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Research Article

International Humanitarian Corridors: An Analysis of Political Exploitation Challenges

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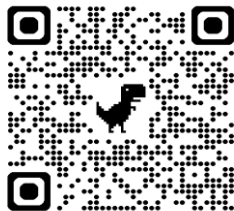
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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the political exploitation of international humanitarian corridors—mechanisms designed to provide safe passage for civilians and aid during armed conflicts. Drawing on three case studies—Syria, Ukraine, and Sudan—it reveals how humanitarian corridors are frequently co-opted for strategic military and political gain, undermining their neutrality and humanitarian purpose. Utilising a multidimensional theoretical framework incorporating realism, constructivism, and critical humanitarianism, the analysis highlights how both state and non-state actors instrumentalise these corridors to influence battlefield outcomes, control civilian populations, and construct normative legitimacy. The methodology combines qualitative content analysis of UN reports, NGO documentation, and academic literature with a thematic synthesis approach. Findings suggest that humanitarian corridors are often sites of coercion, misinformation, and legal ambiguity, calling into question the efficacy of international humanitarian law in protecting vulnerable populations. The study concludes with practical recommendations for strengthening legal enforcement, operational transparency, and ethical accountability in humanitarian interventions. It also proposes the integration of advanced monitoring technologies and more inclusive diplomatic negotiations to safeguard the humanitarian intent of such corridors. This research contributes to a growing body of literature that advocates for a reevaluation of humanitarian tools in contemporary conflict zones and proposes pathways for more principled and effective intervention strategies.

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1. Introduction

Humanitarian corridors are designated routes or zones established during armed conflicts or large-scale emergencies to ensure the safe passage of civilians, the wounded, and humanitarian aid. These corridors are typically negotiated between warring parties under the auspices of international organisations or third-party mediators, aiming to uphold principles enshrined in International Humanitarian Law (IHL), especially those codified in the Geneva Conventions (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2020). They serve as vital lifelines during sieges, displacements, and warfare, seeking to uphold the inviolable rights of civilians amidst chaos and violence.

Despite their humanitarian intentions, the operationalisation of such corridors has become increasingly politicised in modern conflict zones. As state and non-state actors vie for tactical advantage, humanitarian corridors have emerged not only as tools of compassion but also as instruments of strategy and propaganda (Slim, 2016). Rather than being protected zones of neutrality and safety, they are often used to manipulate civilian movements, consolidate military control, legitimise territorial claims, or project compliance with international norms, even while violating them in practice (Amnesty International, 2018).

This duality between the intended humanitarian function of corridors and their actual utilisation on the ground raises critical questions about the integrity of humanitarian operations in conflict zones. Cases such as the prolonged siege of Eastern Ghouta in Syria, the contested evacuations in Ukraine during the Russian invasion, and the ethnic-based access to aid in the recent Sudanese civil strife illustrate how these corridors can be co-opted to serve political or military goals (Human Rights Watch, 2017; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2022; Médecins Sans Frontières [MSF], 2024).

Furthermore, the international legal and normative frameworks surrounding humanitarian corridors, while theoretically robust, are often

unenforceable in practical terms due to power asymmetries, fragmented governance, or lack of third-party oversight. The result is an erosion of trust in humanitarian mechanisms and a growing perception that humanitarian tools are susceptible to manipulation by powerful actors (Billerbeck, 2020). In a global environment increasingly characterised by asymmetric warfare, proxy conflicts, and hybrid threats, the ability of humanitarian actors to remain neutral and effective is being severely tested.

This research aims to examine the political exploitation of international humanitarian corridors through a comparative lens, focusing on three contemporary conflict zones: Syria, Ukraine, and Sudan. By employing theoretical insights from both Realism and Constructivism in International Relations, this paper explores how power interests and normative constructions shape the creation, use, and perception of humanitarian corridors. Realism highlights the instrumentalisation of such corridors for strategic gain, while Constructivism sheds light on how actors justify or condemn their usage through normative discourse (Wendt, 1999; Mearsheimer, 2001).

