Research Article

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Risk Dumping: Humanitarian Programming in Opposition-held Syria before Al Assad's Run-Off

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Abstract

Inaccessible conflict-ridden contexts necessitating humanitarian programming from afar are onerous operational landscapes. Although local staff usually carry the burden of coordinating and implementing projects amid risk-laden environments, their encounters with safety and security risks are scantly heard and researched. By bringing everyday experiences with humanitarianism in conflict to the forefront, the paper investigates humanitarian action in practice, taking 'western'-funded and led humanitarian projects in opposition-held Syria as a sample. It interrogates remote humanitarian programming and the perils of the ethically teetering praxis of Duty of Care associated with it and empirically puts the problematically overlooked tradition of 'Risk Dumping' on the front line. Sharing local voices from, and lived experiences in Syria and neighbouring countries including the author's, the paper explores the frailty of safety and security measures for locals in the Syria response and exposes the blatant absence of ethical and financial accountability towards those actualising internationally funded projects.

Keywords: risk dumping; Syrian conflict; remote humanitarian programming; everyday humanitarianism; duty of care

Introduction

> The provision of personal safety and security training in the humanitarian sector is biased towards internationally deployed staff members, often neglecting local aid workers who are arguably at higher risk. (Breckenridge *et al.*, 2023:16)

Humanitarian and civil society action in Syria was scarce prior to the intra-state proxy crises in the country and social solidarity was heavily government-controlled, charitable or religious in its nature (Bosman, 2012). The presence of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) was unheard of and remains rarely officialised,[1] especially in government-held areas when Al Assad was in power. In opposition-held areas,[2] remote partnerships with local NGOs and remotely managed local staff were the most common routes in which the largely western donor funds were channelled to deliver aid and programming.

This article seeks to understand how local aid workers in the Syria response have been exposed to risk as they implemented programming in opposition-held Syria. Drawing on 22 semi-structured interviews with local aid workers of international aid agencies working in Syria and neighbouring countries known as the Syria hub (Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye), the author argues that risk was dumped on local workers by their international employers and identifies three types of risks that were dumped: reputational damage, kidnapping and loss of life. The paper explains the mechanisms through which dumping occurs and highlights the ways in which some UN agencies and humanitarian INGOs failed to take adequate measures to mitigate the risks they were dumping. The paper argues that this constitutes a failure in their Duty of Care (DoC) to their local staff.

The article builds on the analyses discussed in the next sections; but in foregrounding the voices of the local aid workers onto whom risk is dumped, it extends existing critiques in three key ways. First, it utilises the concept of 'Risk Dumping', coined by Johnson and Mena (2021), which is defined as an often-unintentional top-down dumping of risk on others who are most likely not insured against the risk nor trained to mitigate it.[3] The

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paper uses the term 'dumping' rather than the more commonly utilised 'transfer' because the latter, in the case researched and many others, problematically implies the involvement of a conscious decision by and consent from all involved stakeholders when the balance of power is slanted by default. Dumping on the other hand, conveys the absence of equality and consent which is what this paper shows. Second, it introduces greater nuance in thinking about the kinds of risk that are dumped. Whereas analyses of risk transfer focus on security risks, the research presented here identified not only security risks but also reputational risks. Third, the article exposes the mechanisms through which risk was dumped on local aid workers. Importantly, it shows that risk dumping is not only unknowingly performed by international staff to local staff, but also from local to local.

The Humanitarian Labyrinthine of Syria

Although delving into the particularities of a humanitarian landscape that changed continuously for over 13 years is not the goal of this article, the following section provides a brief description of Syria's humanitarian labyrinthine since 2011 with a focus on opposition-held areas, the nucleus of this paper, and the areas in which numerous international organisations managed to programme. Acknowledged are exceptions to what is described in brief below.

The humanitarian landscape in Syria has been complicated and mercurial depending on political, territorial and temporal variations and developments since the early days of the crisis. Complicated to an extent where a local team implementing a project in an opposition-held area one morning would find itself escaping Russian aerial bombardments and regime and/or affiliated militia ground invasions leading to changes in zones of control later in the same day. Similarly, another team implementing projects in a 'moderate' opposition-controlled area one day, would find its area of operations controlled by an 'extremist' opposition group – temporarily or permanently – later during the same day. Pausing programming for hours or days to later resume in the same location or elsewhere was a normal occurrence in the everydayness of aid workers in Syria. Escaping safe areas that suddenly turn into front lines was an operational reality many Syrian aid workers had to face, in some cases multiple times.

> We waited until the very end to leave our area. We did not want to leave the medicine and equipment behind. We took as many as we could and escaped. Not a single human being was left in town. You should have seen how a stray dog panicking from the airstrikes ran behind our car for metres and metres. I returned at night, to grab more medicine before the regime confiscates it. My life is not more important than that of sick people. (Conversation with Syrian aid worker, 2017)

Prior to 2011, the Syrian government had to a degree chosen the route of isolation through economic self-sufficiency. By the time the uprisings began, only a limited number of UN agencies, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), the Syrian Family Planning Association (SFPA), and the SOS Children's Villages were present on the ground, of which, SARC and the SFPA can be classified as semi-governmental (Bosman, 2012). A miniscule number of faith-based organisations, such as the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), was also reported to have existed and continued to exist in government-held areas of the country. While other INGOs attempted to play a role in the country's increasing humanitarian crisis, the Syrian regime denied them permission to operate and rejected their entry visa applications (Bosman, 2012; Margesson and Chesser, 2013). As a result, some INGOs 'felt they were not able to work without a protective legal framework' (Bosman, 2012:11). The difficulty in obtaining permission to work in the country affected both international and national organisations and initiatives, leading organisations from multiple sectors to initiate covert cross-border operations into Syria as early as 2012 (Marcello, 2019). With such an (in)operational environment, organisations and individuals maintained low profiles and names of stakeholders providing assistance to Syrians were not shared nor published (Marcello, 2019; conversations with Syrians, 2025). Back then, overt aid to Syrians was channelled mainly through the UN and the Red Cross, but only to those who had sought refuge in neighbouring countries like Jordan and Lebanon, as opposed to Syrians in Syria (Bosman, 2012).

