Aiding Gaza: NGO workers' discourses on the 2023 humanitarian crisis

"A drone picture of a line of trucks waiting on an Egyptian road along the border with Israel, near the Rafah border crossing with the Gaza Strip May 2, 2024." (Nichols, M. 2024)

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the discursive strategies employed by NGO workers in humanitarian organizations based in Denmark and neighboring countries to Palestine, focusing on their response to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza. It focuses on the aftermath of the October 7, 2023 attack on Israel and the subsequent military response by Israel, which exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation in Gaza. Since Hamas' takeover in 2007, Gaza has become dependent on aid due to the ensuing blockade, which was worsened by Israel's 2023 reimposed restrictions. The current research analyzes data collected through interviews with seven NGO workers focusing on humanitarian emergency responses for Gaza. Our methodology follows Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate how NGO workers' discourses are being shaped amid the challenges presented due to political interference with humanitarian aid. Our theoretical framework is a combination of seminal works on the role of humanitarian aid and its two main branches - classical humanitarianism and new humanitarianism - with most prominent theoretical inputs from Dorothea Hilhorst and Michael Barnett. The most important challenges reported pertain to increased due diligence requirements by the Danish MFA, the impediments of aid delivery and access to Gaza, as well as scrutiny of the NGOs' Palestinian partners in Gaza, their beneficiaries, as well as public statements and advocacy. Despite a professional obligation to maintain a language grounded in the humanitarian principles, this research finds that NGO workers in this context adopt discourses of political character to challenge the political interference impacting their work. Their discourses are informed by the testimonies of their Palestinian colleagues, by drawing on comparisons with other humanitarian responses, such as the most recent one in Ukraine, incorporating terms like "double standards" and "dehumanization". As opposed to Israel's military actions and Denmark's political stance, articulated through opposing discourses focusing on securitization, our interviewees highlight the imperative of holding these political actors accountable for their role in the Gaza crisis. Additional findings include views on the imperative for decolonisation efforts within modern humanitarian NGOs today, wherein Palestinian voices and critiques of unequal power dynamics globally are emphasized to push for systemic change in the humanitarian response to Gaza.

Keywords: Palestine, Gaza, Israel, Hamas, 7th of October 2023, humanitarianism, humanitarian NGOs, humanitarian principles, politicization, aid delivery, discourse, decolonisation.

List of Abbreviations

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation
CARE: Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis
CEO: Chief Executive Officer
COGAT: Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories
DIGNITY: Danish Institute Against Torture
DR: Danmarks Radio
DRC: Danish Refugee Council
EU: European Union
GBV: Gender-Based Violence
HRW: Human Rights Watch
ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross
IDF: Israeli Defense Forces
IHL: International Humanitarian Law
MSF: Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)
ICJ: International Court of Justice
INGOs: International Non-Governmental Organizations
IPC: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
IOs: International Organizations
MFA: Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MHPSS: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGOs: Non-Governmental Organizations
OCHA: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PA: Palestinian Authority
UN: United Nations
UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UK: United Kingdom
US/USA: United States of America
WASH: Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WFP: World Food Programme

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1. Introduction

After Hamas' terror attack on Israel the 7th of October 2023, killing 1250 people and taking 240 hostages, the Israeli government promptly initiated a devastating military response that has killed around 42.000 Palestinians continuing up until this day. The humanitarian needs immediately skyrocketed, and lack of food security, medicine and shelter became dire at an unprecedented pace. Since the outbreak of the war between Hamas and Israel and the consequently humanitarian disaster in Gaza, Danish and regional humanitarian organizations with aid and development programmes in Gaza and the West Bank intensified their focus to facilitate humanitarian emergency responses in Gaza. Working in humanitarian NGOs, we observed a pronounced frustration among our coworkers, who faced immense challenges in delivering aid to the population, while expressing moral dilemmas of how they ought to handle an increasing politicization of their response. The role of humanitarian emergency responses in Gaza is deemed of utmost importance given the salient need of immediate relief services and goods and the absence of a central recognised government in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. At the same time, the war in Gaza has become charged with political sensitivity and fueled polarization on the overall Israeli-Palestinian conflict than ever before, with government authorities and international institutions being contested on their actions. It became evident to us that clashes of stakeholder interests and varied perceptions of how to deal with the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, has made humanitarian practice seemingly blurred and obscure to our interlocutors. As a result, this expressed obscurity generated a growing curiosity for examining how the humanitarian response to the current crisis is being shaped at the time of writing this paper. As we wanted to understand the dynamics central to the hindrance of aid and the particular political interferences in NGOs, we found it necessary to understand humanitarian worker's perceptions of the crisis through an investigation of their discourses. On the basis of this, the current thesis seeks to investigate how humanitarian workers shape their discourses about the humanitarian response in Gaza in relation to the specific operational, organizational and political challenges they have encountered. Nonetheless, the discourses of NGO workers regarding humanitarian action is a highly understudied topic in academia, where most research endeavors target psychosocial or organizational topics in humanitarian work. Furthermore, so far, research has focused on the role of humanitarianism as a body of governance and embeddedness to states governing logics, mostly examining organizational and political structures without giving voice to the front-liners. Therefore, the main contribution of our qualitative research is the attempt to fill