The central research question guiding this study is: How are international humanitarian corridors politically exploited in contemporary conflict settings, and what are the implications for humanitarian principles and international law? Through this inquiry, the study aims to bridge the gap between legal theory, humanitarian practice, and political reality, offering not only a critical assessment of existing practices but also policy-oriented recommendations to mitigate future exploitation.

This paper seeks to analyse the challenges posed by the political exploitation of humanitarian corridors. It does so through a theoretical lens that combines realism and Constructivism, supported by case-based qualitative content analysis. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How are international humanitarian corridors politically exploited, and what implications does this have for humanitarian principles and international law?

2. Theoretical Framework

To critically assess the political exploitation of international humanitarian corridors, this study employs a dual-theoretical lens combining Realism and Constructivism—two foundational paradigms in International Relations (IR). While these approaches differ in their assumptions about the nature of international politics, their intersection allows for a more comprehensive understanding of both the strategic manipulation and normative justification surrounding humanitarian corridors.

2.1 Realism: Power and Strategic Calculations

Realism posits that the international system is anarchic, and its principal actors pursue survival and power as their primary objectives (Mearsheimer, 2001). Under this framework, humanitarian corridors are not merely neutral instruments of relief but potential tools to achieve strategic advantages in war zones. Realists argue that actors, especially states and powerful non-state entities, may endorse such corridors only to the extent that they align with their geopolitical objectives. For instance, corridors may be allowed to facilitate the relocation of populations from strategically valuable territories or to manipulate the international community's perception of a state's adherence to humanitarian norms (Waltz, 1979; Bellamy, 2015).

In Syria, for example, the Assad regime, with the support of Russia, often employed so-called "evacuation corridors" as mechanisms for consolidating control over besieged areas after prolonged aerial bombardment and starvation tactics (Amnesty International, 2018). Realist theory helps explain this behaviour as a rational strategic choice rather than a humanitarian gesture. These corridors, although presented as humanitarian exits, served to remove opposition-held populations and reassert state sovereignty over contested urban centres.

2.3 Constructivism: Norms, Identity, and Legitimacy

In contrast, Constructivism emphasises the role of ideational factors, such as norms, identities, and discourses, in shaping international behaviour (Wendt, 1999). Constructivists assert that international actors do not merely respond to material interests but also act

in ways that are socially constructed and deemed legitimate within prevailing normative frameworks. In this sense, humanitarian corridors are embedded within broader humanitarian discourses that value neutrality, impartiality, and the protection of civilians.

Constructivism enables scholars to examine how actors justify or critique humanitarian corridors not only in terms of outcomes but also through the lens of legitimacy. States and international organisations often invoke the humanitarian norm of "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) to justify the establishment or enforcement of such corridors, even when such actions intersect with political motives (Weiss, 2016). Moreover, actors who violate or manipulate corridors may still frame their actions in humanitarian terms to preserve their international image or avoid sanctions, indicating that norms have both constraining and enabling power.

For instance, during the Russia-Ukraine war, both sides accused each other of violating agreed-upon humanitarian corridors, while simultaneously presenting themselves as more compliant with international humanitarian norms (UNOCHA, 2022). Constructivism helps explain this behaviour by analysing the performative aspects of humanitarianism—how actors seek moral legitimacy and soft power even amidst brutal conflict.

2.4 Integrative Utility of the Framework

Together, Realism and Constructivism provide a complementary lens for analysing the dual nature of humanitarian corridors. Realism highlights how power dynamics and strategic interests shape the material design and function of corridors. Constructivism, meanwhile, illuminates how those same actions are framed, justified, or contested within international normative structures. This dual approach is beneficial for understanding both the actions and the discourses of state and non-state actors in modern asymmetric conflicts, where the boundaries between military necessity and humanitarian concern are increasingly blurred (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

By applying this theoretical framework, the research seeks to dissect not only the operational

dimensions of humanitarian corridors but also the political narratives that accompany them, thereby uncovering the layers of exploitation that may be masked by ostensibly humanitarian language.

3. Literature Review

The concept of international humanitarian corridors has garnered increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly as protracted conflicts and complex emergencies have challenged traditional modes of humanitarian intervention. Humanitarian corridors, generally defined as negotiated pathways enabling the safe evacuation of civilians or delivery of aid during armed conflicts, have evolved from ad hoc arrangements into highly politicised and strategically significant tools. This literature review critically surveys the evolution, implementation, and challenges of humanitarian corridors, while also emphasising the emerging discourse on their political manipulation.

