diverging interpretations of these norms. States or armed groups may adopt selective compliance based on how they perceive themselves or their adversaries. In deeply fragmented conflicts, such as the Tigray War, actors often reject external humanitarian norms as forms of neo-imperialism or threats to sovereignty, complicating negotiations (Barnett, 2011). Thus, constructivism allows for an appreciation of both the normative progress and the identity-based friction inherent in humanitarian diplomacy.

2.2 Realism

In contrast, Realism provides a more sceptical and power-centric interpretation of international affairs. Rooted in the works of classical and neorealist thinkers, this theory posits that the international system is anarchic and that states primarily act to preserve their security, autonomy, and relative power (Mearsheimer, 2001). Under a realist framework, humanitarian corridors are not purely altruistic endeavours but are often leveraged as strategic instruments by state and non-state actors. Diplomacy surrounding such corridors becomes a bargaining process infused with suspicion, coercion, and strategic manoeuvring.

Realists argue that even humanitarian actions are subordinated to the logic of political survival and the maximisation of interests. For instance, dominant states may advocate for humanitarian corridors in adversarial regions not solely out of concern for civilian protection, but to project soft power, gain influence, or weaken rival actors (Waltz, 1979). The presence of great power rivalry, such as that between Russia and the West in Ukraine, illustrates how humanitarian issues are entangled in broader geopolitical conflicts. Realism also accounts for the recurrent failure of humanitarian diplomacy when actors calculate that compliance would result in strategic disadvantages.

By highlighting the limits of moral appeals and the enduring relevance of power asymmetries, Realism provides a sobering counterbalance to constructivist optimism. The failure of humanitarian corridors due to ceasefire violations, misinformation, and strategic deception can often be better understood through this lens.

2.3 Integrative Perspective

Employing both Constructivist and Realist frameworks enables a more holistic understanding of the diplomatic difficulties associated with humanitarian corridors. Constructivism elucidates the normative and identity-driven motives that foster cooperation or resistance, while Realism explains the persistent influence of material power and strategic interests. This dual approach is essential for dissecting real-world case studies where humanitarian diplomacy often vacillates between ethical imperatives and pragmatic constraints. It allows scholars and practitioners alike to appreciate the moral ambitions of international humanitarian law without overlooking the harsh realities of international politics.

3. Literature Review

The academic discourse surrounding humanitarian corridors has grown steadily, especially since the 1990s, when their application became more visible during conflicts in Somalia, Rwanda, and the Balkans. Initially conceptualised as pragmatic tools for humanitarian access, humanitarian corridors have increasingly been scrutinised for their political, legal, and ethical implications.

Slim (1997) was among the early scholars to discuss the moral dilemmas faced by humanitarian agencies operating in conflict zones. He argued that humanitarian action, while driven by moral imperatives, often operates in politically charged environments that can compromise neutrality and effectiveness. This concern is echoed in Weiss and Daws (2007), who emphasise that the success of humanitarian diplomacy depends not only on legal frameworks but also on the willingness of conflicting parties to respect international humanitarian norms.

A central issue in the literature is the legal status of humanitarian corridors under international law. According to Kellenberger (2008), a tension exists between the right to humanitarian access enshrined in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the principle of state sovereignty. This tension often becomes a significant diplomatic obstacle, as states involved in conflict may view such corridors as a violation of their territorial integrity.

The operational challenges of implementing humanitarian corridors are also well-documented. Ferris (2020) examines the evolution of humanitarian access mechanisms in the 21st century, particularly in the context of conflicts involving non-state actors. She notes that asymmetric warfare has rendered traditional diplomatic tools less effective, necessitating new forms of engagement that can include informal and track-two diplomacy.

Recent literature has focused on the instrumentalisation of humanitarian corridors by powerful states. Mearsheimer (2001), through the lens of realism, argues that states may use humanitarian corridors not as altruistic tools but as instruments to pursue national interests. This view receives empirical support from studies of the Syrian conflict, where both Russia and the United States supported corridors that aligned with their respective allies' strategic needs (ICRC, 2016).