these gaps through inquiring and analyzing critically the discourses of NGO workers and thus shedding light on their perceptions on the challenges in humanitarian aid delivery in Gaza. Its scope also goes further, by adding a discussion on the nature of humanitarian work when faced with high political involvement that interferes with the humanitarian objectives..

The first chapter presents our research design consisting of qualitative interviews with 7 humanitarian workers from 4 different NGOs, and an introduction to Fairclough's critical discourse analysis as the methodological framework of the research enabling us to examine different elements in their speeches. The second chapter focuses on the literature review of recent and seminal research, and locates our thesis within the existing literature. In the third chapter, we present a tailored theoretical framework of complementary theories within humanitarianism and politicization in the context of aid organizations, that clarifies important concepts within the discourses and identities of our interlocutors. The fourth chapter contains a background analysis that introduces the reader to the most important concepts and historic moments between Gaza and Israel, in order to contextualize the main analytical chapter that follows afterward. The following fifth chapter consists of a thorough analysis examining the discourses of our informants through a systematic inspection of the most central themes articulated in the interviews. In the sixth and last chapter of the thesis, we propose a reflective evaluation on our findings, in which we attempt to discuss and contextualize our interlocutors' discourses in relation to the war in Gaza and political developments currently taking place in humanitarian organizations.

1.1 Research Question

With this introduction, we suggest the following research question and sub-question:

How do NGO workers in Denmark and their global affiliates shape their discourse on the humanitarian response in the 2023 Gaza crisis in the light of the challenges they face to their efforts?

- *How does interference by political actors influence their discourse?*

2. Research design

2.1 Positionality

Positionality refers to the specific characteristics of the researchers that shape their position within a certain socio-political context. (Foote & Bartell 2011; Rowe, 2014). It acknowledges and recognizes two things: that researchers actively partake in the social world, and that their experiences have an impact on the research, unlike positivist views that assume an objective reality (Holmes, 2020). To state one's positionality requires reflection in the relation to the studied topic and the researchers' own identities, which can also be challenging. We will follow the method of Savin-Baden & Major (2013), who identify three main ways to state positionality in qualitative research. Firstly, to place oneself around the subject (in this case the humanitarian situation in Gaza). Secondly, to place oneself in relation to the participants who were interviewed for this research, possible affiliations, opinion and identity alignment or disagreement with, which is a process that requires introspection as to how aware we are with personal biases. And thirdly, to place oneself in relation to the research context and process, accepting that the entire study will be influenced by our lens.

Our affiliation to the studied topic starts with our professional experience, as we have both worked closely with NGOs and humanitarian organizations that provide aid relief or programmatic support to vulnerable communities, among them refugee populations. Therefore, we need to locate ourselves with the subject matter experts who have been interviewed for the current study. Our engagement with representatives of some organizations appearing in this research – namely Care, Oxfam and Dignity - either as student assistants or interns, places us in a position to understand their perspective, operational contexts and approaches to relief work. This proximity equipped us to understand their perspective and context in how they communicate and function, while trying to uphold transparency when handling and analyzing the data. Additionally, our involvement in the organizations, pre and post 7th of October 2023, allowed us to observe a rapid change in the programmatic focus which initially led us to critically examine the humanitarian challenges and their political connotations experienced by our colleagues and informants.

Furthermore, through our tenure as MA students in Global Refugee Studies, we have been introduced to several conflicts in an academic outset and have studied in depth humanitarian

assistance from a critical point of view with the aim of advancing our research skills as novice researchers.