With the persistence of the crisis came a natural increase in needs and aid provision to the country, and by 2013, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) 'issued a statement calling for more aid into opposition-controlled areas. It suggested that most aid was going to Government-controlled areas … [and] [d]onors were demanding greater action on reaching areas outside of Government control' (Sida *et al.*, 2016:14). It was in mid-2014, more than two years after organisations started covert cross-border operations, and around a year after the MSF statement, that the UN Security Council adopted UNSCR 2165, mandating the UN 'to use four border crossings to bring aid into areas outside Government control' (Sida *et al.*, 2016:14).[4]

The restrictions to access, coupled with the uncertain security context, led most INGOs and some UN agencies to adopt remote programming utilising the Syrian

nationals access and networks, community acceptance (particularly in the early days), and willingness to work under great risk to assist fellow Syrians, regardless of dangers pertaining to their involvement in the humanitarian response or of encountering armies or armed groups en route or while implementing projects (Marcello, 2019). As direct implementations were rare and continued to be so in many parts of the country, signing partnerships, and hiring remotely managed staff and remote consultants, most of whom had no prior experience in humanitarian programming, became the default modus operandi. As a result, the majority of INGO programming for opposition-held Syria was remote; increasing in intensity and funding from late 2014 onwards; stopping in some opposition-held areas claimed, sometimes through the so-called 'reconciliations' by the Government of Syria up till summer of 2018; and continuing at a smaller scale in northwest Syria, then the last opposition stronghold until Haya'at Tahrir Ash-Sham (HTS) and other groups took over much of the country in December 2024 after Al Assad's run-off.

The next section of the article reviews existing literature on delivering aid in insecure environments, highlighting critiques of remote management and risk transfer, and failures of aid agencies in their duty of care to staff. The following section explains the research approach utilised by the author followed by two sections that unpack how and why risk dumping has happened on the ground in the Syrian response and argues that international aid agencies are failing in their duty of care to local staff. The article concludes with identifying potential future research and gaps as well as encouraging voicing insider and local experiences to provide more nuanced understandings of experiences.

Delivering Aid in Insecure Environments

In highly insecure operating environments, humanitarian agencies have sought to maintain operations and to avoid full operational shutdowns through remote management. For Collinson *et al.*, remote management happens when 'key decision-making is retained by international managers who are relocated in a safe and usually distant location, while national and/or local staff and subcontracted organisations remain in situ to deliver assistance and implement operations on the ground' (Collinson *et al.*, 2013: 2). Pavanello *et al.* define remote management as a 'partial delegation of decision-making power with some support and oversight, albeit at a physical distance' (Pavanello, *et* al., 2018: 3).

Regardless of definition, the practice of remote management involves the transferring of risk towards local staff, a practice critiqued in existing literature. In the context of Syria, Hayes asks 'how do organisations work around this idea of risk transfer and attempt to ensure that actions are taken to mitigate the transfer of risk to partners with whom they may never physically interact?' (2016: 7). In the same context, Meyer and Richardson (2021) question the ethics of risk transfer in light of excluding local actors from decision-making processes and mitigation measures. As Stoddard *et al.* put it:

> While insecurity drives the decision to undertake remote management, often the result is not a security gain, but rather a shift of risk from internationals to nationals – who typically are provided with fewer security resources, materials, and training than their international counterparts. Agencies generally underestimate the risks to national/local staff and partners; the often-faulty assumption that they are less at risk than international staff amounts to a dereliction of agencies' duty of care. (Stoddard *et al.*, 2010: 8)

Worldwide, a voluminous share of relief work is conducted by locals (Collinson *et al.*, 2013; Knox Clarke *et al.*, 2018; Breckenridge *et al.*, 2023). According to Stoddard (2020), in 2017 alone 'the global humanitarian aid sector comprised an estimated 569,700 aid workers in the field. Of those, 529,000 were nationals of the country in which they worked (Stoddard, 2020: 2, citing Knox Clarke, 2018:17)'. Around 80 per cent of recorded security incidents affect local staff in mostly targeted attacks as opposed to unintended collateral damage (Stoddard, 2020: xix). Globally, from 1997 till mid-2024, the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD) reported 7598 security incidents affecting aid workers, 88 per cent (6709) of which were locals and the remaining 12 per cent (889) internationals (AWSD, n.d.). Breckenridge *et al.* report that 56 per cent of major global incidents affecting aid workers in 2022 occurred in six countries, one of which was Syria, where local aid workers were subjected to airstrikes, assault, explosives, kidnapping and shooting (Breckenridge *et al.*, 2023: 4–5).[5] From the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011 until mid-2024, the total documented number of aid workers affected by security incidents stood at 580 workers, 551 of which were locals. Of those, 290 were killed, 210 wounded, and 51 kidnapped whereas 7 internationals were killed, 5 wounded, and 17 kidnapped (AWSD, n.d.). In other words, 95 per cent of aid workers affected by security incidents in Syria were local and 5 per cent were international;[6,7] noting that the Syrian context is one where expat staff could rarely access Syria's opposition-held areas[8] either due to international

border closures, inaccessibility to opposition-held enclaves, or bureaucratic and security reasons, reliance on local aid workers for programming inside such areas was/is the default. Although numbers are not necessarily always representative, they are referred to in this paper for the purposes of clarifying the overall experiences of local aid workers in Syria and the continuous disregard of their safety and security.

Where local aid workers face high levels of insecurity, and especially where risk is transferred from expatriate to local staff, the question of whether and how aid agencies are fulfilling their DoC to local staff becomes especially salient. Although open to multiple interpretations (DisasterReady, n.d.; Nobert and Williamson, 2017; Slim, 2018; OCHA, 2019; DeliverAidBetter.org, 2020), what unifies definitions of DoC is the ethical, legal and financial obligations of the employer towards the health, safety, security and psychological wellbeing of employees and their families (OCHA, 2019). In some versions, DoC also extends to humanitarian partners, volunteers and communities (DisasterReady, n.d.). Aid agencies have oftentimes been criticised for failure and/or dereliction of their duties towards staff, with failures in DoC to international staff sometimes attracting significant attention, as in the prominent case of *Dennis v Norwegian Refugee Council* (Kemp and Merkelbach, 2016; Sandvik, 2018) where a Court 'concluded that the NRC acted with gross negligence in relation to this [injury and kidnapping] incident and found the NRC to be liable for compensation towards Dennis' (Kemp and Merkelbach, 2016: 3). Other incidents involving international staff or contractors working for CHF International, GOAL and Samaritan's Purse have occurred in 2008–10 consecutively but have not gained as much attention (see Sandvik, 2018; Hickey and Keane, 2010).