3.1. Historical and Legal Foundations

The early conceptualisation of humanitarian corridors is rooted in the Geneva Conventions and subsequent protocols, particularly Article 70 of Additional Protocol I (1977), which outlines the right of access to humanitarian relief in times of armed conflict (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2016). However, as scholars such as Fleck (2013) and Kolb and Gaggioli (2013) note, these legal instruments are often aspirational, lacking robust enforcement mechanisms. Legal scholars have criticised the discretionary power they grant to sovereign states, which often results in uneven implementation depending on political will and military objectives.

3.2. Operational Realities and Challenges

The practical deployment of humanitarian corridors has demonstrated a series of operational difficulties. According to Terry (2002) and Barnett (2011), humanitarian actors frequently find themselves entangled in the logic of war, whereby their neutral and impartial status is compromised. The Syrian conflict presents a paradigmatic example, where so-called “safe zones” and corridors were often created under siege-like conditions, resulting in forced displacement rather than voluntary humanitarian relief

(Slim, 2015; Healy & Tiller, 2014). These corridors became instruments of regime consolidation rather than humanitarian sanctuaries.

Several reports by Médecins Sans Frontières (2016) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2022) highlight the recurring issue of insecurity and manipulation of corridors by belligerents. In Ukraine, for instance, temporary ceasefires for humanitarian passage have frequently been violated, with civilians caught in crossfire or redirected against their will (ICRC, 2022; Gowan, 2022). In Sudan, fragmented governance and inter-militia competition have made coordination nearly impossible, often delaying aid or rerouting it through corrupt networks (ReliefWeb, 2023).

3.3. Political Instrumentalisation and Normative Tensions

A significant body of recent literature interrogates the politicisation of humanitarianism. Scholars such as Donini (2012) and Duffield (2014) argue that state and non-state actors are increasingly co-opting humanitarian corridors to further their political or military agendas. The corridors cease to function as neutral humanitarian mechanisms and instead become embedded within broader geopolitical strategies. This is particularly evident in asymmetric warfare, where weaker parties may leverage humanitarian optics to garner international sympathy or to delegitimise opponents (de Lauri, 2016).

Kaldor (2012) and Fassin (2011) further contend that the very act of establishing a humanitarian corridor often legitimises certain forms of violence while obscuring others. For example, designating one area as “safe” implicitly marks other regions as disposable, reinforcing a hierarchy of life and undermining the universality of humanitarian norms. The temporary nature of corridors, which often lasts only hours or days, exacerbates this problem by creating fleeting windows of safety rather than providing sustainable protection.

3.4. The Role of International Actors

The literature is divided on the role of international organisations in managing or mitigating

these exploitations. While the United Nations, particularly through OCHA and the Security Council, has played a pivotal role in facilitating humanitarian access, it has also been criticised for acquiescing to power asymmetries. Scholars such as Weiss (2013) and Macrae and Harmer (2004) note that UN-mandated corridors often reflect the geopolitical interests of dominant states, resulting in a form of selective humanitarianism. The lack of consensus among permanent members of the Security Council frequently impedes decisive action, as seen in the Syrian and Ukrainian contexts.

On the other hand, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local civil society actors are increasingly recognised for their adaptive, community-based approaches to corridor negotiation. According to Fast (2014) and Hilhorst (2018), these actors are better positioned to understand local power dynamics and are often more trusted by communities than international agencies. Nonetheless, they face challenges of scale, security, and funding that limit their impact in high-intensity conflict zones.

3.5. Emerging Solutions and Ethical Debates

There is a growing academic discourse on innovative solutions and ethical paradigms that might improve the functioning of humanitarian corridors. The use of technology, such as satellite monitoring and blockchain-based tracking systems, is viewed as a promising approach to enhancing transparency and accountability (Mancini-Griffoli & Talbot, 2019). However, these solutions also raise ethical concerns about surveillance, data protection, and the militarisation of aid.