To place ourselves within the research context is a challenging task, as it requires a clear understanding of the multiple identities we bring both as individuals, students and professionals. Like many others within our circle, we are highly appalled by attacks against civilians conducted by both Hamas and Israel, and since we subscribe to norms and ideals of human rights, we are opposed to such kinds of violence independent of socio-political and religious factors. Although acknowledging that both sides have attacked civilians, we also believe that the condemnation of this cannot be addressed through the lens of false equivalency; we fundamentally believe that Israel's response has been disproportionate, especially in regards to what we see as their disregard of the rules of war and refusal to let humanitarian organizations provide adequate aid to the population in Gaza, of which women, children, and other minority groups are most affected and vulnerable. Additionally, our research deals with humanitarian organizations that work to improve conditions for the population in Gaza through a variety of means, and therefore we stress the fact that these organizations' work, as well as our engagement within them, are highly impacted and driven by reports from regional offices and testimonies from Palestinian colleagues on the ground. An inevitable bias in our research stems from our experience and shaped identities as NGO/humanitarian workers, which naturally fosters feelings of understanding, compassion and solidarity with the NGOs workers whose discourses are examined in this research. While this does not prevent us from making bird's-eye view observations, it does not negate our connection to the struggles of our interviewees and the people in Gaza they serve in the midst of one of the world's most complex conflicts due to its politicized nature. Naturally, our inductive approach to this topic is influenced by an inevitable bias among our interlocutors' and our own sentiments to the overarching conflict derived from our shared humanitarian experience and interactions in NGO work. Hence, as researchers, we have put in great efforts to fact check our argumentations and conclusions.

It is a fact that the Hamas-Israel war is one of the most convoluted topics in international relations studies, involving researchers with opposing views that follow the different interpretations of the historical and political events (Aronoff, 2019). However, the intensity and scale of Israel's attack upon Hamas' terrorist attack has been deemed disproportionate, an

observation and opinion that we share as students experienced working in humanitarian organizations.

Finally, apart from the three categories mentioned above, we share Holmes' idea of adding time as the fourth parameter. Time affects our statement as exploring and understanding our positionality is inevitably a 'soul searching' journey (2020; p.3). Almost one year after the outbreak of the war, we realize that time has made us evolve our analytical lenses and research perspectives and is an ongoing process that allows for future reflection. As new researchers we acknowledge that regardless of our utmost efforts to be reflective on our data and analysis, it takes considerable time to shape our worldview in research, which is constantly challenged and developed as the humanitarian crisis and the situation in the Middle East region further escalates.

2.2 Epistemology

The worldview of every researcher who produces a scholarly text is rooted in their epistemological orientation (Halperin & Heath, 2020). Epistemology explores questions like how the researcher knows the world and what is the connection between the observer and the observed (ibid). In other words, it relates to a syllogism about the ways we learn things in order to draw conclusions referring to the ethical stance that an inquirer adopts towards how knowledge is being acquired.

Constructionism, as an epistemological stance in research, postulates that knowledge is actively constructed by individuals through their interactions and experiences rather than passively acquired from the environment (Olssen, 1995). It emphasizes that understanding is shaped by social and personal contexts, meaning that knowledge is created through interpretative frameworks rather than discovered as objective truths. More specifically, our exploration of humanitarian workers' discursive practices and actions in the Gaza response, assumes that their beliefs are being formed by the constructed meaning of how humanitarian aid should be performed based on their own truth and meaning-making of their work regarding the same phenomena. It also aligns with the basic premises of our theoretical and methodological framework.

2.3 Data Collection

According to Halperin & Heath (2020), data is the gathered information and evidence that links the empirical world to the research question. In the current study, the data collection followed an inductive approach, where the research starts with an open mind towards the discussed topic and with as few assumptions and expectations as possible (O'Reilly, 2009). Indeed, our research, although focused on the humanitarian work in Gaza including some political, ethical and operational-related questions, allowed for the answers to direct us to the formulation of the research question.

Our data classification has two layers. Firstly, we conducted a qualitative study focusing on the language and content of the studied topic. Some quantitative data is certainly analyzed, though to a lesser extent and usually to supplement and provide further clarity to the qualitative ones. These may include numerical data such as those provided by official reports. Secondly, the other classification pertains to the use of primary and secondary resources. The primary data in the current research refers to the data collected via transcription of the seven interviews with NGO workers elaborating on their programmatic work and the subsequent implications of the Gaza response.

On the quantitative layer, our secondary data include previous academic works relevant to this study that we have examined and discussed, such as scholarly articles and books found in accredited journals or on websites. The research into other academic works was based on a set of factors; firstly, relevance with the topics of delivery of humanitarian aid in emergency contexts, classical and new humanitarianism, ethics and humanitarian work, politicization of humanitarian aid; secondly, to increase the validity of the secondary sources, we used Aalborg University's and other acknowledged online libraries, selecting articles and books that were published in reputable journals or online web pages; thirdly, we ensured that all articles are peer-reviewed, cited by other scholars, as well as the number of citations. Additionally, other secondary sources include policy reports from acknowledged organizations or other bodies focusing on humanitarian work in Palestine, or in the wider region but targeting the Gaza response.