Cases of dereliction of duty towards international staff may be more prominent, but dereliction of duty to local staff is arguably more systematic. Haver argues that despite making up to 90 per cent of all field workers, local staff are not considered in organisational security policy design and 'tend not to figure highly in agencies' security policies' either (Haver, 2007:10). Haver also argues that the discrepancy in access to security trainings, briefings or equipment between local and international staff is significant (Haver, 2007:10; also in Breckenridge *et al.*, 2023). On the same lines, Jackson and Zyck (2017) argue that local partners are provided less support on the DoC front. In 2015, an international adviser working for an INGO in an unnamed African country wrote a Secret Aid Worker piece for the *Guardian* sharing their first-hand experience with INGO double standards in terms of, inter alia, health and accident coverage for employees. When inquiring about the discrepancies, the adviser was given what they labelled as 'excuses that don't stack up' (*Guardian*, 2015). Of the 'excuses' were affordability and prioritising the core of the business, lack of obligation to change related policies because the said INGO's policies are 'in line with other international organisations' and that they 'comply fully with employment legislation and [their] duty of care to contractors' (*Guardian*, 2015). Despite the many criticisms pertaining to DoC implementation especially towards locals, including Syria, 'international actors continue to grapple with how to provide adequate duty of care to Syrian partners, particularly how to … provide predictable funding to cover security-related costs' (Pavanello *et al.*, 2018:13).

In their recommendations section, Pavanello *et al.* state that '[d]uty of care needs to remain a priority, and more concerted efforts are needed by international actors to reduce the transfer of risk to local partners under existing remote management modalities' and 'to engage with donors to set up contingency funds to support duty of care and security management' (Pavanello *et al.*, 2018:16). Similar recommendations have also been made as early as 2010 (Stoddard *et al.*, 2010).

Research Approach

> The best way to know about a problem is to be part of it. (Giridharadas, 2019: 267)

This paper investigates the process of dumping risk on local aid workers implementing remotely managed INGO projects funded by 'western' donors (USA, UK, EU and EU institutions)[9] in current or previous opposition-held areas of Syria regardless of sector.[10] It looks at how said organisations and their employees dump risk, leave local aid workers to mitigate it on their own, and in adverse situations, fall short of taking responsibility, or even parts of it, due to the absence of a budget-line for DoC or related contractual rights.

The paper is built on an amalgam of desk research of academic and humanitarian literatures, first-hand experience of working as a conflict and context analyst and a security focal point at two international INGOs responding to the Syrian crises between 2016 and 2019, undertaking twenty-four freely accessible Arabic security and risk management trainings tailored to aid workers in 2023,[11] and twenty-two semi-structured interviews with individuals who had worked for international humanitarian agencies as local aid workers in the Syrian response (Figure 1). The twenty-two participants had experience working for twelve different organisations – ten INGOs and two UN bodies – eleven of which are/were big in terms of size and reach in the Syrian context, and all of which have headquarters in the USA or Western Europe. Given the short-termism of funding and political-context

Figure 1: General breakdown of respondents.

dependency of the sector and its programmes, many of the interviewees acquired experience from more than one of the twelve organisations. The interviewees worked in office-based jobs ranging in duties from officers to coordinators to managers, with all of the Syrians interviewed required to be, at some point or another, present in the field, camp, local council or municipality council for managing, coordinating or implementing programmes.[12] Most of the interviewees, be they Syrians or locals from neighbouring countries had to remotely communicate with aid workers outside the borders of their country, and most had to either write, share or receive incident reports whether they were subjected to the incident themselves or not. The contractual arrangements of the research participants varied to include local staff, local partners and local consultants of international organisations that were not registered in Damascus/Syria and were remotely programming in the country. Many of the participants had worked under different contractual arrangements throughout their years of experience in the aid sector.

Interviews were conducted remotely between 2019 and 2023 (pre the 2023 Türkiye-Syria earthquakes response), initially with ex-colleagues of the author and contacts on professional and social media platforms, and then with others identified through the snowball technique. This paper concerns people who worked in (the response for) areas of Syria which were held by, and varied between (depending on dynamics), numerous 'extremist' and 'moderate' opposition factions that also varied depending on geography. Said opposition-held areas included territories within Dara'a and Quneitra in southern Syria, Eastern Ghouta, Hama, and Homs in what the aid sector sometimes referred to as Central Syria, and Idleb, Aleppo and Lattakia in the north-west of the country. Most of the areas except for north-west Syria witnessed changes in control from opposition to government throughout the years up till mid-2018. The north-west of the country remained as the last opposition stronghold until the escape of Bashar Al Assad on 8 December 2024. The experiences of the participants reflect the timespans between the beginning of remote humanitarian aid intervention around late 2014/early 2015 until the time when either their areas fell into government control or up until the interviews were conducted. Whereas the presence of an 'extremist' group listed and delisted as a terrorist group by foreign governments was the norm in most opposition-held areas, the research participants shared their experiences with risk in areas that were not under groups designated as terrorists by the donors' governments of origin. Conducting and resuming operations in such areas was prohibited by the donors and mediating INGOs, and any project based in such areas was rejected at the vetting stage and/or requested to relocate, even if territorial changes occurred post funding award.

Although the primary focus of the paper is local Syrian aid workers who are or were based in opposition-held territories,[13] including some who left the sector and some who continue to directly work in it from said territories or remotely from outside the country, it also includes voices of local non-Syrian workers based in and travelling around INGO offices within the Syria hub who remotely coordinate(d) project implementations. The latter's positions, including the author's, as intermediaries between INGO managements/donors and Syrian partners and staff not only puts them in a place where first-hand experiences of local Syrians are

shared, but also in one where they unknowingly dump risk on local Syrian aid workers at the same time as they endure risks dumped upon them by management.

