IGNACIO FRADEJAS-GARCÍA

Humanitarian remoteness: aid work practices from 'little Aleppo'

In response to the Syrian conflict, the biggest humanitarian challenge since the Second World War, aid organisations have set up large-scale cross-border operations. Aid convoys and workers within Syria have become targets, forcing most operations to be carried out remotely from the Turkish border city of Gaziantep, a 'little Aleppo' hosting more than 300,000 Syrians. This produces a transnational humanitarian social field embedded in historical, political and economic relations. Grounded in ethnographic fieldwork among aid workers and organisations providing relief assistance remotely, this article analyses the production of humanitarian remoteness, both rhetorically and in practice, shaped by remote technologies and the division of labour. In the case of Syria, the normalisation of remote practices and the dependency on local aid workers and organisations ultimately increases the distance between donors and beneficiaries inside Syria, although it reinforces the illusion of control among aid managers.

Key words humanitarian remoteness, aid workers, remote management, Syria, Turkey, humanitarian transnational social field

Introduction

The Syrian conflict undoubtedly represents a huge humanitarian challenge. What started as a civil uprising has evolved into a bloody proxy war between global powers supporting different factions. By 2016, almost half of Syria's population was displaced – 6.6 million internally and 4.8 million registered as refugees in neighbouring countries (UNOCHA 2016). The number of casualties lies between 400,000 and 470,000 (Akgün *et al*. 2016). In response to this humanitarian challenge, aid organisations have set up large-scale operations to reach affected populations within Syria. With humanitarian actors and aid convoys often becoming military targets, operations need to be performed remotely – that is, managed from third countries. Delivering aid inside Syria requires crossing national borders; negotiating with governments and opposition groups with different political agendas; dealing with national and international laws, administrations and procedures; and grappling with overlapping categories of local, national and international aid groups with various levels of influence and different managerial practices.

This article analyses how humanitarian remoteness is produced both rhetorically and in practice, and how it is shaped by humanitarian morality, remote technologies and the division of labour among aid workers. I use the term 'humanitarian remoteness' to define a set of remote practices embedded in historical, political and economic relations within the humanitarian transnational social field, where international aid workers and organisations not only grapple with the challenges presented by no-go areas but constantly re-create remoteness through daily aid praxis. In the case at hand,

humanitarian aid tries to reach war-torn Syria's civil population remotely from Turkey, and the cross-border operation presents a distinct and visible construction of remote areas through separation. As I will argue, the consequences of employing a remote approach include challenges deriving from trying to uphold humanitarian principles; from the unequal distribution of risk and responsibilities; from evolving imaginaries of Syria from afar; and from the daily frustration experienced by participants. Moreover, remoteness cannot exist without nearness, as humanitarian action still requires proximity for the delivery of aid (Collinson *et al.* 2013). This has created a dependency on Syrian middlemen and organisations to manage and implement aid operations.

I carried out my ethnographic fieldwork[1] among aid workers and organisations – UN agencies, international NGOs and Syrian NGOs – providing relief assistance to Syria remotely, from the Turkish border city of Gaziantep. Thus, what follows is an ethnographic analysis of how humanitarian remoteness is being made and remade by a large variety of actors, all of whom in some way aimed to exercise and maintain control over valuable aid resources.

Delivering aid into the Syrian black box: the normalisation of remote strategies and technologies

The persistence of the Syrian war is inflamed by complex political and economic relations that cannot be summed up in a battle between two or more sides (Keen 2017). A plethora of states, rebel groups, local authorities, warlords, governments and even humanitarian actors are battling to control the movement of people (civil populations, soldiers, jihadists, mercenaries, etc.), things (oil, weapons, water, seeds, food, trucks, drugs, money, construction material, etc.) and ideas (religious, political, humanitarian principles, news, etc.) across different territories, borders and war fronts in and around Syria. This has produced spaces of exclusion, buffer zones, besieged locations, humanitarian corridors, trafficking routes, checkpoints, concrete walls and no-flight zones. Such differentiated areas are often represented in varying maps and graphics of Syria, full of archipelagos of colour and symbols, flags, points and landmarks showing who controls which area, which population, or who supports which ideology (see Figure 1). In such mapping exercises by external interveners, Syria is represented as a 'no-go area of nebulous risks and dangers' colonised by complex threats with troubling consequences for local populations (Andersson 2016: 716). The black flag of ISIS – the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – marks the top of the scale in these risk areas. 'Black areas', occupied by ISIS, are replete with the worst imaginaries inherent in the remote relationship. The metaphor of the black area or the black box is also fitting when witnessing how these areas have been obscured, extinguished and remade as remote in an active process of 'removal' (cf. Introduction, this issue).