Ethical debates in the literature also revolve around the principle of “not harm.” As Slim (2015) warns, the establishment of corridors without robust ethical oversight can inadvertently cause more harm than good by legitimising forced evacuations or becoming tools of demographic engineering. The literature calls for a re-centring of humanitarianism around affected populations rather than political convenience.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study methodology to investigate the political exploitation of international humanitarian corridors in contemporary conflict zones. A qualitative approach is most appropriate given the complex, context-dependent nature of the phenomena under investigation, particularly the intersection between humanitarian norms, state behaviour, and international political discourse (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Through in-depth analysis of three specific cases—Syria, Ukraine, and Sudan—the research seeks to identify patterns, divergences, and implications surrounding the strategic use and misuse of humanitarian corridors.

4.1 Case Selection

The case study approach allows for a contextualised exploration of specific events while maintaining analytical generalizability through comparison (Yin, 2018). The three selected cases—Syria (2011–2020), Ukraine (2022–present), and Sudan (2023–present)—were chosen based on the following criteria:

- Presence of declared humanitarian corridors: All three contexts feature formally established humanitarian corridors, either through bilateral agreements, international mediation, or unilateral declarations.
- Documented instances of political manipulation: Each case presents credible allegations or evidence of corridors being used for purposes other than civilian protection.
- Variation in geopolitical context: These conflicts span different regions, actors, and international responses, providing a diverse backdrop for comparative insights.

This purposive sampling ensures theoretical relevance rather than statistical representativeness, aligning with the goals of qualitative IR research (George & Bennett, 2005).

4.2 Data Collection

The study relies primarily on secondary data sources, including:

- Reports from international organisations (e.g., United Nations, ICRC, MSF)
- NGO publications (e.g., Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch)
- News archives and investigative journalism
- Academic literature
- Government and intergovernmental briefings and communiqués

These materials were systematically reviewed using document analysis to identify discourses, policy actions, and outcomes related to the implementation and manipulation of humanitarian corridors. The selected documents were screened for relevance, credibility, and recency to ensure analytical validity (Bowen, 2009).

Additionally, discourse analysis was employed to assess how various actors—state, non-state, and international—frame their engagement with humanitarian corridors. This helps unpack the normative and political justifications for their use or violation, consistent with the constructivist strand of the study's theoretical framework (Gee, 2014).

4.3 Analytical Strategy

The analysis was conducted in two stages:

- Within-case analysis: Each case was examined independently to identify the political dynamics, actors involved, humanitarian consequences, and instances of corridor exploitation.
- Cross-case comparison: The findings were then compared across the three cases to identify common themes and key divergences. Particular attention was given to how power asymmetries, strategic military objectives, and international responses influenced the use or misuse of corridors.

This dual-level analysis enables the research to move beyond descriptive accounts toward theoretical generalisations about the political instrumentalisation of humanitarian norms in conflict zones.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the reliance on secondary sources, no direct human subjects were involved, and ethical clearance was not required under standard institutional guidelines. However, the study maintained a strong commitment to representing conflict-affected populations ethically, avoiding the reproduction of state narratives that dehumanise or victimise communities (Bryman, 2016). Moreover, care was taken to triangulate data from multiple perspectives to reduce bias and increase interpretive validity.

By combining methodological rigour with contextual depth, this research offers a robust platform to interrogate the paradoxes inherent in the modern deployment of humanitarian corridors—mechanisms intended to save lives but often wielded in the service of power.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

This section presents a comparative analysis of three major conflict zones—Syria, Ukraine, and Sudan—where humanitarian corridors have been employed with varying degrees of political manipulation. Drawing on qualitative data from institutional reports, academic analyses, and media investigations, the section analyses the actors, motives, and consequences surrounding these corridors. Findings are organised thematically to uncover patterns of exploitation and deviation from humanitarian norms.

5.1. Syria: The Politicisation of Humanitarian Corridors as Siege Warfare Tools

In Syria, humanitarian corridors were widely publicised as mechanisms to evacuate civilians from besieged zones, particularly between 2013 and 2018. However, extensive evidence suggests that the Assad regime and its allies strategically manipulated these corridors to consolidate territorial control. Humanitarian corridors were often implemented only after prolonged sieges and the deliberate use of starvation and bombardment, creating conditions where civilians had no choice but to evacuate (Amnesty International, 2018; Lundgren, 2019).