Insider–Outsider Continuum

Although conducted after the author had left the humanitarian sector and moved into academia, this research was driven by insider knowledge and experience, particularly by a sentence shared by an ex-colleague who expressed how he and his colleagues in Syria felt disposed of by the organisation they had worked for. In our conversation in 2018 he said:

> We begged the organisation to halt programming, to give us time to think how to survive and see our families. But they refused. They told us 'You'll finish the work, and we won't give up on you' but at the end they did give up on us. When they were done with us, they dumped us. (Repeated when interviewed – 5.2019)

Despite no longer being an insider within the aid industry, the author's position while conversing with those who experienced risk dumping was situated within a dynamic continuum not a dichotomy of insider versus outsider (Breen, 2007). This continuum and acquired knowledge of the Syrian context facilitated conversations with Syrian aid workers about a topic that would otherwise be difficult to find participants to openly talk about.

> What you know about Syria is something that many Syrians themselves don't know about. You know names of key stakeholders and you even know their history, where they were, what they did, what roles they played years ago. This means a lot to whoever is conversing with you. That's why I personally trust you with my experiences. (Conversation, 2025)

Moreover, as someone who experienced risk dumping from distinct angles, having had risk dumped on her by international managers and having dumped risk onto others herself, the author brings a unique perspective to this discussion.

Among others, the so-called insider research is accused of inherent bias, despite the many pros it ensures (Merriam *et al.*, 2001; Greene 2014), including multi-contextual in-depth knowledge (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Smyth and Holian, 2008; Fleming, 2018), trustworthiness of interactions, facilitated access, and its ability to 'be a source of insight' (Aguilar, 1981: 26) that proved advantageous for this research. Recognising the possibility of bias in research, be one an insider or outsider, the author organically employed reflexivity in various forms throughout varying stages of producing this research as well as before. During working in the humanitarian sector, the author had maintained a personal journal where reflections of experiences were noted mainly for processing purposes given her role as a conflict and security analyst and a security focal point closely interacting with people in distress. The author also organically conducted self-interviews before conversing with those whose voices are reflected in the paper. This step had two purposes: to test the logic and flow of questions, and to explore how the author would answer them. Despite having only had negative personal experiences with INGO responses to risk endured by locals, the formulation of questions and conversations ensured that sharing positive and negative experiences was possible and encouraged. Moreover, this research was only conducted after the author established what academic practice describes as an 'appropriate degree of both social and emotional distance' from the topic (Greene, 2014: 9) to minimise potential inherent bias.

Confirmation bias and informant bias were tackled via diversifying the interviewee pool to include ex-colleagues within the sector (for ease of access, already built trust, and/or common understandings) as well as snowballed and social media platforms contacts to counter/prove the input provided by the aforementioned. The multi-layered experience-collection approach was complemented by the quantitative literature available on risks dumped at locals to allow triangulation as much as possible.

Insider research is also criticised for potentially reaching 'premature conclusions that are based upon preconceived ideas and the desire for positive outcomes' (Fleming, 2018: 316). A solution to such a drawback, as suggested by Fleming, is having the author's assumptions challenged and interrogated by a third party. This research was discussed and interrogated, also organically, with critical acquaintances during conversations and debates about humanitarian work. On the academic front, a draft of this paper was shared and discussed with a research group consisting of academics working on various topics within social sciences.

Tacit Ethics

With previous academic experience and publications on topics related to displacement, knowledge production and trauma (Hassouneh and Pascucci, 2022), and with field experience in working with people in conflict zones and at distress, the author's acquired knowledge of culture- and context-specific ethical approaches to researching the experiences of the recipients of risk dumping was vital to mitigate and avoid further dumping. Three main ethical concerns were identified prior to conducting the research and revised throughout the data-collection processes. First, anonymity: privacy and confidentiality were two concerns that were

prioritised in the form of personal and institutional anonymity over methodological elaboration to ensure the safety of the individuals whose experiences and voices are shared. No identifiers are linked to interviews beyond number and year (example 1.2019). Anonymity also pertained to sensitive information such as warring parties' official names which were verbally encrypted by the author and thus encrypted by respondents and/or vice versa. The encryptions were based on insider knowledge of the terms used to refer to actors in the conflict and were shuffled on a case-to-case basis. Second, security: to ensure maximum security, all interviews were conducted utilising platforms with end-to-end encryption protocols for instant messaging and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), and all interviewees were 'safely' based either in opposition-held areas within Syria or outside the country.[14] The implementation of verbal encryption played a role in securing interactions besides anonymising them. Third, psychological harm: another consideration that concerned this research was the possibility of re-traumatisation. This required employing additional emotional labour on the side of the interviewer to minimise any potential psychological harm. Conversing in the same language and sharing the same or a very proximate culture facilitated this process to a certain extent. An unlikely and surprising outcome during this phase was that most interviewees expressed, unprompted, their gratitude for being given an opportunity to vent and verbalise what they had gone through, and for making their voices heard. One interviewee repeated: 'Please make our voices heard. I would have loved to expose them [organisation], but I fear for my personal safety and that of my family' (16.2022). This desire to be heard made starting the interviews with requesting verbal consent and clarifying the purpose of the research and the right to withdraw at any time sounded nugatory, especially that some did not even have any reservations on having their full names spelled out instead of anonymised.