For a working definition of humanitarian response, we rely on the common understanding found across various UN documents and handbooks. It refers to a set of activities aimed at saving lives, alleviating suffering, and preserving human dignity during and after man-made

crises and natural disasters, while also focusing on prevention and preparedness for future emergencies.

It is also necessary to unpack the key terms that will be used in the analytical chapter, specifically the notions of the “humanitarian” and the “political”. As will be discussed in the theory, “humanitarianism” derives from the word humanity originating in the 19th century following the breakout of several major wars and the subsequent emerging recognition of the need to assist people in distress. Over time it became increasingly difficult to pinpoint the differences between the two terms. Barnett aptly points out “Once upon a time humanitarian agencies used to define themselves largely in opposition to “politics” (2005, p. 723-724). Therefore, in order to overcome the intrusion of politics and differentiate the field, humanitarian organizations based their work on the guiding principles - these are impartiality, independence, neutrality - in an attempt to depoliticize the field (Stockton, 2004; Louis & Maertens, 2021). The political/humanitarian divide does not yield a straightforward answer (Warner, 1999), while there is extensive research regarding whether organizations should remain more humanitarian or whether they should have a greater engagement with politics (Weiss, 1999; Warner, 1999; Stein 2005; Banrett; 2005; Harvey, 2013). When we refer to “politics” and the “political”, we are inspired by the way Barnett gives meaning to politics as inherently tied to power dynamics, especially in the context of international organizations and humanitarian efforts. In Barnett’s view, politics encompasses the role of institutions and governments, especially in global governance and understands politics through a normative lens, where actors advocate for particular values or moral principles creating boundaries between "us" and "them.". Lastly, politics also entails contestation and conflict of values and resources in which powerful actors can exert authority over the less powerful (Barnett, 2005).

2.3.1 Sampling

The data management started with the selection of our sample. The study’s sample consists of seven interviewees who work for humanitarian organizations or NGOs and whose projects are focusing on the service provision for the Gaza response. The organizations selected were Oxfam, Care, Danish Institute Against Torture (DIGNITY) and Doctors Without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres - MSF). Four of them were based in Denmark and thus involved in advocacy and programmatic work, three of them were working closer to the region but also working for Care Jordan, Care Palestine and Oxfam Egypt. The selection of the sample followed a mixed method of selective sampling and snowball sampling to a lesser degree

(Coyne, 1997). The selective sampling of interviewees was due to the fact of our internship and work at the NGOs Care, Oxfam and Dignity. Two of the interviews followed a snowball sampling technique, as the participants were referred by the other participants as subject matter experts that could provide valuable insights to this research. It should be noted that the initial intention of this research was to gather insights from humanitarian workers based in Gaza; however, this was not feasible given the adversity of the current conflict that brought considerable challenges in communication, due to the limited access to internet and electricity in the Gaza Strip. Therefore, upon discussion with the focal points from the organizations where we completed internships or student jobs, we decided that the interviews would be conducted with local Danish NGO representatives involved in Gaza response projects.

A necessary consideration is the reflection on the sample that consists of people who are based in Denmark with a focus on programmatic, fundraising and strategic work, and people who work for the implementation of the programs on the regional level and in closer proximity to the conflict. We view this as an opportunity for a wide perspective and diverse answers to the phenomenon under question. It provides the opportunity for exploring how the actors that work for the same humanitarian emergency express different or shared opinions, moral sentiments and judgements. Other considerations concern the mandate of the agency. For instance, MSF's mandate is about the delivery of humanitarian medical assistance, while Oxfams' and Care's mandate is about the fight against inequality and justice, with a focus on economic parameters. Dignity's work differentiates slightly from purely humanitarian operational work, as it engages with the fight against any form of torture. It should be noted that MSF, Oxfam and Care have an international presence, while Dignity is based in Copenhagen but provides funds to partner organizations around the world, including Palestine.

The sample diversity ensures perspectives from both field-level and central-level humanitarian work. All participants, although interconnected through employment with the same NGOs, work in different regions. On one hand, the NGO workers in Denmark addressed programmatic challenges and their participation in the subworking group with representatives from all Danish NGOs and relevant institutions and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They also drew insights from internal communication channels that relay their colleagues' narratives and reports from the field. On the other hand, we interviewed three

humanitarian workers placed in Jordan, Lebanon, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, bringing direct insights from areas closer to the conflict zone. Consequently, the sample is homogeneous in terms of organizational affiliation but diverse in geographical and operational contexts.