A notable example is the 2016 evacuation of Aleppo, where Syrian and Russian forces facilitated corridors to allow civilians and rebel fighters to leave under an agreement with the United Nations. However, reports indicated that these corridors were not truly voluntary, as access to food, water, and medical care had been deliberately restricted in opposition-held areas for months (Siegel, 2017). The corridors thus became instruments for forced displacement, effectively enabling the regime to reclaim strategic urban territories without prolonged ground combat.

From a realist perspective, this aligns with the logic of using humanitarian rhetoric to mask strategic objectives (Mearsheimer, 2001). The manipulation of these corridors allowed the regime to gain legitimacy in international discourse while engaging in actions that contravened international humanitarian law. From a constructivist perspective, the regime framed these evacuations as acts of clemency and peace-making, despite their coercive nature, demonstrating how humanitarian discourse can be co-opted to legitimise state violence (Wendt, 1999).

5.2. Ukraine: Competing Narratives and Weaponised Humanitarianism

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine presented a different dynamic, with both sides engaging in strategic communication surrounding humanitarian corridors. Following the siege of Mariupol and other eastern Ukrainian cities, several corridors were negotiated under international pressure to allow civilian evacuations. However, multiple independent sources confirmed that Russia bombarded designated evacuation routes, leading to civilian casualties and raising questions about the corridors' integrity (UN News, 2022; ICRC, 2022).

Russia's declaration of unilateral corridors—primarily directing evacuees toward Russian-held territories or Russia itself—was interpreted by the Ukrainian government and many observers as a tactic of population control and forced assimilation (BBC, 2022). Human Rights Watch (2022) reported that Ukrainian civilians were subjected to "filtration camps," where individuals were interrogated,

detained, and, in some cases, forcibly deported to Russia.

This strategy resonates with both realist and constructivist interpretations. From a realist view, Russia's manipulation of corridors reflects its military goal of depopulating contested zones and using civilians as leverage in negotiations. Constructivist analysis reveals how humanitarian terminology was employed to soften the perception of coercive relocations. Russian media narratives portrayed these corridors as protective actions, reinforcing state legitimacy while undermining Ukrainian sovereignty (Kazansky, 2023).

Meanwhile, Ukraine and Western allies also used the discourse around humanitarian violations to mobilise international support, showing how even accusations of corridor violations are weaponised within the information war. Thus, the Ukrainian case reveals a dual exploitation of humanitarian corridors through both physical manipulation and discursive warfare.

5.3. Sudan: Humanitarian Access Amid State Fragmentation

Sudan's 2023 conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) presents a distinct case, characterised by institutional collapse and fragmented state authority. Humanitarian corridors, rather than being centrally negotiated or enforced, have depended mainly on ad hoc agreements and the capacity of local actors, international agencies, and tribal networks (UNOCHA, 2023).

In contrast to Syria and Ukraine, Sudan lacks a centralised authority capable of guaranteeing corridor security. This has led to frequent violations of ceasefires and widespread looting of humanitarian convoys. Humanitarian access is also highly politicised—both sides have selectively permitted aid to areas under their control, using it as leverage to garner local support and legitimacy (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2023).

The politicisation here is less about overt deception and more about functional survival in a fragmented sovereignty environment. The RSF has been accused of granting corridor access in return for loyalty pledges, while the SAF has obstructed aid delivery to opposition-controlled territories (International Crisis Group, 2023). Humanitarian corridors are not only manipulated but also often absent in areas that are most in need due to logistical and security constraints.

Realism explains this behaviour as rational within an anarchic system where neither actor can afford to cede control. Constructivism also contributes insights: local identities, historical grievances, and ethnic affiliations shape which communities receive humanitarian protection. Normative commitments to civilian protection are often highly selective, based on factors such as political, ethnic, or strategic proximity.