Risk Dumping in Action and Inaction

> I asked my expat manager: 'What would you do if the Syrian partners I am communicating with turn out to be members of Hay'at Tahrir Ash-Sham [designated terrorist group]?'
>
> S/he said: 'Nothing.'
>
> I asked: 'What if the intelligence here [neighbouring country] asks me why I am communicating with terrorists?'
>
> S/he said: 'Nothing. Tell them that your manager asked you to do so'. (Interviewee, 2.2019)

Risk taking is part of everydayness, occupational hazards cannot be fully avoided, and instances where employer and employee find themselves in catch-22 situations are ineffaceable. The humanitarian sector is no different from others in that regard, and this paper does not argue otherwise. Instead, what this section aims to do is qualitatively and empirically shed light on some of the most common risks dumped on locals without or with minimal responsible risk reduction and mitigation measures practiced by INGOs. Safety and security risks imposed on local aid workers responding to the Syrian crisis are numerous, most of which are inherent and rarely residual.[15] With that and with the absence of responsible DoC implementation, health insurance compensation, and timely in-depth context-specific risk management training, all of those interviewed stated that they had to rely on themselves and their networks to navigate risks whenever those occur and that they did not believe that the INGO employing them/partnering with them would do anything to alleviate risks imposed on them as employees/partners should their security and safety become compromised.[16]

Besides earlier reference to quantitative studies, this paper brings in a qualitative dimension to the usually quantitively approached risks, and through looking at how the process of risk dumping occurs in practice, argues that yet other forms of security risks such as blacklisting and reputational damage do exist and are of concern to locals but are not necessarily reported nor registered in databases/reports given their unquantifiable nature. The following are the main risks identified by interviewees, some of which feature in databases/reports, and some of which do not.

Blacklisting and Reputational Damage

INGOs and local NGOs can suffer from reputational damage, but the critical difference as per Stoddard *et al.* is that

> reputational damage to an INGO in one context is rarely fatal whereas once an L/NNGO [Local/National NGO] is labeled as corrupt, they can be blacklisted among international actors and quickly run out of business. L/NNGO staff interviewed on this spoke of the difficulty of getting off a blacklist once put on. (Stoddard *et al.*, 2019: 23)

Similarly, international and local staff, as individuals, can suffer from reputational risks, affecting locals more especially when implementing locally.

The simple fact of Syrian local aid workers communicating with INGO employees in neighbouring countries and vice versa creates an everyday risk to both sides that 15 out of the 22 interviewees in and around Syria identified. One interviewee based in a neighbouring country summarised the risk by saying 'the fact that I am communicating with them [local Syrian colleagues] puts them at risk' (12.2022). Risk in this case and as identified

by the interviewees is summarised as interception, tapping, recording, confiscation and later blackmailing, threatening or detaining by political or state military actors. Potential accusations include spying for foreign intelligence or working/communicating with the enemy or terror sponsoring INGOs, which are rather common assertions by intelligence and amid community members, be it inside Syria or around it (5.2019; 12.2022; 13.2022; 16.2022; 9.2023; 21.2023). Interviewee responses regarding absence of safety and security trainings show that this risk-laden two-way communication, which usually takes place via emails and instant messaging applications is not preceded by thorough IT security risk trainings and software provision to either side. Local employees, in this case, are left to their own devices and learn from their own experiences.

Being blacklisted by intelligence for working with or receiving funding from INGOs is another concern that worries both Syrian and neighbouring aid workers. To local non-Syrian and Syrian workers in neighbouring countries, being summoned by country intelligence is a fear that some of the interviewees expressed openly (for example 2.2019; 12.2022). It is also one that the author personally experienced every time she reached border control before or after work trips to/from the Syria hub: 'This is it … this is the time they will stop me and interrogate me about my job and communications with Syria'. It is worth noting that despite being a 'local', the author was still able to travel to the Syria hub countries and to do so without visas, permissions from interior ministries or intelligence departments, like local Syrians in the Syria hub, simply because she carried a non-Syrian passport. Local Syrians in opposition-held Syria itself rarely enjoyed any form of mobility outside the opposition-held territory in which they reside.

There also exists another layer of fear for locals in neighbouring countries in case of one day entering neighbouring Syria, that of the many Syrian intelligence branches. One interviewee summarises this fear as follows:

> I am sure the regime has all our names listed. I will never dare enter Syria, nor allow my children or even grandchildren to go there. What will the INGO do for me and my listed name? Nothing … Don't tell me international law and human rights. Those won't protect us. (12.2022)

On the same lines, being blacklisted with the Syrian intelligence(s) as a Syrian has more life-threatening connotations (Sosnowski, 2023) to include detention, forced conscription, disappearance and death (3.2019; 4.2019; 5.2019; 14.2022; 16.2022; 17.2022, 8.2023) or 'being turned into minced meat' as one interviewee phrased it (16.2022). Such risks do not only threaten the INGO employee/partner as an individual but also extend to their families and ex-colleagues on some occasions. As the afore-quoted interviewee states, 'I regret that I hadn't created a media scandal against the INGO for mistreating me … but I was worried about my family who would be exposed to risk if my identity as an INGO employee was linked to theirs', or another stating that 'the biggest accusation is being employed by an INGO. Being a commander with the Free Army is better perceived than INGO worker. We are all accused of being agents, infiltrators' (5.2019). This very prominent personal safety and security risk is not one acknowledged by INGOs or listed in quantitative surveys. This risk indeed resembles a catch-22 situation. However, INGOs could attempt to institutionalise protecting their local employees by providing training and secure communication equipment and methods (21.2023). This suggestion might be easier applied to locals based in neighbouring countries where the INGO itself has physical presence, but could be possible for those inside Syria as well, should IT safety and security for locals be considered in project proposals to and by donors and later project design with partners and contractual obligations to employees.

On the other hand, some risks pertain only to local aid workers in Syria, being the perceived decision-makers and fund recipients by the communities they are serving; some local Syrian INGO aid workers were threatened, beaten and had their reputations tarnished because the 'beneficiaries' were convinced that they personally do not want to provide them with aid (5.2019) or because someone did not get a job with an INGO (11.2022). Although this could be yet another catch-22 situation where delivering aid and DoC compete on priority, no conflict mitigation, mediation or negotiation trainings are provided to team leaders on the ground nor are they insured or covered against such accidents. One interviewee shared 'I once received a bomb threat on my car, covered with a note saying, "you will regret it" because a family was not listed as beneficiaries. I told the INGO, but they did not do anything. I had to resolve the issue on my own, using my own networks' (16.2023).