The academic debate also includes the efficacy of international organisations in negotiating and managing humanitarian corridors. Scholars such as Weiss and Daws (2007) and the UNHCR (2023) argue that while organisations like the UN and the ICRC have normative authority, they often lack effective enforcement mechanisms, especially when major powers are involved. The Security Council's veto system is frequently cited as a structural limitation in this regard.

Another area explored is the influence of public opinion and media on shaping humanitarian access. Slim (1997) and Ferris (2020) highlight how global media coverage can pressure states and international organisations into action. However, the media can also

exacerbate diplomatic tensions by framing conflicts in ways that delegitimise one party, thereby reducing the prospects for cooperation.

Trust deficit among conflicting parties is another recurring theme. UNHCR (2023) emphasises the importance of sustained dialogue and confidence-building measures, without which humanitarian corridors are likely to be sporadic and unreliable. This is especially true in contexts such as Ukraine and Ethiopia, where mutual accusations and a lack of verifiable ceasefires undermine corridor implementation (OCHA, 2022; HRW, 2022).

Moreover, regional organisations are gaining attention for their potential role in mediating humanitarian access. While global institutions often face geopolitical constraints, regional actors may have better contextual understanding and cultural legitimacy. Studies on the African Union's involvement in Ethiopia and Turkey's role in Ukraine underscore this point (HRW, 2022; OCHA, 2022).

Nevertheless, the literature also cautions against over-reliance on regional mechanisms, noting that regional politics can be equally divisive. For instance, rivalries within the Arab League or competing interests within the African Union can hinder effective action (Ferris, 2020).

Despite the richness of the existing literature, few studies have systematically compared the diplomatic processes across different contexts to identify patterns and anomalies. This paper contributes to filling that gap by analysing three contemporary case studies—Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia—through a dual theoretical lens. It demonstrates that while each context has its unique attributes, common diplomatic barriers persist, including legal ambiguity, power asymmetries, trust deficits, and limited institutional capacities.

In summary, the literature on humanitarian corridors is multi-disciplinary, drawing from international law, political science, and humanitarian studies. It provides valuable insights into the legal, moral, and operational aspects of humanitarian

corridors, but often falls short of offering integrated theoretical explanations and comparative diplomatic analysis. This study aims to bridge that gap by focusing explicitly on diplomacy as the linchpin for the success or failure of humanitarian corridors.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study methodology to examine the diplomatic challenges involved in establishing and implementing international humanitarian corridors. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for understanding complex political and normative phenomena, such as humanitarian diplomacy, where contextual sensitivity and interpretive depth are crucial (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research aims to elucidate how various political, legal, and strategic factors interact to either facilitate or hinder humanitarian access during armed conflicts.

4.1 Research Design

The research employs a multiple-case design, focusing on three contemporary conflict zones: Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia. Each of these cases represents a significant humanitarian crisis wherein humanitarian corridors were proposed, negotiated, or implemented with varying degrees of success and diplomatic complexity. The cross-case comparison enables the identification of both context-specific dynamics and recurring diplomatic obstacles, thereby contributing to the development of generalisable insights into humanitarian diplomacy.

4.2 Case Selection Criteria

The cases were selected based on three primary criteria:

- **Conflict Intensity and Humanitarian Need:** Each case involved a high-intensity armed conflict that necessitated the creation of humanitarian corridors to address urgent civilian needs (OCHA, 2022; UNHCR, 2023).
- **Documented Diplomatic Engagement:** The presence of well-documented diplomatic initiatives, including UN Security Council resolutions, negotiations by international and

regional actors, and media coverage of the corridor processes.

- Geopolitical Diversity: The inclusion of cases from diverse geopolitical and cultural regions—such as the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Horn of Africa—enables broader applicability of the findings.