5.4. Comparative Patterns and Political Exploitation Typologies

Analysing these three cases reveals four major typologies of political exploitation in humanitarian corridors:

- Strategic Evacuation as Territory Consolidation (Syria)
- Corridors were used to depopulate contested areas and enforce demographic shifts.
- Often followed sieges and indiscriminate attacks.
- International actors faced dilemmas in legitimising these corridors by participating in their negotiation.
- Corridor Manipulation as Information Warfare (Ukraine)
- Both establishment and violation of corridors were used to influence international opinion.
- Evacuations were redirected to hostile territories, effectively weaponising humanitarian protection.
- Corridors functioned as both military and propaganda tools.
- Fragmentation and Localised Negotiation (Sudan)
- The absence of a single authoritative power led to patchwork corridors governed by

militias, tribal leaders, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

- Aid was selectively granted, politicised at local levels, and subject to looting.
- Lack of enforcement mechanisms enabled rampant impunity.
- Normative Co-optation Across Contexts
- In all cases, humanitarian discourse was used to mask or justify politically motivated actions.
- Actors appealed to international law and humanitarianism while engaging in practices antithetical to those principles.
- The performative use of humanitarian language served to evade accountability.

These findings reinforce the notion that humanitarian corridors, while normatively rooted in civilian protection, are highly susceptible to instrumentalisation when embedded within power asymmetries and contested sovereignties.

5.5. Implications for Humanitarian Practice and International Law

The research demonstrates that humanitarian corridors are rarely neutral. Their effectiveness is contingent on a balance of power, the presence of credible enforcement mechanisms, and the ability of neutral actors to monitor and implement agreements. When these conditions are absent, corridors become susceptible to manipulation and may even exacerbate conflict dynamics.

Moreover, the dual role of corridors—as both practical relief mechanisms and symbolic gestures—makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. States and non-state actors can comply with international expectations superficially while using corridors to achieve coercive ends. This creates a challenge for international humanitarian law (IHL), which assumes exemplary faith implementation of principles such as neutrality and distinction (ICRC, 2016).

The findings suggest a need for increased monitoring, verification, and conditionality in establishing humanitarian corridors. Agreements must

include third-party verification, enforceable sanctions for violations, and robust documentation processes to ensure accountability and transparency. Furthermore, humanitarian actors must navigate the fine line between engagement and complicity, ensuring that their participation does not legitimise exploitative arrangements.

6. Discussion

This section synthesises the key findings of the data analysis within the broader academic discourse on humanitarianism, international law, and conflict strategy. It critically evaluates the implications of political exploitation in humanitarian corridors and provides a theoretical assessment through the lenses of realism, constructivism, and critical humanitarianism. The section also explores how these findings inform policy, law, and humanitarian practice.

6.1. Humanitarian Corridors as Political Instruments

Humanitarian corridors, though conceptualised as life-saving pathways for civilians during armed conflict, often morph into tools of strategic gain. In all three case studies—Syria, Ukraine, and Sudan—the original intent of corridors was subverted by political and military interests. These findings align with Slim's (2015) argument that humanitarian space is never politically neutral; somewhat, it is shaped, constrained, and exploited by the actors who control territory and discourse.

In Syria, the state used humanitarian corridors to achieve a dual objective: consolidating territory and depopulating resistance zones. These corridors were created after prolonged sieges that violated the principles of distinction and proportionality enshrined in International Humanitarian Law (ICRC, 2016). The Syrian case exemplifies how corridors can serve as mechanisms of coerced displacement rather than voluntary refuge. The corridor thus becomes a “humanitarian alibi” (Terry, 2002), enabling state actors to legitimise military objectives through a veneer of legality and compassion.

Ukraine's conflict revealed how humanitarian corridors could serve as battlegrounds for information

and psychological warfare. Russia's establishment of corridors leading into Russian territory, coupled with documented attacks on evacuation routes, demonstrates a strategy of instrumentalising humanitarian mechanisms for both population control and media influence (Kazansky, 2023). Meanwhile, Ukraine and its allies emphasised violations to garner international condemnation and reinforce normative narratives around Russian aggression. This mutual manipulation highlights how humanitarian corridors have become integral to geopolitical narratives, echoing Foucault's (1978) concept of “biopolitics”—the strategic management of life and death by sovereign power.