Kidnapping and Detention

Also affecting local Syrians are kidnappings and detentions by armed actors, which sometimes turn into disappearances, and although such instances are treated with silence (Weissman, 2019) and non-intervention from the INGOs sides, balancing that inability and unwillingness to intervene by providing professional abduction/kidnapping management trainings, for instance, remains lacking. Eight experiences of kidnapping and detention, some by ISIS and some by other

armed actors, were shared by local Syrian interviewees. All eight experiences saw the kidnapped figure their own way out either by escaping or by being voluntarily released by the kidnappers/detainers. A common phrase the interviewees used while describing how kidnappings and detentions (and cases of loss of life) were dealt with by the INGO staff[17] and perceived by the local was *dabber haalak,* which means deal with it/ sort it on your own, you know better/there is nothing I can do for you. The phrase is linguistically and culturally used in Levantine Arabic when one party shifts decisions or consequences to another, or in other words dumps it on another. Like risk dumping, *dabber haalak* is generally not an approach that intends to cause harm – although it can, and it does. One interviewee shared how he was besieged by ISIS and waited for the INGO to 'work on it' for two weeks. He later decided that the risk of staying was higher than that of trying to escape, so he decided to sort it out on his own, or in Arabic, *ydabber haalo*. He shared: 'I took the risk and escaped in an ambulance with my mother who faked illness to save me. The only thing the INGO managed to do was to stop implementation until they found another team member to replace me. After escaping, I was expected to return to work normally' (16.2022). Another interviewee shared the story of his friend who was detained by ISIS for around five months, the 'INGO did not intervene, but they did hand him his accrued salary upon his release. They refused to hand it to his family while he was detained although he was the breadwinner' (13.2022). And yet a third interviewee shared the story of the disappearance of his ex-colleague and friend: 'Until this day his location is unknown. Four years of not knowing anything about someone who was like a brother to me. The INGO does not know anything nor cares to know' (14.2022). Kidnappings and abductions are a sensitive aspect of humanitarian programming and paying ransom is not a humanitarian practice. However, other mitigation measures, besides proper training could reduce the precarity of staff and partners; examples include compensations to families, and humane treatment of those who underwent additional traumatic experiences for being INGO aid workers.

Loss of Life

Even loss of life while implementing INGO-led or -funded projects does not seem to be sufficient for the humanitarian system to acknowledge and act upon the risks local aid workers are exposed to. An interviewee shared the story of how he lost a colleague. He said:

> I was in the middle of a meeting when I received news that one of our case management employees had been killed by a rocket while in the car coming to work. We could not do anything for her family. We could not even release her full salary for that month. We only compensated them up till the day she passed, and we had to make a note to file in order to hand part of her salary to her father. She used to feed her parents and younger siblings. She risked her life to come to work. And what was I allowed to do for her? Nothing. (14.2022)

Another shared that his colleague 'was martyred and his family wasn't compensated due to the absence of a DoC budget line on our side' (17.2022), an unfortunately common scenario (14.2022; 18.2022; 19.2022). In twenty-one out of the twenty-two cases interviewed, local employees shared that they themselves had to rely on personal initiatives to support colleagues and that included raising money for the family of the deceased because as colleagues they had to 'deal with it' or *ydabbru haalhom* given the absence of an alternative. A solution to this life-ending risk dumping was proposed by a non-Syrian local employee who came across several similar situations and suggested that 'DoC should be obligatory, included in the budget from the beginning, from the initial stages of the partnership'. He added:

> We are remotely partnering with people on the ground, without whom, all our organisations will cease to exist. We can cover gas, rent, and schooling for expat families who already take thousands of dollars per month, but we cannot cover a family of a deceased partner with 500 dollars which would cover them for five months, unless there is a Duty of Care budget line. (18.2022)

This is also a recommendation Stoddard *et al*. had made in 2019 in their *NGOs and Risk: Managing Uncertainty in Local-International Partnerships* report.

The evident absence of solid DoC implementation yields such dumping of decisions and consequences on those affected by kidnapping, detention and/or loss of life, yet what is striking in all the above is that the individuals left to 'sort it out on their own' (*ydabbru haalhom*) are the ones facilitating and actualising project implementations that are later reported by expat managements to international donors as successes of the managing INGO; those are the triumphs that ensure further funding, and thus continued existence, to INGOs and to the humanitarian sector. Such encounters with risk and death are not reported to nor requested by donors, but are just 'noted' and 'well delivered' (14.2022) when shared in the form of incident reports with INGOs.

The following section demonstrates that not only is risk dumped at local staff, but that the organisations in which the staff interviewed worked provide locals with considerably less (relevant/specific) resources than their expat counterparts in terms of safety and security,

compounding the already problematic practice of risk dumping by such differential treatment and care.

Differential Care

As shown in previous studies and earlier in this research, local aid workers 'take on greater security risk' (Stoddard *et al.*, 2019: 23, see also Tammi, 2022, 2023) than their expat counterparts. In the global study conducted on *NGOs and Risk* in 2019, the majority of 117 practitioner-interviewees and 446 local survey respondents see that INGOs have an obligation to help minimise the risk faced by local and national NGOs (Stoddard *et al.*, 2019:24). *The Sphere Handbook*, the 'holy book' of humanitarian standards, lists the right to protection and security among its common principles, rights and duties, and refers to it as a particular humanitarian concern and that it is imperative that 'agencies exercise a DoC to their workers, [and] managers make humanitarian workers (national and international) aware of risks and protect them from exposure to unnecessary threats to their physical and emotional health' (Sphere Association, 2018: 78).

In their *NGOs and Risk* report, Stoddard *et al.* list thematic and targeted recommendations for INGOs and UN Agencies, Local/National NGOs, and Donors (2019: 39–42). Some recommendations for INGOs and UN Agencies intersected with responses garnered from interviewees for this paper, as practices that remain nowhere near common in their everyday experiences within the sector. It is worth noting that the themes in the aforementioned report were not utilised to formulate the interview questions, yet many unsurprisingly intersected, reflecting established shortcomings in security and safety provision for locals.

In their report, Stoddard *et al.* recommended the provision of basic security management training into onboarding processes (Stoddard *et al.*, 2019: 41). On the ground, however, the practice of minimising or mitigating risk for local staff or partners remains inadequate. For example, in a sector that is built on saving lives, 16 out of the 22 interviewees for this paper (14 of which never worked in the sector beforehand) were not given any safety and security training throughout their precarious employment with INGOs. The remaining 6 interviewees did receive varying training of which half (3) reported that they thought the trainings were useless and out-of-context, and the other half happened to receive trainings normally targeted to expat/international employees, such as the Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT)[18] considered the training to be of benefit. Those who are not fortunate enough to receive proper in-person training are mostly expected to benefit from (context) free optional online trainings like those provided by DisasterReady (1.2019, 2.2019, 6.2019, 21.2023), which provide basic risk management trainings in Arabic, and Kaya Connect or International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) online learning, who provide similar online trainings only in English.

