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## Analysis: Politics and humanitarianism in Israel-oPt

- Foreign aid without political engagement - risky?
- Impartiality versus advocacy
- Israel's definition of humanitarianism too narrow?
- Humanitarian activism - pros and cons

JERUSALEM, 29 November 2012 (IRIN) - "We do aid not politics", has been the traditional mantra of the mainstream humanitarian community.

But that division is not always easy to maintain, perhaps nowhere more so than for those working in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), something that was brought into sharp relief by the recent seven-day bombardment of the Gaza Strip.

NGOs such as Oxfam quickly condemned the escalation, saying that "real security for people in Gaza and southern Israel comes when all parties to the conflict put people before politics."

But if politics is recognized as the problem, then can humanitarians ignore it in their search for solutions? For some, the line between humanitarian aid and political advocacy is increasingly blurred.

The bombardment destroyed scores of buildings rebuilt with humanitarian aid since the 2008-9 crisis, and the wider context of the Israeli land, sea and air blockade of the Gaza strip has also hampered humanitarian work, "with UN and other projects stalled due to the lengthy and bureaucratic Israeli procedures to bring in crucial materials like steel, aggregate and cement," said Ana Povrzenic, area manager of the Gaza "Shelter Sector" collective.

The impact of the man-made crisis in oPt in recent years has given rise to an increasing focus on political advocacy among humanitarian NGOs.

"We address political issues because humanitarian aid must come hand-in-hand with a strong advocacy platform," said Aimee Shalan, director of advocacy and communications at the NGO Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP), one of 22 signatory NGOs - many of them with a humanitarian mandate - of a recent [report](#) calling on the European Union to ban imports of Israeli settlements' products.

Signatory NGOs said the continuous expansion of settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank has become an example of the humanitarian impact of political decisions on the ground: affecting Palestinians' mobility, agriculture, and access to health care, and making any future territorial settlement of the conflict harder.

"From our point of view, obviously this is a political issue for us," said Shalan, adding that foreign aid without political engagement risked "cementing the occupation" and hence being harmful to Palestinian dignity, independence and sustainability.

The [Israeli government said](#) the report had set aside purely humanitarian concerns for a political agenda.

Shalan's views are controversial within the aid community, which has long debated the role of so-called dual-mandate NGOs, which provide humanitarian assistance while also advocating politically for one side in a conflict.

### Accusations of partisanship

Political impartiality is widely viewed as an important prerequisite for the safe delivery of humanitarian aid, while political advocacy is often regarded as conflicting with, or at the very least existing uncomfortably alongside, the principles of humanitarian work.

"We are a humanitarian actor. When we do advocacy, we do it based upon the rights of our beneficiaries, [internally displaced persons] and refugees," said Elisabeth Rasmussen, secretary-general of the Norwegian Refugee Council.

"It's difficult in oPt because the whole situation is so politicized. Some actors are doing a lot of advocacy, sympathizing with one party or another at the same time as they are providing assistance - that is blurring the lines. We insist on being impartial."

While dual-mandate NGOs see humanitarian aid as hollow without political engagement - not tackling the root causes of the humanitarian problems - others say political engagement actually puts humanitarian work at risk.

"Political work can certainly endanger humanitarian action if it influences where assistance goes," said Ramesh Rajasingham, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in oPt. "That is why OCHA and humanitarian organizations go to great length to avoid these risks."

The blurring of the lines by some NGOs has already opened the door to accusations that humanitarian charities are partisan, political and anti-Israel, particularly by the Israeli government, which draws a clear line between what it considers political and humanitarian.

"`Humanitarian' means they want to help in a humanitarian way, either in the field of health, or food, or welfare, if it is done without political judgement," said Ilana Stein, vice-spokesperson of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "But when they take sides and start giving out political opinions, that's already non-humanitarian."

The right-wing Israel group NGO Monitor - whose stated objective is "to end the practice used by certain self-declared `humanitarian NGOs' of exploiting the label `universal human rights values' to promote politically and ideologically motivated agendas" - is busy blacklisting NGOs it sees as guilty.