The following section provides detailed information on our interlocutors' roles and their respective organizations, enhancing the clarity of our sample for the reader.

Table 1

Participants interviewed for this research

Name	Organization	Position	Country
Alice	Care	Response Director for the Gaza Crisis & Global Coordinator for Gender-Based Violence and Emergencies	Egypt
Kyla	Care	Protection and GBV emergency specialist	Palestine
Nadia	Care	Regional Gender and Emergencies and Protection Advisor for theMiddle East, North Africa, Balkans and the Caucasus.	Jordan
John	Oxfam	International Program Advisor & coordinator for Palestine programmes	Denmark
Clara	Oxfam	Senior Humanitarian Advisor	Denmark
Jennie	MSF	Analysis & Advocacy Director	Denmark
Teresa	Danish Institute Against Torture	International Project Manager for the Middle East	Denmark

2.3.2 Qualitative Interviews

The interviews were conducted in February and March 2024, and their average duration was around 45 minutes. The questionnaire comprised 15 questions loosely categorized into sections regarding a) operations, b) politics, c) funding, d) ethical considerations, all focusing on the current humanitarian emergency and projects in Gaza Strip. The questionnaire can be found in appendix 1. Two interviews with Danish NGO representatives were conducted in their respective offices in Copenhagen, while the remaining five interviews were conducted online. The participants were initially contacted by email that was introducing the scope and the description of the research. The interviews were recorded and transcripted upon consent, while the participants had the opportunity to retain their anonymity. While all participants

chose to remain anonymous, they agreed to disclose the name of their NGO for the purpose of the research. Therefore all names mentioned in the analysis are pseudonyms.

Upon transcription of the recorded data, we designed an online data storage system categorizing notable parts of the raw data under prevalent hyper-categories; these initial rough categorisation of the raw data is essential as Miles and Huberman (1994, p.182) suggest that qualitative data exist as "essences of people, objects, and situations." Indeed, essences refer to the interpretations that researchers draw upon the raw data collected during the interview (McNabb, 2015). This interpretative process, that is also explained in our epistemology, was a crucial step toward achieving data reduction. The latter involves selecting key themes and constructs from extensive qualitative data to create a conceptual framework consisting of themes or clusters (ibid). In the current stage, the initial categories were humanitarian operations, politicization of humanitarian aid, humanitarian norms, discourses of agency and postcolonial narratives on humanitarian aid. Undoubtedly, this clustering was just the initial step to assist researchers in the subsequent data analysis.

2.4 Methods - Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis

The methodological approach follows Fairclough's work on critical discourse analysis and informs the way that the data of this research will be analyzed. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) combines the critical research on social analysis with language studies. It aims at examining the relation between discourse and other social elements such as power, ideologies, institutions, and social identities (Fairclough, 1992). Its goal is not just to describe the prevalent discourse of individuals or entities that act within the same social space, but also critically evaluate the values or norms that are being expressed, as well as explaining what underlying mechanisms and structures feed these discourses (ibid). Therefore, its constructivist lens aligns with the assumption of the current research about how the discourses of the NGO workers dealing with the humanitarian response shape and are being shaped by other actors within the same social reality. The discourse consists of three dimensions; the text itself, the discursive practice, and the social practice. The relationship between these dimensions is interconnected and dialectical; for Fairclough, the discursive practice is embedded in social practice, understood in that social practice sometimes consists entirely of discursive practice, while other times it involves both discursive and

non-discursive elements (ibid). What exactly each dimension means and how they are used in the analysis will be explained in the next section.

The dialectical relationship between discursive and social practice is one of the main distinguishing features of Fairclough's CDA, particularly in how discourse both constitutes and is being constituted by social practice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The discourses articulated by our interlocutors not only contribute in shaping the nature of humanitarian work, but are also being shaped by the humanitarian paradigms and other social actors and entities that are involved in humanitarian affairs. For instance, it is crucial to investigate how the utterances of our interlocutors are shaped by their interaction with multiple actors in the arena (institutions, states, authorities, NGO executive bodies, legal actors), and how they form the discourse on the humanitarian intervention in Gaza. Most importantly, apart from the strictly linguistic/textual examination of their utterances, CDA's advantage lies in the social analysis of the phenomenon through focusing on the historical and cultural practice of the humanitarian social domain.

An integral feature of Fairclough's CDA is that the "discourse functions ideologically", which means that discourses tend to contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups aiming at preserving and advancing their interests (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; p.4). It is also through the discourse that each group struggles for power and challenges these imbalances, and ideologies are critical in this context. Additionally, Fairclough's CDA is critical because it is committed to the research of social change and investigates how the dominant discourse practice contributes to the preservation of unequal power relations, but also how inequality can be tackled through the discourse of the less powerful.