In the *Aid Worker Security Report 2023*, Breckenridge *et al.* surveyed 358 aid workers throughout 46 countries on receiving security (and safety) training and concluded that

> [a]lmost all international aid workers interviewed for [the] report described receiving some form of security training (which tends to include some safety aspects as well) … In contrast, most national NGO staff reported not having access to security training unless it was provided through their international partners, and then only for small numbers of colleagues. (Breckenridge *et al.*, 2023:12)

So not only are local employees and partners of INGOs excluded from training, as this paper argues, but the same applies to NGOs and their national staff. Or as one interviewee phrased it 'we are put in the middle of the sea and asked to swim, without orientation or training' (3.2019), while senior expat staff receive professional training and better protection (Collinson *et al.*, 2013; Elkahlout and Elgibali, 2020; Guidero, 2021; 20.2023) and are treated 'as if they are angels from the sky' as another interviewee described it (7.2019).

Under 'Practicing Ethical Duty of Care', Stoddard *et al.* recommended that INGOs and UN agencies provide support for their local partners to establish insurance schemes, and models of psychological and staff care programmes for their local staff (Stoddard *et al.*, 2019: 42). However, as the cases within this paper reflect, this practice is not yet implemented by the INGOs and UN agencies themselves towards their own local staff, let alone NGOs. In a report published by Humanity & Inclusion in 2023 'interviewees highlighted a lack of clear DoC policies, or their inadequacy, underlining that they should go beyond training and … include the ability to pay salaries in advance as well as provide for assistance with evacuation and relocation, psychological support and material assistance to victims' families'. (Humanity & Inclusion, 2023: 4)

Strikingly, given the widely utilised humanitarian narrative where DoC is a vital component within *The Sphere Handbook*, twenty out of the twenty-two interviewees who had all been working in the sector for several years had heard of DoC only passingly, as jargon, and did not witness its implementation, and considered it empty rhetoric (*haki faadhi* or *aria fritta* – an expression that featured frequently during interviews). One interviewee had not heard of the term and another explained that in his experience, the diversion from the norm of lack of DoC in practice was an outcome of well-

trained and well-oriented management practices performed, on a personal capacity, by a humane INGO director (22.2023). Most local Syrian respondents regardless of current location had a psychological support comprehension of the concept and thought that it an artificial and untimely practice. The rest, including locals in neighbouring countries, perceive it on the lines of 'we just develop bureaucratic policies, but there is no result or outcome of developing them … there is no funding to ensure implementation of such policies' (11.2022; 12.2022; 13.2022; 15.2022; 18.2022). Nonetheless, local aid workers in neighbouring countries had a better understanding of the concept and the absence of its actual implementation beyond paperwork vis-à-vis Syrian staff and partners, but only minimally vis-à-vis themselves and their rights as unprotected INGO local staff members communicating remotely with strangers inside Syria. The inadequacy of DoC implementation in the case studied is reflected in the local workers' statements below:

> A few years ago we used to ask partners if they want to add a Duty of Care budget line to give them training on the topic … if they say no, we don't ask why and we don't tell them what it is. Nowadays we don't even mention it. It has always been optional but it's like it hopes that no one will want to include it anyway. (18.2022)

> One of our partner's employees working on the ground was killed on duty. But we couldn't compensate his family at all. Because the partners had no Duty of Care policy and budget line. (19.2022)

Relatedly, while local staff in neighbouring countries, be they nationals of the country or Syrians treated by the INGOs as locals (as opposed to the intuitive internationals[19]) do receive health insurance coverage and social security contributions as per country laws,[20] 13 out of the 14 local staff and partners interviewed in Syria stated that they are not covered nor compensated for either. The anomaly in this case was from an INGO that does compensate its local Syrian staff (but not partner employees) for health care and social security as part of their end of service payment (12.2022).[21] In that regard, it is important to add that humanitarian budget lines, like many other sectors, lack flexibility, and that the absence of the optional DoC budget line, which if existent would be deducted from the partner's fund, means that partners cannot be compensated for unmitigated personal safety or security incidents, even during working hours, although they are requested to report it to the INGO within a given number of hours and days. Relatedly and on reporting incidents to INGOs, twenty-one out of the twenty-two respondents thought that security incident reporting was a futile process performed for bureaucratic purposes only and that it never yielded results. The one anomaly is the same one who worked under the 'well-performing' director. Although not generalisable, the aforementioned highlights that acts of responsible management appear to come as a result of personal ethical obligation rather than institutional(ised) obligation.

Despite the provision of safety and security training being 'widely acknowledged as a duty of care obligation' (Breckenridge *et al.*, 2023:10), and despite the humanitarian standards dictating that the health, safety and wellbeing of aid workers be guaranteed, or international agencies utilising security trainings as a proactive treatment of threats (UNHCR, 2022), local employees and partners of international organisations working in and around Syria prove that such obligations have been neglected, leading to the dumping of risk onto locals who are not insured against such types of risks nor trained to mitigate them. INGOs appear to be more compelled to protect themselves from liability, but not their local employees from harm – a complaint that several interviewees had made loudly and one which the author witnessed when demanding that the risks and personal harm she had to endure as a local INGO worker be considered in an evaluation process – 'I cannot consider the risks that you are exposed to as a security focal point to our Syrian partners an exceptional risk like that of your colleagues verifying our partners' spendings', she was bluntly told by a risk dumping manager who was likely unaware of the implications of what s/he said. This, as well, has been clearly reflected by some of the interviewees who concluded that INGOs only pay attention to aid diversion and financial fraud because those are the issues they might be held accountable for or face reputational damage from by their donors and the international community.