Humanitarian actors re-create and re-define remote areas constantly through risk categories, emergency levels and monitoring systems, making remoteness 'contingent,

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[1]   Much of this article is the result of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2015 and 2016. The main methodologies were participant observation, in-depth interviews (including cognitive maps and personal network analysis) and a focus group in remote management. Other fieldwork experiences, in Haiti (2012) and in DR Congo (2014), have been decisive in arriving at a deeper understanding of humanitarian practices.
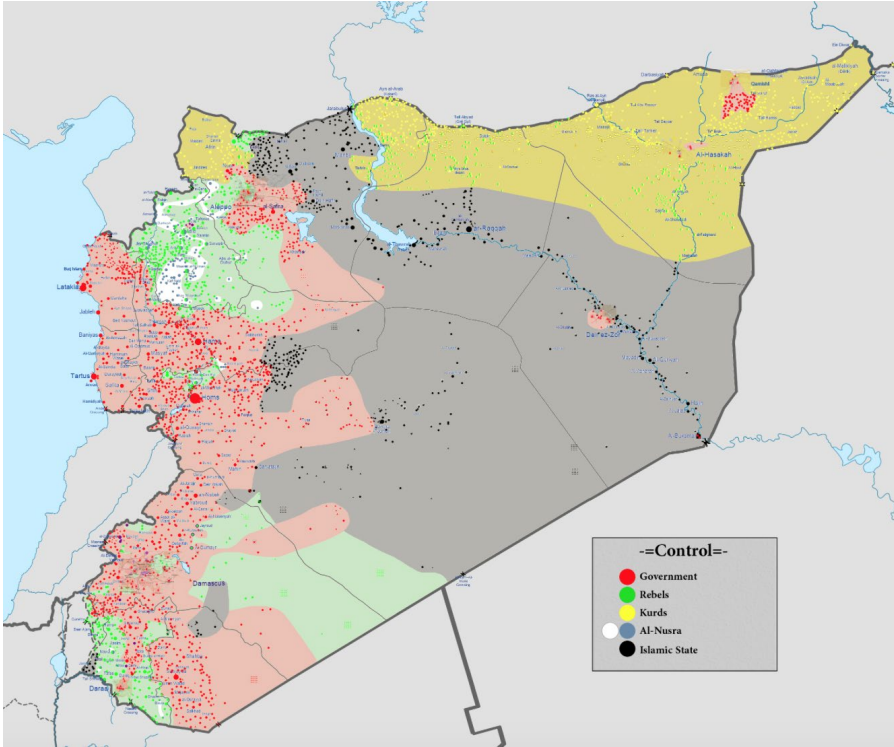
Figure 1   Syrian Civil War map, 1 August 2016
CC BY-SA 4.0 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syrian_Civil_War#/media/
File:Syrian_Civil_War_map.svg

relational and inexorably co-implicated with power' (Harms *et al*. 2014: 371). When the aid apparatus arrives to help in a specific place, the so-called international community institutes a mobile sovereignty (Pandolfi 2010) that imposes its presence physically based on unavoidable humanitarian action.

This legitimacy of modern humanitarianism is founded on its supposed neutrality and universality in reducing suffering. Humanitarian reason presupposes that all humans are equal, belonging to one moral community, but, as Fassin (2012: 253) argues, humanitarian government displays a dual model, focused on individuals in rich countries while dealing with undifferentiated groups of people in poor countries. Cosmopolitan centres have the ethical obligation to take care of a mass – not citizens or other loyalties – 'of those in backward, remote places' (Calhoun 2010: 54). This dual humanitarianism has recently been challenged by the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe as the main aid actors opened refugee camps and facilities on the continent. However, the world's major humanitarian operations still take place in remote areas outside, or at the margins of, the welfare state, and are grounded in ancient traditions of charity (Calhoun 2010).

The 'war on terror' and the terrorist attack on aid offices in Baghdad in 2003 changed the security paradigm for aid agencies[2] (e.g. Smirl 2015). The dangers and risks

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[2] UN security was restructured as a UN Department for Safety and Security was established in 2005: http://www.worldlii.org/int/other/UNGARsn/2004/313.pdf (accessed 19 March 2019).

posed to aid workers increased due to external and internal causes (Fast 2010) related to the entangled but conflicting trends of growing securitisation, militarisation of interventions and lack of access. As a result, the humanitarian presence began to withdraw from local realities (Autesserre 2014; Andersson and Weigand 2015), 'a growing *remoteness* – of international aid workers from the societies in which they work' (Duffield 2012a: 478; original italics).

In 'Aidland', a term Apthorpe (2011a) employs to describe the virtual and real worlds of aid workers, everyday expert language uses the term remote in combination with 'control', 'support', 'partnership' and 'management', depending on the ethos of each aid practice (Rogers 2006). 'Remote management' is the technical term used to encompass all remote strategies, practices and approaches of managing humanitarian actions from a distance. These strategies have been employed over recent decades across a variety of settings, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sri Lanka or Sudan, withdrawing international or other at-risk staff while transferring increased responsibilities and risks to local staff or local partner organisations (e.g. Stoddard *et al.* 2010).

Rather than viewing remote management as a temporary measure or last resort under difficult circumstances, the humanitarian sector has begun to see remote management as a normal and integral strategic approach (Duffield 2014). In remote management, power remains in the hands of international staff who monitor and oversee operations from a distance (Stoddard *et al.* 2010). The resulting illusion of control is also entangled with the use of humanitarian technologies. The humanitarian sector has always utilised all available technologies, but the proliferation of workshops, trainings and courses at a global scale in recent times has been substantial. This represents a search for more effective aid operations based on new remote technologies and cyber humanitarianism (Donini and Maxwell 2013), using GIS systems and satellite images, drones, tools for collecting data on displaced populations or even mapping tools with 'remoteness indicators'.[3]

However, as we will see in the following sections, remote technologies cannot substitute the humanitarian presence on the ground. Thus, remote management in Syria creates a deep dependency on Syrian workers and organisations who carry out humanitarian work. As an international aid worker stated, 'you have people working inside Syria basically following instructions from people here [in Turkey]'. This entails both the inclusion of Syrian nationals in decision-making and managerial positions, and a 'removal' of the control and power that international staff have over operations.