Sudan's case illustrates a different but equally troubling scenario, where fragmentation and weak governance structures render humanitarian corridors effectively non-operational. Without centralised enforcement, corridors are subject to local political dynamics, tribal affiliations, and opportunistic exploitation. This supports Barnett's (2011) claim that humanitarianism in failed or fragile states often lacks the infrastructure and legitimacy needed to protect civilians effectively. The Sudanese example reveals how, in the absence of formal institutions, informal systems of control—often based on coercion or patronage—dominate access to humanitarian relief.

6.2. Theoretical Implications: Realism, Constructivism, and Critical Humanitarianism

The findings confirm and extend key theoretical positions in international relations. From a realist perspective, humanitarian corridors are subject to the logic of power and survival. States and non-state actors use these mechanisms not because of moral obligation, but because they serve strategic interests. Mearsheimer (2001) argued that states act in their self-interest under anarchy; the case of Syria exemplifies this as the Assad regime used corridors to accelerate military victory and eliminate dissent without triggering further international intervention.

Constructivist theory, which emphasises the power of norms and discourse, also provides valuable insights. Humanitarian corridors, although materially significant, are also discursive tools used to shape

global perceptions and legitimise or delegitimise actions. Russia's framing of its unilateral corridors as acts of compassion is a clear example of how normative language can be weaponised (Wendt, 1999). The West's counter-narrative, emphasising corridor violations as evidence of war crimes, demonstrates the constructivist principle that international norms are constantly contested and reconstituted through discourse (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Critical humanitarianism, rooted in post-colonial and Marxist critiques, problematises the very foundation of humanitarian intervention. Scholars like Duffield (2014) argue that humanitarianism often serves neo-imperial interests by legitimising external involvement in sovereign affairs. In this view, the presence of humanitarian corridors—and the international community's complicity in their establishment—can perpetuate cycles of dependency, displacement, and domination. The Syrian corridors negotiated under UN auspices, despite their coercive nature, illustrate how international institutions may inadvertently support state violence while claiming neutrality.

6.3. Legal and Ethical Paradoxes

The political exploitation of humanitarian corridors challenges fundamental assumptions of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), particularly the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and humanity. The Geneva Conventions (1949) provide for the safe passage of civilians and humanitarian aid, assuming mutual consent and good faith. However, as the analysis has shown, such assumptions often do not hold in asymmetric or civil conflicts.

Corridors are increasingly established under duress, without genuine consent from all parties, and robust mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement. This undermines the protective value of international humanitarian law (IHL) and raises questions about its adaptability to modern warfare. As Roberts (2010) notes, the “humanitarianisation” of armed conflict can sometimes obscure rather than illuminate legal violations, especially when actors manipulate legal norms to achieve political ends.

Ethically, the use of humanitarian corridors under coercive conditions raises questions about the agency and voluntariness of those involved. If civilians are forced to choose between starvation and evacuation through a hostile corridor, can their movement be considered voluntary? The concept of “voluntary evacuation” becomes ethically fraught when shaped by structural violence and systemic deprivation (Pictet, 1979). Humanitarian actors must critically examine whether their involvement in such corridors constitutes complicity and how to strike a balance between immediate relief and long-term accountability.

6.4. Policy and Operational Challenges

The politicisation of humanitarian corridors presents several operational challenges for humanitarian organisations and international institutions:

- In fragmented conflicts, such as Sudan, the absence of a central authority complicates coordination. Multiple checkpoints, informal negotiations, and security uncertainties hinder timely and safe evacuation (UNOCHA, 2023).
- In all cases examined, violations of corridor agreements—bombardment, detainment, or redirection—occurred due to weak or nonexistent monitoring. Real-time verification by neutral actors such as the ICRC or UN peacekeepers is rarely available (ICRC, 2016).
- Misinformation campaigns, especially in Ukraine, created confusion among civilians regarding the safety and direction of corridors. This highlights the need for transparent, multilingual communication verified by credible third parties (Human Rights Watch, 2022).
- Agencies often face dilemmas between adhering to humanitarian principles and engaging with politically compromised actors. For example, the UN's cooperation with the Assad regime in organising evacuations was heavily criticised for legitimising forced displacement (Amnesty International, 2018).