"Distribution of water is a classic example of an orchestra of NGOs all repeating the same unfounded claims," said Gerald Steinberg, head the group, which analyses NGOs' activities and reports.

As the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) pointed out in a [2011 report](#) on the future of humanitarian action, the politicization of aid has a long history and has led to "harsh criticism of humanitarian action over decades".

ICRC has a special status as an impartial provider of aid under the Geneva Conventions on the laws of war, but certain NGOs, and particularly government humanitarian work, have been less immune from accusations of politicking.

And even ICRC has sometimes come under attack: ICRC's deputy director of operations, Dominik Stillhart, said in an [interview](#) that "there is always a risk that our observations could be exploited for political gain or instrumentalized by one side or another."

### **Root causes of vulnerability**

In the end, much of the discussions boil down to arguments about the definition of "humanitarian". Some aid agencies complain Israel has intentionally narrowed its definition of humanitarian, so as to exclude so-called protection activities, like tracking violence by Israeli settlers.

This leaves aid agencies walking a fine line, caught between the risk of having restrictions placed on their work and the moral and practical need to speak out.

But for Daniel Bar Tal, professor of political psychology at the School of Education at Tel Aviv University, the line is very clear.

"Israel actually enjoys a wide scope of humanitarian assistance in the West Bank, because it replaces Israel's own responsibility to take care [of Palestinians]... as long as humanitarian is not related with the blackening of Israel," he told IRIN.

OCHA says that in carrying out humanitarian assessments, there is no political bias: "We exclude any political factor in assessments and responses [to humanitarian needs]," OCHA's Rajasingham said.

"However, the root of the humanitarian vulnerability in oPt is often found in policies and politically related issues. Our advocacy work does include identifying the connection between these political root causes and humanitarian vulnerability," he said, referring to movement restrictions imposed on civilians, and the blockade of the Gaza Strip.

### **Humanitarian activism**

In May 2010, boats of activists calling themselves the "Gaza Freedom Flotilla" tried to travel to Gaza by sea to break the blockade of the Gaza Strip in a symbolic international protest.

They also carried with them construction materials, food, medicines and other aid.

Nine Turkish citizens lost their lives when Israeli commandos landed on the lead vessel, the Mavi Marmara in international waters, to prevent its passage.

"In Israel-Palestine, you can't separate the political from the humanitarian," said Re'ut Mor, an Israeli activist who took part in a more recent Gaza-bound flotilla called Estelle.

"Take water in the West Bank: it's a basic humanitarian need, but the way Israel controls it is deeply political. To be humanitarian, but not political, simply means to play by Israel's rules."

When volunteers and activists on the ground report demolitions of buildings, settler attacks or Israeli military incursions into Palestinian towns to humanitarian agencies, part of their work qualifies as humanitarian reporting.

But the political reputation of many of the people involved in these activities can raise doubts about the impartiality and accuracy of the information collected and put the perceived impartiality of NGOs at risk.

Such volunteers insist they fill important gaps created by Israel's ignorance of its responsibility as the occupying power (according to international law), and see no contradiction between political and humanitarian work.

The German activist Andi\* has supported the olive harvest in the Palestinian West Bank village of Kafr Qaddum for several weeks this year, rising from a mattress in an empty town hall every morning to accompany Palestinian families to their olive groves, regularly the victims of Israeli settler attacks.

Work includes clearing rubble from Israeli roadblocks while also recording attacks on Palestinians by Israeli settlers.

As a volunteer for the International Women's Peace Service (IWPS), she says she is committed to non-violent political action. But at the same time, she also believes the work she and other activists do is essentially humanitarian.

But for Stein from Israel's foreign ministry, protecting the olive orchards is their responsibility, so wonders if the volunteers aren't really taking a political stand.

"The Israeli police and army forces, especially during olive season, were there to maintain order, to make sure settler attacks don't happen. Were they really there to help, or just to take a political stand?"

\*not her real name

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