'It is why we exist': aid workers' daily lives in little Aleppo

Aid workers manage a complex global industry, a network of heterogeneous aid organisations fuelled by a variety of donors and agendas. Global practices are in a constant, if slow, process of change, following sudden events and failed responses towards events such as the Rwandan genocides and the Balkan wars, among others. The Syrian operation also marks one of these turning points because of the magnitude of humanitarian needs, the challenges that have been faced, the funding shortages and the new remote

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[3] 'Successfully implementing a remoteness indicator Malawi': https://www.510.global/developing-and-field-testing-a-remoteness-indicator-in-malawi/ (accessed 19 March 2019).

approaches that have been developed. To reach and support remote areas is 'why we exist', said one international aid worker.

Defining who gets to be an 'aid worker' is difficult due to the heterogeneity of countries, projects, organisations, individuals and work-life practices involved in the unregulated global aid sector. But recognising different aid categories is possible to 'exploit their heuristic potential' (Fechter 2011: 135). Aidland is not homogeneous and is intersected by transnational individuals or groups participating in everyday lives: journalists, academics, volunteers, accompanying persons, visitors, tourists, travellers, missionaries, diplomats, soldiers and businessmen. Nonetheless, Aidland is also inhabited by the sometimes forgotten local population and local aid workers. In fact, internationals constitute just 10% of aid workers globally (Egeland *et al.* 2011: 31; Roth 2015: 169) and in any given aid programme, nationals comprise the overwhelming majority (Collinson *et al.* 2013: 3). Indeed, international aid workers have attracted most of the research on the topic,[4] overshadowing nationals or locals, the *impatriates* (Apthorpe 2011b: 208) who are often defined as ahistorical, immobile and disempowered. The international/local distinction is contractual rather than ethnically or racially defined (Collinson *et al.* 2013), ensuring higher security standards, mobility privileges and better salaries for internationals. In Gaziantep, the imperative of working remotely has effects on many aspects of the operation, overall in daily life and on the division of labour. Hence, when we look closely at the differences, commonalities and power hierarchies, some interrelated and sometimes overlapped categories emerge, challenging the international and national/local duality: (i) the internationals or expats, (ii) Turkish nationals and (iii) Syrian nationals.

This heterogeneous group of aid workers is employed by a few hundred NGOs, UN agencies and other humanitarian actors in offices established in Gaziantep, a Turkish city hosting more than 300,000 Syrians that is sometimes called 'little Aleppo'; one of every six inhabitants comes from Syria, mainly from Aleppo. Gaziantep is full of Syrian voices, smells and tastes. Only 118 km separates the city from the real Aleppo – so close and so far at the same time. Situated on the Aleppo plateau, both cities were part of the same administrative division, Aleppo Vilayet, during the last epoch of the Ottoman Empire. The Sykes–Picot Agreement split the area in 1916, leaving the cities separated by the Turkish–Syrian border. Nonetheless, the long socio-cultural and trade relationship at the margin of their respective states, the permeable border and 'the transgression of boundaries … inflects its abutting community with values, practices and relationships' (Şenoğuz 2016: np). These relationships saw strong links develop in the Aleppo–Gaziantep industrial areas, supported by free trade zones and agreements – currently employing thousands of Syrians in Gaziantep industrial areas – and affected by the spatial reconfiguration of the border during war (Montabone 2017). Thus, humanitarian operations were able to take advantage of previous ties of kinship and trade across *territoires circulatoires* that were grounded in previous solidarities and ethical conventions (Tarrius 2000: 124). Setting up head offices in Gaziantep, the aid sector created a humanitarian enclave (Smirl 2015) producing an emergent transnational

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[4] Anthropological research has been focused on specific spaces, people and events of transnational humanitarianism (Ticktin 2014). Two excellent ethnographic compilations on aid workers: *Inside the everyday lives of development workers. The challenges and futures of Aidland*, edited by Anne-Meike Fechter and Heather Hindman (2011); and *Adventures in Aidland: the anthropology of professionals in international development*, edited by David Mosse (2011).

social field of multiple social networks in Syria, Turkey and worldwide, where 'ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1009). This complex social field generates a multi-dimensional space where different kinds of capital define agents' conditions and positions (Bourdieu 1985). They are constrained by unequal regimes of mobility (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013) demarcating the lives of those who try to control humanitarian action as opposed to those who risk their lives on the ground.