4.3 Data Collection

The research draws on a variety of primary and secondary sources. Primary data includes:

- Official documents from the United Nations (e.g., Security Council resolutions, OCHA situation reports)
- Statements and communiqués from international non-governmental organisations (e.g., ICRC, MSF)
- Transcripts of speeches and public statements by state actors and diplomats involved in negotiations

Secondary data includes peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and media analyses related to the selected case studies. This multi-source strategy ensures methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Yin, 2018).

4.4 Analytical Framework

The data were analysed using thematic content analysis, a qualitative technique for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Key themes—such as sovereignty disputes, legal ambiguities, mistrust among parties, and strategic manipulation—were derived inductively and coded across all cases. These themes were then interpreted through the dual lenses of Constructivism and Realism, allowing for both normative and strategic dimensions of diplomacy to be considered.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Given the reliance on publicly available data and the absence of human subjects, formal ethical approval was not required. However, the research maintains academic integrity by accurately citing all sources and ensuring balanced representation of all stakeholders involved in the humanitarian corridor processes. Care

has been taken to avoid sensationalism and maintain neutrality, particularly when discussing ongoing conflicts.

4.6 Limitations

While the qualitative case study approach provides depth, it also imposes certain limitations regarding generalizability. The diplomatic dynamics of humanitarian corridors can vary significantly depending on the nature of the conflict, the actors involved, and regional political configurations. Furthermore, the reliance on publicly available documents means that some behind-the-scenes negotiations or classified information may not be accessible, which could limit the completeness of the analysis.

Despite these limitations, the methodology employed provides a rigorous and context-sensitive approach to understanding the diplomatic challenges inherent in creating and operating humanitarian corridors. It lays the groundwork for further research, incorporating field interviews and quantitative data on humanitarian outcomes.

5. Case Studies

To understand the real-world complexities of humanitarian corridors, this section examines three contemporary conflict zones: Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia. Each case presents distinct geopolitical contexts and diplomatic interactions, yet reveals strikingly similar obstacles in establishing effective humanitarian pathways.

5.1 Syria

The Syrian conflict, ongoing since 2011, has become emblematic of the diplomatic difficulties in implementing humanitarian corridors. The war involves a wide array of actors, including the Syrian government, various opposition groups, international coalitions, and powerful external states such as Russia, the United States, and Turkey.

Diplomatic negotiations for humanitarian corridors in Syria have frequently been impeded by the lack of consensus at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Russia, a staunch ally of the Assad

regime, has repeatedly used its veto power to limit international access to Syrian territory under the guise of defending state sovereignty (UNSC, 2021). This tension highlights a classic realist dilemma in which strategic alliances and power projection often take precedence over humanitarian imperatives (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Constructivist insights are also applicable. Different actors possess divergent perceptions of legitimacy and responsibility. Western nations often frame the Syrian government as illegitimate and prioritise humanitarian intervention, while Russia and Iran emphasise sovereignty and accuse Western powers of regime change motives. These identity-driven narratives obstruct diplomatic efforts by reducing the common normative ground necessary for cooperation (Wendt, 1999).

On-the-ground implementation of corridors, such as those in Eastern Ghouta (2018) and Aleppo (2016), was marred by mutual distrust, insufficient guarantees of safety, and selective access depending on territorial control (ICRC, 2016). Humanitarian agencies often found themselves negotiating separately with multiple actors, leading to inconsistent outcomes and increased security risks.

The Syrian case demonstrates how legal ambiguity, contested narratives, and veto diplomacy intersect to undermine corridor implementation. Despite numerous UNSC resolutions, such as Resolution 2254, humanitarian access has remained erratic due to competing geopolitical interests and the absence of enforceable mechanisms.

5.2 Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 introduced a new theatre for humanitarian corridors shaped by high-intensity interstate warfare, modern information warfare, and extensive media scrutiny. Unlike Syria, where non-state actors dominate, Ukraine represents a more traditional conflict between two state actors, albeit with proxy elements and broader NATO involvement.