2.4.1 The three-dimensional model

Fairclough suggests a complex three-dimensional framework to analyze the discourse as a social practice (Fairclough, 1992; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2013). This model positions the study of discourse at the intersection of: a) textual and linguistic analysis, b) macro-sociological analysis, where power relations significantly shape people's discourse usually without their awareness, and c) micro-sociological analysis, which examines everyday practices based on "common-sense" procedures (Fairclough, 1992; p.72). The three

dimensions are referred to as Discursive practice, Text, and Social practice respectively. We will explain each dimension below,, laying out how they will be used to analyze the data collected in the current thesis.

2.4.2 Discursive Practice

The first dimension, discursive practice, is the mediator between the other two dimensions; that is, texts and social practice is mediated by discursive practice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). It is composed of text production, distribution and consumption within a specific social process. We will shed light on the existing circumstances when the interviews and other selected data were produced. The production of our interviewees' replies are informed by their professional identities that form their discourses on the humanitarian response in Gaza. Our interlocutors have been working for a variety of humanitarian responses, thus carrying many experiences in different operational contexts. At the same time, they generally align with the principles of the organization they work for. The distribution of their speeches takes place in a public space with many different actors, such as government representatives, colleagues, partners and the public through advocacy. The consumption of the text is highly pertinent to different types of audience (Fairclough, 1992; 80). In this sense, the discourses of NGO staff address multiple audiences as mentioned above. These are not only "addressees", meaning directly addressed, but also "hearers" that are still part of the audience as they encounter the work of the NGOs through public advocacy, social media, and private fundraising efforts (Fairclough, 1992; p. 79)

2.4.2.1 Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity

The analytical tools we will use for the discursive practice are intertextuality and interdiscursivity by merging them in the analysis to achieve a more coherent and unified analysis of data. They refer to the productivity of speeches or texts examining how they can convert previous texts, change existing norms and lead to the creation of new ones (Fairclough, 1992; p. 102). But for Fairclough, this productivity is not limitless, but rather subject to power structures within a social domain (ibid; 103). Therefore, it is suggested that it is studied alongside hegemony in order to capture the power struggle among the interested groups. Interdiscursivity is a type of intertextuality that posits that "the use of elements in one discourse and social practice (…) carry institutional and social meanings from other discourses and social practices." (Candlin & Maley, 1997: 212). Intertextuality and

interdiscursivity can lead to either reproduction or challenge of the existing social schemes (Rear & Jones, 2013). When discourses are used in a conventional way they maintain the order of things whereas when they provide alternative or creative new discourses they challenge the status quo (ibid., 21). These two concepts will be applied with a view to scrutinizing whether the discourse of NGO workers intend to bring change or maintain the narrative about how the current humanitarian response in Gaza is unfolding. In other words, do they align with the humanitarian, institutional and political discourses or do they use discourse as a means of raising their voices and negotiating their demands, in the social fabric of the humanitarian response for Gaza?

2.4.3 Text

Inherently a linguistic approach, CDA's textual dimension refers to the formal features of text or speech, and is used in the procedure of description of a discourse (Fairclough, 1992; p.73). These refer to vocabulary, grammar, syntax, cohesion, structure, notions well spread and understood among the linguistic scholars. However, Fairclough's contribution to the critical social studies is his suggestion that language, discursive and social practice are interwoven; The model asserts that texts must be understood in relation to webs of other texts and their social context, never in isolation (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In the current research we will focus on wording, ethos, and word meaning.

2.4.3.1 Word meaning

Word meaning pertains to the key terms within a text. We will examine whether the utterances involving general or culturally and socially specific words can provide valuable insights into the speaker's choices as well as into the way these will be interpreted. For Fairclough (1992) words and meanings are involved in processes of social or political discord and call for change. Therefore, the struggle for the acceptance of certain meanings through words is a struggle for hegemony. The latter will be analyzed in the following paragraphs about hegemony. Here, we will examine which words (wording) have been used and whether these have been used conventionally or unconventionally in the light of the new humanitarian situation in Gaza (word meaning), by examining our interlocutors' thoughts on the political and ethical challenges they face currently.