During the interviews I asked the aid workers to draw and explain to me how the remote cross-border operation works (see Figure 2). This cognitive mapping method complemented the interviews and was evocative in illustrating the nature of the remote operations. Gaziantep appears as an important aid node that operates as the catalyst, connecting moneyed donors to Syrian beneficiaries. In his map (left map in Figure 2), an international aid worker reflected on how information, goods and political influence flow across the border. At the top, 'elsewhere' refers to big funders from the Global North and decision-makers in regional offices and headquarters in Geneva, New York, Rome or London. According to him, in remote management, distance decreases the possibility of success. First, information from the field is limited. Every day, a huge flow of unreliable information is broadcast via social media and local news outlets operating from within Syria. The same applies to the global press that covers the conflict. Limited access and partisan positions far from guarantee truthful information; rumours of fake reports are constant. This lack of reliable first-hand information affects all aspects of the humanitarian operation. Indeed, the majority of NGOs are reluctant to share information about their facilities inside Syria – education centres, offices, warehouses, hospitals, etc. – because they fear being targeted after sharing such information.
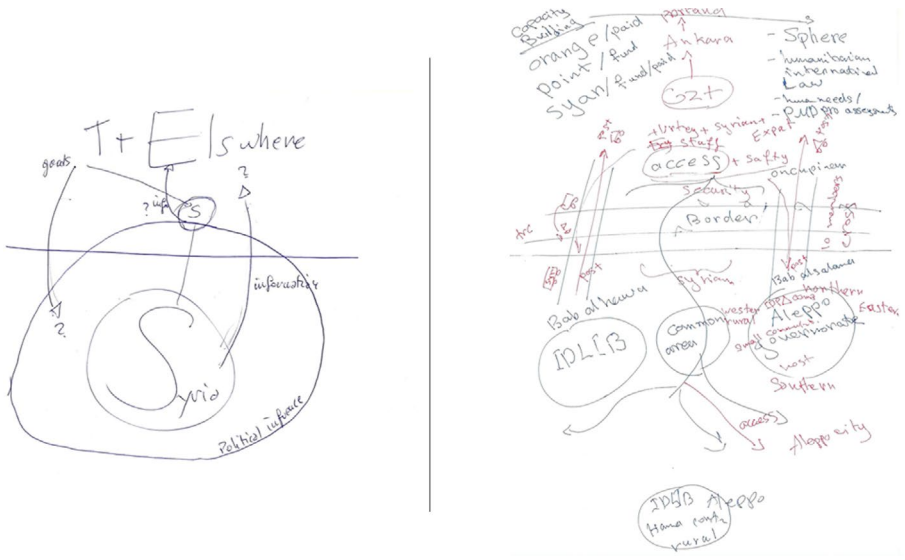
Figure 2   Left: flows of goods, information and political influence across the border; right: access to remote areas

Second, this unreliable information is combined with, as another international aid worker put it, 'the policies of your organization. Projects are in reality prepared elsewhere […] too many intermediary faces between the information received from the field and the final planning of the interventions.' Indeed, it should be borne in mind that 'remote areas are not outside the field of power of the dominant social structure but entangled with it' (Harms *et al.* 2014: 365). The micro-physics of power in a humanitarian arena (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010) is well represented by the hierarchical chain of command. It gets lost on its way back to central offices where superiors take decisions. 'We always have heads, of heads, of heads, of heads…', a Syrian aid worker pointed out. Syrian aid workers are on the bottom rung of the aid ladder, connecting remote areas with NGO headquarters.

The aid core needs these peripheries and the remoteness they produce in order to operate. For instance, thousands of international experts lay down the rules based on their centrality in the aid system (Autesserre 2014). The tension between established bureaucracies and local experience is always present; some internationals are concerned because locals, it is felt, would simply 'reinvent the wheel'. In contrast, a Syrian aid worker told me how he and his remote team inside Syria developed 'referral pathways' for child and gender protection – connecting the person at risk with someone able to provide specific support. Thus, the Syrian aid workers created simple pathways, attending to each case as unique, and employing social networks of friends and family that are culture-specific. One day, an international expert arrived, imposing a universal referral mechanism that was as complicated as 'rocket science', according to the Syrian aid worker. He said it changed the *modus operandi* in the field, complicating procedures and leaving no space for local solutions already in place. The distance of the international official via remote management led to imposing templates (Autesserre 2014) that worsened the humanitarian action.

Moreover, humanitarian organisations and research centres have tried to create guides on remote management for practitioners[5] but few aid workers I interviewed in Turkey were familiar with these materials. Distance training for those working inside Syria, partnership initiatives and capacity building for local partners have flourished with different levels of success, depending on the trust and confidence between international and Syrian NGOs (Howe *et al.* 2015). The lack or inadequacy of training, procedures and methods have led to operations being managed by trial and error, building on experiences over the years. In short, in Aidland no satisfactory substitute for direct action and face-to-face interaction has been found so far.

Working from little Aleppo: field imaginaries and remote proximities

Daily life at any aid organisation in Gaziantep is much the same as in any aid office in a safe place, except for the presence of security personnel. During business hours, expats, Turkish and Syrian administrators, managers, programmers, officers, assistants, cleaning staff and drivers converse in English, Arabic and Turkish. Most of the time, email after email is spent writing proposals, monitoring projects, controlling budgets

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[5] 'Remote management' annotated bibliography: https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/Final%20Remote%20Management%20Annotated%20Bibliography.pdf (accessed 19 March 2019).

and communicating with counterparts or teams inside Syria, or with donors and global managers at headquarters in global cities. Some receive other 'aiders' or attend meetings at other NGO offices. After work, the majority commute home by walking, cycling, travelling by car or taxi, and arrive at their apartments without any special security measures.

Their families are allowed to stay in Gaziantep. In their free time, they play football, dance salsa, do yoga, go to the mosque or just drink tea in the park. On weekends they go to town, barbecue with friends or visit one of the Mediterranean beaches. This presents a strikingly different picture to humanitarian operations in no-go zones, where there is a clear tendency towards fortification and 'bunkerization' (Collinson *et al.* 2013; Duffield 2012b; Andersson and Weigand 2015). In Gaziantep, aid workers are neither at risk nor fenced in. However, they face continuous frustration derived from the remote nature of their work, the impossibility of being in the field, the lack of reliable information, the complete dependence on Syrian personnel, and the risks and responsibilities of operating under fire without putting at risk the lives of local aid workers, beneficiaries and the support chain itself.