To address these issues, humanitarian policy must evolve. One solution is the establishment of “protected corridor protocols”—binding legal agreements that require third-party verification, satellite monitoring, and pre-agreed sanctions for violations. Additionally, the international community should develop context-specific humanitarian diplomacy frameworks that allow negotiations to be informed by local cultural, political, and social dynamics.

6.5. Recommendations for International Stakeholders

Given the above analysis, several recommendations are proposed:

- **Strengthen Legal Enforcement:** The UN Security Council must move beyond rhetorical condemnations and establish clear legal consequences for the manipulation of humanitarian corridors. This includes referring egregious violations to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and imposing targeted sanctions on individuals and entities obstructing humanitarian access (Roberts, 2010).
- **Invest in Technology for Monitoring:** Utilise satellite imagery, AI-based pattern recognition, and real-time GPS tracking to monitor corridors and identify violations. These technologies can provide evidentiary support for legal accountability and improve trust among civilians.
- **Enhance Local Partnerships:** International organisations should work closely with local NGOs, religious institutions, and community leaders to understand the sociopolitical terrain. In contexts like Sudan, where state authority is fragmented, local actors can facilitate access and legitimacy (MSF, 2023).
- **Reinforce Humanitarian Principles through Education:** Both civilians and combatants must be educated on humanitarian law and the sanctity of humanitarian corridors. Educational campaigns and workshops should be part of any corridor negotiation package.
- **Promote Normative Change:** Finally, there is a need to reassert the normative strength of

humanitarianism in global governance. This includes resisting the politicisation of humanitarian aid and affirming the moral imperative of civilian protection, regardless of political or military considerations.

This discussion has highlighted the multifaceted nature of political exploitation in humanitarian corridors. While humanitarian corridors are ostensibly mechanisms of protection, in practice, they often serve the strategic goals of belligerents. Realist, constructivist, and critical humanitarian frameworks help explain these manipulations and underscore the challenges facing humanitarian law and practice. The global community must confront these challenges by strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing operational capacity, and reaffirming the core principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality.

7. Conclusion

The study has explored the complex intersection of humanitarian objectives and political exploitation within the framework of international humanitarian corridors. Drawing upon three significant conflict case studies—Syria, Ukraine, and Sudan—the analysis reveals that while humanitarian corridors are intended to safeguard civilian life, in practice, they are frequently manipulated by both state and non-state actors to achieve military, political, or ideological objectives.

The findings underscore the reality that humanitarian corridors rarely function as neutral spaces. Instead, they are deeply embedded in the strategic calculus of war. The Assad regime’s use of corridors in Syria to depopulate opposition areas, Russia’s dual use of corridors for evacuation and propaganda in Ukraine, and the decentralisation of humanitarian access in Sudan each illustrate unique but convergent patterns of political misuse. These findings challenge the conventional assumption that humanitarianism operates outside the boundaries of power politics, revealing the vulnerability of international humanitarian law to co-optation.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study validates key premises from realist, constructivist, and critical

humanitarian theories. Realism explains the strategic utility of corridors, while constructivism highlights the role of discourse in legitimising or contesting humanitarian practices. Critical perspectives, on the other hand, warn against the instrumentalisation of humanitarian norms for neo-imperial or coercive purposes.

7.1. Future Research

This study has opened several avenues for further investigation into the geopolitics of humanitarian interventions. First, there is a need for quantitative research that maps the outcomes of all known humanitarian corridors over the last two decades. This could provide a more comprehensive understanding of success rates, casualties, violations, and long-term displacement patterns. Additionally, comparative research could focus on non-conflict humanitarian corridors, such as those created during pandemics or environmental disasters, to evaluate whether political exploitation is a universal challenge or one specific to armed conflict.

Second, future work could explore the psychological and sociological impact of forced evacuations through politically compromised corridors, particularly on children, women, and disabled populations. Lastly, there is significant potential in exploring the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchain, in creating more secure and accountable humanitarian pathways. These lines of inquiry would contribute to a more adaptive and resilient humanitarian architecture in the 21st century.

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