2.4.3.2 Ethos

Ethos relates to the construction of social identities through verbal and non-verbal activities (Fairclough, 1992; p.166-167). We will focus on both parts starting from the text and extending the analysis by focusing on the individual and professional ethos that is met in humanitarian workers' discourses as a whole. The quest for ethos is built on the different types of pre-existing patterns that are mobilized by the producer and which aim at declaring subjectivity and producing distinguishable social identities (Fairclough, 1992). It is highly applicable to the current study, as we intend to examine the patterns deployed by the humanitarian workers when describing the challenges they meet in the conflict under examination.

2.4.4 Social Practice

The third dimension of Fairclough's model is social practice, which is the main distinguishing figure of CDA compared to other theories of discourse analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). As mentioned before, Fairclough understands discursive practice as existing within the social, but additionally, the relationship between discursive and social practice is dialectical; discourse is formed by social practice, but social practice also forms discourse. Social practice, as mentioned before, can consist of both discursive and non-discursive elements, which can be political, economic, and/or historical in nature. This dimension's main aim is to identify the social matrix that discourse is situated in, with the hope that discourse's effects can be ascertained through the examination of said matrix. In layman's terms, a social matrix is the set of identified actors that seek to influence and construct the discourses and social practices in a certain space, and by extension the balances of power between them (the "status quo"). Through their collective actions, social practice is formed. Specifically, this dimension tries to assess whether the actors' discourses seek to maintain or challenge the status quo through their creative and innovative use of the aforementioned elements (Fairclough, 1992; p. 237). The social matrix in the current study involves the NGO workers, the institutions they belong to, their collaborators, the political authorities they interact with or are affected by, other legal bodies, and, of course, the population in Gaza. Through this dimension, we hope to ascertain the imbalances of power within, and between, the aforementioned groups, as well as the strategies each actor uses in the struggle for power and influence.

Fairclough suggests that social practice, and the imbalances within, is understood, practiced, and challenged through two integral concepts: ideology and hegemony (Fairclough, 1992). Given the dimensions' interconnectedness and dialectic relationship, they carry broader implications for the model as a whole.

2.4.4.1 Ideology and hegemony

Firstly, ideology is understood as constructions of meaning that contribute to the production, reproduction, and transformation of relations of domination (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). These ideologies emerge in societies characterized by domination based on class, gender, cultural group, and other factors, and like the relationship between social and discursive practice, society and ideology are dialectically linked. According to Fairclough, these ideologies are most effectively identified in everyday "common-sense" discussions where attempts are made to negotiate meaning, and as such it is in these discussions, where ideology is most "invisible", where discussing word meanings is vital (Fairclough, 1992; p.72). CDA, as critical social research seeking to examine and address societal injustices and inequalities, centers around this concept in a general sense as well (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Secondly, hegemony refers to the ongoing struggle for dominance among competing social groups or voices within the "order of discourse." In contrast to Foucault, who exclusively focuses on the influence of power relations over discursive practices and the struggle for less powerful groups to gain hegemony, Fairclough insists that the power of discourse as a social practice "establishes, sustains, and changes power relations" (Fairclough, 1992; p. 67). By emphasizing "tactical polyvalence" (ibid; p. 221) - the idea that discourses can be used in various ways depending on context - Fairclough contradicts Foucault by arguing that power is not absolute, but contested. This allows for the possibility of resistance and subversive social actions through discourse, which Foucault's critics argued were underexplored in his work (Dremel & Matic, 2014).

The concept of hegemony should be studied alongside ideology. Researchers should investigate how discursive practices, as components of social practice, are articulated in the textual dimension as part of the hegemonic struggles of various social groups striving to dominate discourse. Similarly, when a social group introduces new discursive elements to challenge existing power structures, it represents an effort toward discursive change.

2.4.5 Examining power dynamics in our case study

In our case study, unequal power dynamics are present both in terms of the institutional structures that our interlocutors work in, but are also fundamental to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Our interlocutors work in “the middle" of an actor hierarchy, in which NGO workers are positioned in between the state, their donors and the people in need. They are faced with the responsibility to be accountable both to the donors - that is the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in our case - but also the people who ought to provide relief to. We will try to unpack what types of discourses emerge when their obligation to comply with donor requirements of the Danish government collides with the values that these organizations have to work after, as we will explain in the analysis. A battle for hegemony and ideological dominance occurs, when the politics imposed by actors such as the Israeli government and the Danish MFA obstruct the humanitarian efforts of the NGO workers, who then contest the growing political interference. Given the complex hierarchy and network of actors within this social matrix, the three-dimensional model laid out by Fairclough is very useful in breaking down and pulling into focus how these imbalances are constructed and contested, especially in the case of less-powerful actors that exist in the intersections, such as our interlocutors.