Internationals are habituated to working in remote areas, experiencing the crisis first hand, receiving things from outside and living at risk. For some, going to the field before returning back to their home(land) is also a rite of passage (Smirl 2015). Nevertheless, in Gaziantep the situation is the opposite: they are not in 'the field' and the liminal phase of working in the 'real' field is lost because there are no people to help directly in their daily work (Calhoun 2010). The field of humanitarian assistance is imagined and constructed through the process of aid work (Smirl 2015), in which limited contact with the beneficiaries is mediated by second-hand information: the imagination of the field is too remote. The task of witnessing and returning to tell what they have seen is one of the main roles of aid workers, and here this role is left unperformed. The humanitarian practice of carrying out surprise visits is not possible here. The impossibility of seeing the projects has created a sense of absence of reliable information shared among aid workers. Imaginaries about what is happening inside Syria are sometimes a blank space, a way to avoid big questions on humanitarian principles or simply to keep doing their part of the aid work. Sometimes the adjective 'remote' is also used as an excuse to justify the lack of effectiveness in relief delivery, even though direct implementation in other settings has never been totally effective (historical examples show that even with full access there is evidence of massive ineffectiveness on a global scale: e.g. Apthorpe 2011a).

Innovative ways of acquiring and analysing data have been implemented by standardising the use of satellite and geospatial information, geo-located photos and videos, apps, tablets and smart phones. It has opened up a niche for new job positions related to data management and mapping technologies. However, this information-collection endeavour requires the presence of hundreds of enumerators collecting data inside Syria, risking their own lives and trying to 'do no harm' with the confidential information they collect. Paradoxically, donors and auditors push for technological solutions but still, for example, ask for hard-copy documents because digital copies can be manipulated. As a result, some organisations have developed *ad hoc* internal post systems, to send and receive hard copies across the border. Hence, the current enthusiasm for big data and new remote technologies seems premature, because it loses sight of the operational context and reifies some technologies while excluding others, reinforcing the technocrats based in headquarters (Read *et al.* 2016) while still depending on a (local Syrian) presence on the ground.

The impossibility of being present is a common frustration for all aid workers. Only a few Syrian aid workers are able to go back and forth across the border, mainly due to the controls imposed by Turkey. Remote management 'is like grabbing something that does not exist with your hands', said a Syrian aid worker in Gaziantep. Consequently, aid workers in Gaziantep have become distant spectators, losing the ability to explicitly connect their humanitarian practices with the distant suffering (Boltanski 1999). Their need to help implies a self-transformative relationship with others in need (Malkki 2015), which is affected by the remote relationship. Both modes of Kant's productive (creative) and reproductive (re-creative) imagination (Malkki 2015) work together, generating remote suffering through daily battles and armed attacks. It is also linked with the representations re-created by documentaries and NGO campaigns, sometimes presenting aid workers as mediators to explain the issues in remote areas, connecting both extremes of the remote relationship: the imagined sufferer and the wealthy donor. This creates stereotypical representations of workers (Stirrat 2008), remote areas and distant sufferers alike. Audiences around the world tire of images of war, while powerful governments fail to commit to halting the conflict. The 'banalization of moral discourse and moral sentiments in the public sphere, the insistence on suffering and trauma' (Fassin 2014: 433) is feeding humanitarian remoteness, overlooking the political causes of suffering.

Personal contacts and networks of Turkish and Syrian employees working on both sides of the border have facilitated the remote operations, ensuring access and delivery in a safe manner. On one side, Turks manage the relations, rules and difficulties imposed by Turkey on the aid system, mostly concerning logistics, purchasing and cross-border procedures. Considered to be local workers in terms of salary and status, Turks have benefited from positive discrimination because NGOs can only contract one foreigner for every five Turks. This rule has forced the NGOs to contract many Turks in less skilled positions – as drivers – to compensate for the ratio and/ or having people without working permits in their offices. In order to avoid fines, de-registration or suspension of activities, NGOs often instruct personnel without working permits – mainly Syrians – to evacuate the offices if Turkish authorities arrive. The risk assumed by the NGOs reveals how important Syrian workers are to overcome the limitations of remoteness.

The Syrian aid workers, on the other side, are key to operations, but are very heterogeneous. They include: (i) international aid workers from the Syrian diaspora; (ii) Syrian refugees working remotely from Turkey; (iii) Syrians who go back and forth to Syria for aid work; and (iv) Syrian aid workers working inside Syria. The vast majority are refugees, although in Turkey they do not have this status and have been categorised as 'guests', it is not a legal protection category but rather an official discourse (Carpi and Şenoğuz 2019). They have to apply for work permits as internationals but are considered locals in terms of salary and responsibilities along with Turkish workers. At the same time, it has been difficult to find staff. Some aid workers argue that highly qualified Syrians have left Syria and Turkey. However, after six years of working remotely, some well-trained Syrians have acquired experience, even reaching top positions in their organisations. Some have even gained the trust of headquarters and are able to seek international careers in Aidland. In fact, all humanitarian actors have accepted that Syrians, from top to bottom, are essential to carrying out operations in Syria because it is their country, they have the necessary contacts inside, they can overcome language, cultural, political and social barriers more easily – and consequently, they take all the risks.