The establishment of humanitarian corridors in cities such as Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Bucha faced significant diplomatic hurdles. One major challenge was the failure to establish robust ceasefires that could protect corridor operations. Although agreements were often reached through intermediaries such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), these were frequently violated within hours due to the absence of enforceable verification mechanisms (OCHA, 2022).

Ukraine's diplomatic strategy involved mobilising Western support to shame Russia on the international stage, portraying violations of humanitarian agreements as war crimes. This approach generated global sympathy but hardened Russian resistance, further politicising corridor negotiations (UNHCR, 2023). Russia, in turn, accused Ukraine and Western countries of using civilians as "human shields" and obstructing safe passage (HRW, 2022).

The constructivist framework helps explain the identity-based antagonism fueling diplomatic deadlock. Russia's perception of Ukraine as a sphere of influence clashes with the latter's Western alignment, making even technical humanitarian discussions ideologically charged (Wendt, 1999). Meanwhile, realist dynamics—such as NATO's support for Ukraine and Russia's territorial ambitions—further complicate corridor implementation by embedding humanitarian decisions within larger security calculations.

Thus, the Ukraine case reveals how humanitarian diplomacy can be overwhelmed by militarised narratives and geopolitical brinkmanship. The inability to establish credible monitoring and enforcement mechanisms resulted in repeated failures and significant civilian casualties during attempted evacuations.

5.3 Ethiopia

The conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region, which began in late 2020, presents a unique diplomatic context characterised by internal state fragmentation, ethnic divisions, and regional African diplomacy. The

Ethiopian government's military operations against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) triggered a severe humanitarian crisis, prompting calls for corridors to deliver aid and evacuate civilians.

Unlike Syria and Ukraine, the Ethiopian government initially denied the existence of a humanitarian crisis and resisted international involvement, framing the conflict as a domestic issue. This sovereignty-first narrative effectively blocked early international diplomatic engagement (HRW, 2022). However, pressure from the African Union (AU), along with discreet shuttle diplomacy from the UN and other regional actors, eventually led to limited agreements for humanitarian access.

The humanitarian corridor established from Semera to Mekelle in 2021, although theoretically operational, was plagued by logistical delays, military interference, and accusations from both sides of aid weaponisation. Humanitarian convoys were frequently blocked or looted, and aid workers were subjected to security risks (OCHA, 2022).

Constructivist theory helps explain the Ethiopian case through the lens of competing national narratives. The central government framed humanitarian interventions as foreign interference, while the TPLF accused Addis Ababa of orchestrating famine as a weapon of war. These narratives shaped the diplomatic atmosphere and hindered trust-based negotiation (UNHCR, 2023).

From a realist perspective, the Ethiopian state's desire to assert control over national territory, combined with regional rivalries (e.g., with Eritrea), diminished the incentive to accommodate external humanitarian mediation. The AU, though better situated to engage with local actors, lacked the political clout and logistical capabilities to enforce sustained access (Ferris, 2020).

The Tigray case thus illustrates how internal power dynamics and weak regional institutions can render humanitarian corridors ineffective, even in the absence of great-power rivalry. It underscores the need

for robust regional mechanisms and local-level trust-building in future diplomatic efforts.

5.4 Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis of Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia highlights several recurring diplomatic challenges:

Legal Ambiguity: In all three cases, conflicting interpretations of international humanitarian law and sovereignty impeded consensus. There remains no universally binding legal instrument to compel parties to honour humanitarian corridor agreements (Kellenberger, 2008).

Power Asymmetries: Realist dynamics dominate, with more powerful actors leveraging humanitarian issues for strategic gain. This is especially evident in Syria and Ukraine, where major powers use vetoes and alliances to shape access to corridors.

Trust Deficit: All cases reveal deep mutual mistrust, exacerbated by past violations and propaganda. This deficit undermines ceasefire agreements and safe passage assurances, rendering humanitarian diplomacy fragile and contingent.