Conclusion

In a context where international personnel located in mostly safe spaces are prioritised for rigorous safety and security trainings and local personnel leading the implementation of programmes are largely left to their own devices, exploring the 'how and why' of this discrepancy becomes crucial. Supported by local voices from Syria and its hub and oriented by seeing risk as an un-consensually dumped practice, although not necessarily intentionally, this paper investigated risk dumping in western-funded organisations remotely programming in opposition-held Syria and explored the experiences and processes in which dumping happens. Through risk dumping, the paper shed light on a relatively counter-intuitive practice observed within the researched humanitarian organisations; that which subjects

humans/humanitarians to risk rather than alleviating it. The paper also went beyond the initial understanding of risk dumping to include risks dumped at locals by locals (and juniors) and not only by internationals, which allowed expanding the comprehension of the process and how it unfolds.

The paper contributes to academic literature on interconnected levels. It primarily focused on the everyday experiences of the under-researched local aid workers with risk. Additionally, with the absence of adequate risk mitigation measures especially pertaining to locals implementing humanitarian projects, the paper adds to the growing body of literature on humanitarian everydayness, remote programming, and risk transfer and its interpretations. The paper attempted to uncover the cycle of unaccountable risk dumping in the name of humanitarian reach practiced by INGOs and donors on staff/partners/consultants who have limited options but to unknowingly accept risks. It argued that safety and security measures, as well as DoC and not doing harm, are not sufficiently mainstreamed to include local staff and partners by default (Stoddard, 2020; Pavanello *et al.*, 2018), and not yet set up at the donor level and throughout project proposals and designs despite being identified issues for over a decade.

Moreover, the focus on local aid workers in this paper is an invitation to revisit the approach utilised for understanding local everyday experiences within the international aid sector, in that continuing to marginalise local voices regardless of cause (Pascucci, 2019) implies that 'all lives are equal but some are more equal than others' (Bradley, 2019:13) especially that twenty-one out of twenty-two of those interviewed for this paper expressed, unprompted, their disbelief in the humaneness of the humanitarianism sector they work/ed for given how they have been treated. Similarly, introducing the author's experience as a former aid worker within this paper is an invitation to those who were part of a problem to scrutinise and reflect upon their insider knowledge and write about it.

Finally, further research outside the scope of this article, limited to the opposition-held Syrian context yet very relevant to the topic, includes comparative analyses of risk dumping not only throughout other areas within Syria or from other funders of humanitarian programming in the country, but also in other conflict-ridden humanitarian contexts in order to better comprehend the geopolitics of aid. Although this paper is limited to listening to local voices and experiences, investigating how international policy makers, funders and INGOs explain the continued differential treatment of international versus local staff and partners would complement similar research and potentially lead to more clarity on the state of affairs of the humanitarian system.

Finally, this paper seeks to highlight the practice of risk dumping onto local aid workers in the Syrian response, and particularly those who were implementing in opposition-held areas, but generalisation is not its aim.

Notes

1 The humanitarian landscape following the run-off of Bashar Al Assad is changing and humanitarian agencies are currently racing to register in Damascus.
2 Opposition-held areas include previous opposition-held territories in Dara'a/Quneitra/Eastern Ghouta/Hama/Homs and current opposition-held territories in Idleb/Aleppo/Lattakia. Areas under control of Syrian Democratic Forces are not included in this research due to irreconcilable differences with the studied case in terms of conflict and humanitarian dynamics.
3 Risks in the studied context are related to personal safety and security risks.
4 Namely Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa at the Syria-Turkey border, Al Yarubiyah at the Syria-Iraq border, and Al-Ramtha at the Syria-Jordan border.
5 The same applied to Syria after 2013, where aid worker security incidents were among the highest globally, as per The Aid Worker Security Database incidents search function at www.aidworkersecurity.org/incidents (accessed 18 September 2025).
6 For Syria, the database categorises the incidents into eleven means of attack: Shooting/Shelling/Kidnapping/Roadside IED/Other Explosives/Vehicle-born [*sic*] IED/Aerial Bombardment/Landmine/Bodily Assault/Complex Attack/ Unknown
7 In terms of numbers and percentages, it is important to note that the variation in numbers between local and international does not only stem from the widely and wildly practiced transfer of risk at the organisational level, but also because for a substantial period of time, some opposition-held areas were inaccessible either due to international border closures or to the geo-location of such areas as pockets surrounded by government-held areas.
8 With the exception of some Kurdish-held areas, which are not the focus of this paper.
9 The main funders of aid projects in opposition-held Syria. In 2023, nine of the top ten funders of Syria's Response Plan were 'western'. Acknowledged here is the existence of different policies within each donor and I/NGO. However, the paper focuses on outcomes of practice rather than official documentation.
10 Acknowledged are the context/sector-specific risks imposed on aid workers (such as health workers).
11 Courses provided by Save the Children, Cornerstone OnDemand Foundation, and Risk and Strategic Management.

12 Interviews worked in multiple sectors to include Non-Food Items (NFIs); Shelter; Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH); Health; Protection.
13 Which explains the higher number of local Syrians interviewed.
14 Due to the high risk involved in speaking to external researchers, no interviews were conducted with ex-aid workers currently residing in government-held areas.
15 Inherent risks are risks prior to the application of systematic mitigation measures. Residual risks are the risks that remain after implementing mitigation measures.
16 However, six Syrian local interviewees thought that their INGO employer/partner might provide them with one or two months' worth of salary, which is not risk alleviation but more of a right in other contexts and to other employees.
17 It is important to note that local Syrians inside Syria deal with locals in neighbouring countries and not with expatriate staff. Expatriate staff are usually employed as upper management, and local staff are employed as intermediaries with Arabic language skills and cultural understandings.
18 The Basic HEAT course (at the time of writing) costs about €2500 per person and consists of three days of face-to-face simulations of threatening situations and methods of responding safely and securely to them. This paper is not uncritical about the contents of such trainings and is aware of its rootedness in whiteness, masculinity, western-ness, ex-military orientations and cookie cutter designs, as also supported by Breckenbridge *et al.*, 2023.
19 Syrians in neighbouring countries are also treated as nationals in terms of salaries, which are substantially lower than international staff salaries.
20 This does not include insurance or compensation against security and safety risks.
21 The same INGO did not implement the same practice in all opposition-held areas across all times. The whys of this discrepancy in implementation were unknown by the employee.

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