In Gaziantep, aid workers enjoy good living conditions, while thousands of Syrian aid workers on the other side implement the projects under fire. Images of resistance and success are shared, but the majority of aid workers' WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages and email feeds are populated with daily graphic pictures and dramatic updates from inside Syria. It has created a 'feeling of hopelessness when you see dozens of facilities targeted', said an aid worker. At some aid organisations a minute of silence for the recent death of a co-worker or colleague inside Syria is an almost daily occurrence. This leads to difficulties in coping, and grief after years without emotional support. They attempt to build good remote relationships with their teams inside, accompanying them without being there. Some are connected 24/7 if the internet works, and closeness is activated with constant communication, creating virtual intimacy at a distance (Gregory 2011). Sometimes guilt arrives, but life goes on. They 'have the big picture from outside to support' their countrymen from afar, as one Syrian aid worker in Gaziantep put it.

One Turkish aid worker metaphorically explained the rhythms of remote management (Figure 3). She stated that 'remote management, the ideal, would be a car everywhere', but in Turkey the aid machinery works as fast as a car, in the border the operation works with horsepower but in Syria the operation walks slowly. This ineffectiveness is increased by some power holders in Syria who 'are crowned as kings', she said, accumulating power and gaining control over aid resources.

Inside Syria, aid personnel implement aid projects under fire with few security measures to protect them (SAMS 2014). These thousands of workers carry out one of
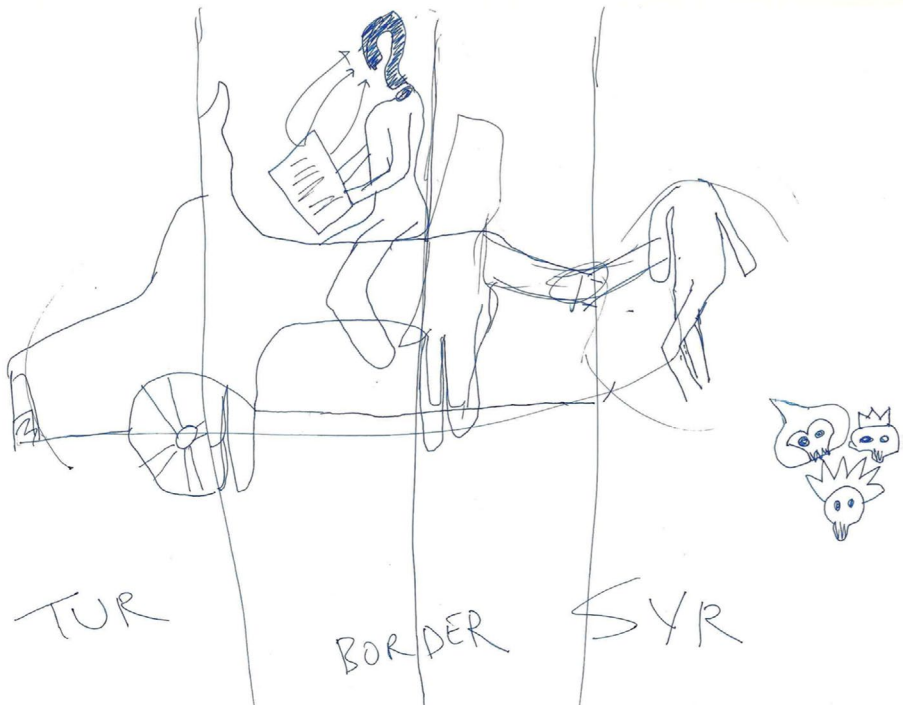

Figure 3   Rhythms of remote management

the riskiest civilian jobs in the world, at risk of being killed, kidnapped or arrested. All are under a tremendous amount of pressure, whether working in areas under Syrian government control, or even in (former) ISIS enclaves such as Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. They communicate via basic encrypted messages, knowing that any mistake or wrong decision could have deadly consequences or cause the loss of millions of US dollars if a warehouse is targeted. Aid workers and the civilian population inside Syria look to overcome the limitations imposed by war by trying to maintain internet and phone connections, enabling them to follow social networking sites. They are constantly concerned with the possible loss of contact in remote relations. Some areas are less connected to the internet, which also increases remoteness. In fact, one of the main concerns in remote management is not being able to receive an immediate and intimate response from the other side. Remote areas, Ardener observed, 'are obsessed with communications' (2012: 528). This rings very true in the case of Syria.

Aid workers inside are secondary beneficiaries of the humanitarian system, having a job and a salary. Some cannot leave because they do not speak English, others are too rooted, while still others are truly committed to helping others. Having the opportunity to speak face-to-face with a physician working inside Syria, I asked her 'why are people working outside Syria?' She replied, 'They should be inside and not here [in Turkey] in the offices, we have lots of needs in Syria.' In this regard, the capacity and motivation of some workers risking their lives inside Syria, such as for the distribution of aid or the treatment of the wounded, seems to be key to understanding the humanitarian operation: without them, the operation would be impossible.

Battling for access and aid resources

The cross-border operation uses hubs near border crossings at Bab-al-Salama and Bab-al-Hawa, both hardly checked by Turkey on its side of the border, to transfer aid material from Turkish to Syrian trucks. It follows three paths: the import–export procedures at trade hubs, the humanitarian hubs controlled by the Turkish Red Crescent and the UN cross-border hubs. The latter are used by UN agencies and partners, although these see only a small fraction of total aid delivery. Based on my fieldwork, I estimate this part to be around a maximum of 15%. The aid is then distributed in Syria exclusively by Syrians, who are in turn affected by changing levels of access and the dynamics of war. There is not any peacekeeping operation and humanitarian actions have not been protected by military means.