Institutional Limitations: International organisations, although normatively significant, often lack adequate enforcement capacity. In Ethiopia, regional bodies, such as the African Union (AU), were constrained by political considerations and logistical limitations.

Normative Contestation: Constructivist elements, including identity, narrative framing, and normative disagreement, strongly influence diplomatic interactions. The varying perceptions of legitimacy and victimhood affect cooperation prospects.

In summary, these case studies confirm that while humanitarian corridors are both legally and morally justified, their practical implementation is hindered by complex diplomatic dynamics. Successful humanitarian diplomacy requires not only legal clarity and operational planning but also a recalibration of political will, trust, and multilateral engagement.

6. Analysis and Discussion

The comparative analysis of the three selected case studies—Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia—reveals a complex interplay of legal ambiguity, power asymmetries, normative divergences, and institutional constraints in the implementation of humanitarian corridors. This section critically examines the diplomatic challenges through the dual theoretical lens of constructivism and realism, offering insights into recurring and context-specific impediments.

6.1 Legal Ambiguity and the Sovereignty Dilemma

One of the most persistent challenges across all three contexts is the tension between humanitarian imperatives and state sovereignty. In Ethiopia, for instance, the government consistently invoked sovereignty and national security as reasons to deny or delay humanitarian access to the Tigray region. This stance reflects the realist assertion that states prioritise survival and autonomy above all else (Mearsheimer, 2001). Even in situations where humanitarian need is dire, governments often view corridors as infringements on their authority, leading to diplomatic resistance.

In Syria, although the legal framework for humanitarian corridors exists under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), implementation requires the consent of the host state, which is often withheld or manipulated. The UN Security Council's Resolution 2165 (2014) authorised cross-border aid without Syrian government approval but was heavily contested and eventually rolled back due to opposition from Russia and China. This illustrates the limits of legal instruments when major powers exert influence to protect their allies (Kellenberger, 2008).

6.2 Strategic Instrumentalisation and Realpolitik

The realist perspective is further substantiated by the strategic use of humanitarian corridors for political and military gain. In Syria, the corridors were used by the Assad regime and its allies not solely for humanitarian purposes but as tools to evacuate opposition-held areas and consolidate control (HRW, 2016). This weaponisation of humanitarianism undermines both the trust and neutrality necessary for corridor success.

Ukraine's experience presents a similar picture. The conflicting narratives and mutual accusations between Russia and Ukraine regarding the targeting of civilians and the use of corridors for military positioning reflect a zero-sum strategic environment. The involvement of regional powers, such as Turkey, and supranational bodies, such as the EU, has helped mediate to some extent; however, the lack of enforcement mechanisms hampers durable outcomes (OCHA, 2022).

Constructivist theory emphasises that when shared norms surrounding humanitarianism are absent or contested, diplomatic efforts falter. In both Ukraine and Syria, accusations of bad faith and manipulation eroded the normative basis necessary for cooperation. This divergence in humanitarian norms—what constitutes neutrality, who qualifies as a civilian—creates interpretive gaps that complicate diplomatic dialogue (Wendt, 1999).

6.3 Trust Deficits and Fragmented Dialogue

The establishment of humanitarian corridors relies heavily on mutual trust, yet all three cases suffer from profound trust deficits. In Ethiopia, the absence of transparent communication between the government and humanitarian agencies, exacerbated by media censorship, resulted in misinformation and mutual suspicion. Humanitarian actors were unable to verify conditions on the ground, and diplomatic overtures were perceived as hostile interventions (Ferris, 2020).

Ukraine and Syria, although more accessible to international media, also demonstrated deep distrust among conflicting parties. The failure of ceasefires, attacks on aid convoys, and exclusion of certain actors from negotiations all contributed to the fragility of diplomatic arrangements. This echoes findings from Slim (1997), who emphasised the necessity of confidence-building measures and transparent mechanisms to foster cooperative engagement.

6.4 Role of Mediators and Institutional Constraints

The role of mediating actors—both international and regional—is pivotal in the negotiation and maintenance of humanitarian corridors. However, the

efficacy of such mediation is contingent upon institutional authority and political neutrality. In the Syrian and Ethiopian cases, the United Nations and the African Union, respectively, faced limitations due to geopolitical alignments and internal divisions. The UN's normative authority was counterbalanced by the veto power of Security Council members, while the African Union lacked sufficient leverage over the Ethiopian government (Weiss & Daws, 2007).

Conversely, in Ukraine, Turkey's mediation, particularly in brokering the grain corridor deal, demonstrated the potential of regional actors to play a constructive role when they possess both influence and perceived neutrality. However, this success was limited to specific sectors and did not extend fully to humanitarian corridors, indicating the need for broader mandates and more robust institutional frameworks (HRW, 2022).

6.5 Media and Public Perception

The influence of media and public perception in shaping diplomatic trajectories cannot be overlooked. In Syria and Ukraine, widespread media coverage generated international pressure and mobilised humanitarian concern. However, this also led to the politicisation of humanitarian narratives, where certain actors were delegitimised, reducing the scope for inclusive negotiation (Slim, 1997).

In contrast, the Ethiopian conflict was characterised by restricted media access and information blackouts, which diminished global awareness and reduced diplomatic pressure. This asymmetry in visibility affects the effectiveness of humanitarian diplomacy, as international actors often prioritise crises that receive substantial media coverage (Ferris, 2020).

6.6 Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

The constructivist lens offers valuable insights into how identity, norms, and perceptions shape the diplomacy of humanitarian corridors. The contested meaning of humanitarian norms, the delegitimation of opposing parties, and the erosion of shared ethical standards are all normative barriers that hinder cooperative diplomacy efforts. When states and non-

state actors lack a common understanding of humanitarian principles, diplomatic efforts are prone to failure.

At the same time, realism effectively explains the structural and strategic impediments that dominate the operational landscape. State actors prioritise sovereignty, territorial control, and strategic advantage over humanitarian concerns. Humanitarian corridors, from a realist perspective, are tolerated only when they align with national interests or help to mitigate reputational costs.

Both theories underscore the need for more nuanced diplomatic strategies that address normative divergence while also accommodating geopolitical realities. The fusion of constructivist and realist insights suggests that successful humanitarian corridor diplomacy requires:

- Clear legal mandates that reduce ambiguity and offer enforceable guidelines.
- Neutral and credible mediators capable of navigating power asymmetries.
- Inclusive dialogue platforms that build trust among diverse stakeholders.
- Strategic communication efforts that balance transparency with conflict sensitivity.
- Stronger international and regional institutional capacities with less politicised governance mechanisms.

6.7 Practical Lessons and Policy Implications

The empirical evidence from Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia demonstrates that establishing humanitarian corridors is not merely a logistical or legal issue, but fundamentally a diplomatic one. Effective humanitarian diplomacy must be proactive, context-sensitive, and grounded in both normative and strategic realities.

Policymakers and humanitarian agencies should prioritise early diplomatic engagement to prevent conflicts from escalating beyond the possibility of negotiation. Moreover, the empowerment of regional actors with cultural and geopolitical legitimacy can enhance mediation efforts, provided they maintain neutrality.

Ultimately, there is a pressing need to enhance the international legal framework governing humanitarian corridors. Clear guidelines on initiation, operation, and monitoring, coupled with accountability mechanisms, can help reduce manipulation and improve compliance.

In conclusion, humanitarian corridors are indispensable yet diplomatically fragile tools. Their success depends on the delicate balance of legal clarity, normative consensus, and strategic cooperation. A deeper understanding of both realist and constructivist dynamics can inform more effective and ethical approaches to humanitarian diplomacy in future crises.

8. Conclusion

The analysis of humanitarian corridors in Syria, Ukraine, and Ethiopia reveals the immense diplomatic complexities surrounding their negotiation and implementation. These corridors, intended as lifelines for civilians in conflict zones, often become entangled in a web of political, legal, and strategic disputes. Through the dual theoretical lenses of realism and constructivism, the study highlights how state interests, power asymmetries, and normative divergences collectively hinder the operationalisation of these humanitarian mechanisms.