The aid apparatus has not been able to impose its intervention sovereignty in Turkey and Syria, because both states have put limits on the aid system's capacity to institute its own autonomy, actively shaping aid operations through control and restrictions. The Turkish government directly manages refugee camps through its emergency and disaster agency (AFAD) and strictly monitors aid organisations. In fact, from 2016 onwards, the Turkish government has exercised heavy-handed political control over aid organisations, even detaining and expelling aid workers and organisations.[6] Work permits are not renewed and some aid workers work from outside Turkey, doubly remote. The Syrian government on the other hand has been successful in

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[6] '"Massive anxiety" as Turkey cracks down on international NGOs': https://www.devex.com/news/massive-anxiety-as-turkey-cracks-down-on-international-ngos-91004 (accessed 19 March 2019).

controlling aid through instituting numerous obstacles. In areas under its control, administrative hurdles have limited the number of NGOs working on the ground (Meininghaus 2016), whereas aid operations in rebel areas have been targeted or severely restricted.

Millions of Syrians have suffered indiscriminate shelling and have been under prolonged siege, where 'starvation and the denial of humanitarian relief was being used as a weapon of war' (Slim and Trombetta 2014: 37), obstructions that should be considered war crimes (Keen 2017). Siege as a weapon of war creates remote areas that seem to have 'encouraged donors to give' (Harms *et al.* 2014: 373). Here imagination again plays a big role: being remote is perceived as being more in need. It is also related with the humanitarian categorisation of an area as being 'besieged' or 'hard-to-reach'.[7] Over the course of the Syrian conflict, the UN has changed the label of many areas from the former to the latter, opening up a large discussion (Slemrod 2016) because it minimises the severity of the situation of the people in need. These labels also show how the distance relation depends on the actor's access to remote locations, a pre-condition to successfully applying for funding.

In early 2013, a debate arose about the unbalanced and politicised humanitarian system operating within Syria. The government in Damascus retained the power to give permission to the ICRC, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) and the UN to deliver aid to the whole country, including areas held by rebel forces. However, they faced considerable criticism because just a few convoys reached northern populations, while from Turkey these rebel-held zones were easily accessible (Rodrigue and Weissman 2013). Meanwhile, since 2012, much of the cross-border assistance in rebel areas was provided by Syrian and international NGOs from Turkey claiming humanitarian principles but working informally, without permission from the Syrian government and being systematically targeted by its forces (UNOCHA 2015). Finally, successive UN resolutions 2139, 2165, 2191 and 2258 (UN Security Council 2015) created an international legal framework that acknowledged the need to help by most direct routes (UNOCHA 2015) and thus called for a 'humanitarian cross-border operation' from Jordan, Iraq and Turkey. Consequently, humanitarian deliveries have been concentrated along two precarious main axes: from Damascus to areas controlled by the Syrian government and from neighbouring countries to areas held by opposition forces. In this polarised and politicised arena, the heterogeneous opposition and the government of Syria have co-opted both sides of the humanitarian space, making political remoteness.

The Turkish–Syrian border is at times closed, depending on political decisions and war dynamics. In Syria, access to aid delivery changes by the hour. Depending on the remote area, governmental representatives, local councils, armed groups, religious leaders, traders and gatekeepers impose different conditions. In this volatile environment, NGO status and aid workers' personal abilities, social networks, local knowledge and experience in dealing with these actors is key to operating effectively. This includes the use of kinship or tribal networks (Montabone 2017) and negotiation of local rules

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7 Hard-to-reach is 'an area that is not regularly accessible to humanitarian actors', and besieged is 'an area surrounded by armed actors with the sustained effect that humanitarian assistance cannot regularly enter, and civilians, the sick and wounded cannot regularly exit the area': https://reliefweb.int/ map/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-overview-hard-reach-besieged-locations-oct-2015 (accessed 19 March 2019).

of access with Local Administrative Councils and Local Coordination Committees (Khoury 2013; Meininghaus 2016). Ethnicities also play an important role, especially in Kurdish areas – mainly the Rojava cantons Afrin, Jazira and Kobanî – where aid delivery uses different paths through Kurdish organisations. In Syria each area 'is different when you want to operate in it, have different armed groups, different authorities, different ways of operation […] and different culture […] Syria is full of cultures!' one Syrian aid worker said.

Therefore, aid organisations overcome limitations to access by contracting counterparts and/or having their own teams in Gaziantep and inside Syria. But their remote social capital, using informal ties, can collide with the bureaucracy and principles of the aid sector. Sometimes access goes hand-in-hand with payments in cash or kind to facilitate crossing at checkpoints or to ensure access to certain zones, opening the door to bribery and corruption. Other times access is a question of exploration and personal risk. For example, some managers ask their workers inside Syria to record videos of the routes with mobile phones or small cameras before they decide whether to distribute or transport aid using these routes.

In Syria's productive war economy (Keen 2017), cross-border flows of goods are asymmetrical. Oil and people travel South to North, but capital, goods and military supplies travel North to South (Montabone 2017). The control of these aid resources is crucial for the Syrian government as well as for opposition groups, while respecting humanitarian principles and measuring efficacy is essential for humanitarian actors. Aid resources are mainly basic goods shipped across the border, but money – cash transfers, cash for work programmes and vouchers – is transferred remotely: NGOs predominantly use the *hawala* system. The *hawaladars* are brokers who transfer the money at a distance through their informal networks without the need for the movement of cash.

But cash and goods bring with them the potential for corruption. Monitoring systems are updated every day because, for example, pharmaceuticals and drugs for trauma cases are gold dust in a war zone. 'We have spent four million dollars in six months, only on pharmaceuticals', an international aid worker explained. But it is difficult to know remotely how these resources are being used, how they are affecting power relations and how they are affecting local economies, with volatile prices and the lack of basic needs. Critiques of remote auto-monitoring and auto-evaluation have created the necessity for strong third-party and peer-to-peer monitoring, where everyone controls everyone. Nevertheless, in May 2016 a big corruption case shook operations. Aid workers, vendors and others were involved in contract bribery while delivering humanitarian aid to Syria (USAID 2016; Slemrod and Parker 2016), demonstrating that in this risky and complex environment, lack of control jeopardises the operation (USAID 2016).

Also, dozens of Syrian relief organisations have been created,[8] often supported by the Syrian diaspora. Most have followed the UN organisational pool funding system to unify the operations and avoid duplication. But funding shortages have been common: only around 50% of UN appeals were met, creating competition for scarce resources. Furthermore, only a few people and organisations are able to operate under fire. Thus, partnership initiatives have allowed many Syrian organisations to manage funding and implement projects. But suspicions about relaxing requirements and

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[8]   See http://syriareliefnetwork.com/en/ (accessed 19 March 19).

mistrust about supporting projects in certain areas have eroded the credibility of the operation. By the same token, discussions about neutrality have been neglected in the interest of moving forward. In Gaziantep, in meetings of NGO actors, one sometimes hears, 'hey folks, we are humanitarians, no politics here please'. Humanitarian principles are mentioned frequently to remind everyone of common values. However, for many aid workers, especially for those who have suffered torture and unlawful detention inside Syria, it is difficult to remain calm. The politics of war and the role of state governments are always present, and the remote management process is clearly influenced by political interests which perpetuate the humanitarian interventions.

Conclusion: remaking humanitarian remoteness

At a global scale, the rise of remote management strategies in humanitarian action has produced a growing remoteness between humanitarian actors – donors, organisations, workers – and local workers and beneficiaries. This is not a new trend. The aid apparatus needs remote emergencies to operate, creating asymmetrical exchanges with remote sufferers. In the last two decades, humanitarian remoteness has been fed by increased securitisation, the banalisation of moral discourses, and the development of information and communications technology, permitting the illusion of on-site-ness for humanitarian action. Thus, speaking about humanitarian remoteness has the potential to include the historical, political, economic and social relations of humanitarianism, while opening up for analysis how humanitarian actions remake remote areas and sufferers.

In the Syrian case, the magnitude of the humanitarian operation has created a complex transnational field of remote aid delivery into war zones. States on both sides of the border have put limits on the operations, as have other actors such as rebel groups, who see aid as a valuable resource. The daily practices of humanitarian actors attempting to gain access to remote areas constantly recreate and redefine these remote areas through operational bureaucracies, risk categories, monitoring systems, and access and emergency levels. The transfer of risk, responsibilities and power from internationals to Syrian aid workers represents a withdrawal from the Syrian reality and the work on the frontline. Friction is common, but all aid workers have accepted dependency on locals. However, as Harms *et al.* (2014) note, the remote needs to be close enough to the core of the power structure to be meaningful. Accordingly, Syrian aid workers in Gaziantep are giving meaningful responses to both sides of the remote relation, from the wealthy donor in the metropolis to the needy victim across the border. As interpreters and mediators between the two sides of the border, they can justify their positions, producing nearness through virtual intimacy and helping their country from a distance. However, inside Syria, local aid workers carry the heavy, dangerous load. Humanitarianism requires such locals to overcome the limitations of distance. Increased remoteness means more safety for some actors but effectively transfers the danger onto others. The asymmetry of the aid exchange is also charged with victim-isation of undifferentiated populations, remote sufferers whose lives are re-imagined in the aid chain.

The Syrian operation will come to stand as a turning point in humanitarian praxis. After six years of conflict, humanitarian remoteness is today productive: it generates new jobs, creates innovative methodologies and has produced the first major generation

of remote aid workers, who are now ready to use their experience elsewhere. The long-term intervention in Syria has become prime ground for the normalisation of remote management, to be later implemented in other settings, confirming the growing trend in humanitarian remoteness.

Thus, the construction of humanitarian remoteness is a complex process that occurs in the context of aid workers and organisations facing a variety of challenges and frustrations, while relying on various imaginaries and similar humanitarian frameworks to overcome the difficulties and reach remote areas in need. Using the Syrian case, this article has argued that remote practices based on modern technologies and expert knowledge have been regularised and accepted, while at the same time they have generated a dependency on locals on both sides of the border. Operations in Syria have been adapted to the particularities of access and risk, producing new ways to manage the delivery of humanitarian support remotely. The aid industry has remade its presence in the field, employing Syrians in Turkey to explain and manage remoteness, and employing them inside Syria to implement the projects, since remoteness cannot exist without nearness. The anthropological adage of making the familiar strange and vice versa can be applied to the remaking of remote areas such as war-torn parts of Syria. In the case at hand, it is Syrian aid workers who are entrusted with giving meaning to what is happening in the remote black box; it is for them to keep in play the very remoteness their colleagues aim to control from afar, thereby enabling its full-fledged incorporation into the wider praxis of humanitarianism.

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Ignacio Fradejas-García iD
Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology (GRAFO research group)
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Edifici B – Carrer de la Fortuna s/n Campus de la UAB
08193
Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès)
Barcelona
Spain
ignacio.fradejas@uab.cat

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