Realist interpretations emphasise how concerns about sovereignty and strategic priorities frequently supersede humanitarian obligations. States frequently resist or manipulate corridors to retain political leverage or to pursue military objectives. In contrast, the constructivist perspective sheds light on how divergent interpretations of humanitarian norms, such as neutrality and the protection of civilians, contribute to breakdowns in diplomatic dialogue. The absence of shared values and trust further complicates negotiations, particularly in protracted or highly polarised conflicts.

Furthermore, the analysis illustrates the critical yet constrained role of mediators, whether regional actors or international organizations. Success depends not only on their institutional authority but also on their perceived neutrality and ability to navigate

competing narratives. Media visibility and public perception further shape the international response, sometimes amplifying or undermining humanitarian diplomacy.

Ultimately, the study concludes that the success of humanitarian corridors hinges on a nuanced balance between normative alignment and pragmatic diplomacy. Future strategies must integrate enforceable legal frameworks, inclusive negotiation platforms, and robust institutional mechanisms that can accommodate both humanitarian imperatives and geopolitical realities. The cases examined offer valuable lessons for designing more adaptive, credible, and ethical approaches to humanitarian corridor diplomacy in contemporary and future conflict settings.

7.1. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations can be made to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian corridor diplomacy:

- **Establish Clear Legal Frameworks:** There is a need for internationally agreed-upon guidelines that define the creation, operation, and oversight of humanitarian corridors. These frameworks should include enforceable provisions to prevent misuse and ensure accountability.
- **Enhance Mediator Legitimacy and Capacity:** Neutral and trusted third-party actors—whether regional powers or international institutions—should be empowered with greater authority and resources to facilitate negotiations. Mediators must maintain impartiality while possessing the geopolitical clout to influence parties.
- **Foster Normative Convergence:** Efforts should be made to build consensus on humanitarian norms among conflicting parties. Training, dialogue sessions, and cultural diplomacy can help align perceptions regarding neutrality and the protection of civilians.
- **Strengthen Communication Mechanisms:** Establish transparent and credible communication channels to minimise

misinformation, reduce distrust, and ensure a safe passage. Information campaigns can also enhance public understanding and global support.

- Institutionalise Early Intervention: Humanitarian diplomacy should not be a reactive approach. Early diplomatic engagement, before the full escalation of conflict, can provide better outcomes for civilians and humanitarian actors alike.

By implementing these recommendations, states and humanitarian agencies can contribute to more functional, legitimate, and humane responses to crises.

7.2. Future Research

While this study has provided a comparative analysis of humanitarian corridors in three conflict settings, future research could expand in several directions to deepen our understanding of humanitarian diplomacy.

First, more empirical case studies, particularly from underrepresented regions such as Latin America or Southeast Asia, could provide a broader dataset for cross-regional comparison. These cases might reveal unique diplomatic practices or challenges shaped by different cultural, political, or historical contexts.

Second, longitudinal studies that examine the long-term impacts of humanitarian corridors on post-conflict recovery and reconciliation processes would be invaluable. Do these corridors foster lasting trust or contribute to enduring political fragmentation?

Third, there is scope for technological inquiry into how innovations, such as satellite surveillance, blockchain logistics, or AI-driven monitoring, can improve the transparency, security, and accountability of humanitarian corridors.

Additionally, research should explore the gendered dimensions of humanitarian access, including how women and children are affected by corridor failures or manipulations, and how feminist diplomatic strategies might offer alternative approaches to addressing these issues.

Ultimately, integrating psychological and behavioural insights into diplomatic studies can enhance our understanding of trust-building and negotiation under extreme conditions. By examining how cognitive biases and group identities shape diplomatic decisions, future research can contribute to more psychologically informed models of humanitarian diplomacy.

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