The study reaches its final conclusions through analyzing the relationship between discursive practice and broader social practice. We will examine whether the discursive practice of the NGO workers intends to contest and challenge the current humanitarian work streams in Gaza by examining their operational and financial aspects, internal and external communications as well as their partnerships or cooperation with other entities in this social matrix. This is a complex question to tackle, as there are many actors involved in the same humanitarian arena. Therefore, does the order of their discourse (which can be described as the relatively durable social structuring of the language, and that shapes social practice) try to bring new elements through challenging power relations?

This is the contribution of the research: discovering whether the NGO workers negotiate meanings in their discourse, thus attempting to change the order of humanitarian work by deploying different orders of discourse. If so, which themes pertaining to humanitarian aid are mentioned and being challenged? Conversely, if not, do they try to maintain the current order of discourse and thus align with the social practice as it has been so far? These are the questions that this study will try to analyze.

2.5 Limitations

As previously mentioned, the current study followed a snowball sampling technique which bears certain limitations. Four of our interviewees work for Danish NGOs, suggesting that we could talk to their partner organization colleagues to gain a closer understanding of humanitarian responses and on-the-ground realities. Therefore, the other three NGO representatives are affiliated to two of the Danish NGOs and work in Jordan, Egypt and Palestine. In this sense, although working for similar mandates, the distinction between programmatic roles and operational roles presents challenges for direct comparison and may limit the ability to generalize findings across these different organizational contexts. Therefore, our findings should not be generalized to represent the views and discourses of all civil society/NGO workers, but instead they can potentially inform future research, especially given that the existing academic work on the topic is highly limited.

The questionnaire was addressed to professionals who work for well known NGOs in Denmark, of which some are also internationally known and have global presence. During the interviews we asked the professionals to answer based on their professional identities and express their views in the context of their current tasks related to the Gaza crisis. However, while their opinions to a certain extent are embedded in the mandate and rhetoric of the NGOs they work for, it is inevitable that their personal opinions may also be interconnected with their professional ones, since one's professional identity is closely linked to and partly shapes an individual's overall identity and beliefs. This is a challenge in this research, as the lines between professional and personal opinions often seemed blurred. In addition, it is important to stress the sensitive nature of any topic on Israel and Palestine, and the current humanitarian crisis in Gaza certainly provokes strong feelings among people working on the issue. Although the profound sensitivity on the topic may not be a limitation as such, but rather a natural part of the research, it may explain how professional and personal opinions are so closely connected.

We have encountered a noteworthy lack of prior research studies on the topic, especially ethnographic studies about discourses of NGO workers on topics pertaining to the role of humanitarianism and its interplay with politics. The lack of secondary literature delimited our research endeavor, as it was challenging to situate findings within a broader academic context and reduced opportunities for comparative analysis with other academic works.

Another limitation is the highly contested debates in academia with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our role as researchers is to thoroughly interpret the collected data which inescapably follow our own lens and thus our own bias. While we can not eradicate our biases, however, we tried to minimize their impact by being transparent on our methodology, theory and resources used in the current thesis. This was attempted by supporting the findings on widely accepted and cited literature as well as being very attentive to the provision of information coming from online media. Lastly, the use of references from the media presents another limitation to this study. The events that followed the 2023 humanitarian response in Gaza are extremely recent therefore we had to rely on the press and the spread of non accurate data was prominent. To mitigate this risk we tried to rely on acclaimed UN sources, or cross check multiple sources to finally provide the most truthful one.

3. Literature Review

From our research and conversations with our interlocutors, we have identified four areas of study that our research touches on and contributes to. To pursue the research agenda, we will review literature within each of these areas and showcase how it will contribute to the current knowledge on humanitarian and NGO work. We will start by reviewing the literature on the common challenges in humanitarian aid, addressed within the wider field of international relations following qualitative research. Afterwards, we will analyze studies that detail the positions of NGO workers themselves. Then we will connect this literature to the effect of politicization in humanitarian aid, a topic that is prominent in our case study on the NGO workers' discourse for the humanitarian response in Gaza. Lastly, we will examine the existing research on relief work in Gaza. In each case, we hope to show how our research illuminates new topics and fills gaps exposed by the examined case. Both historical/seminal research as well as new academic work will be presented.

3.1 General humanitarian challenges

Humanitarian interventions during conflict are characterized by higher complexity, usually because of lack of access to affected populations, inadequate basic infrastructure and overwhelmed aid organizations (van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017). Bollettino et al (2024) follow a thematic analysis to examine a large sample of aid workers' perceptions on the most

common challenges they face during emergency responses. Challenges pertaining to coordination, operating environment and security were the most frequently stated. Demographics such as the organization they work for, the seniority of the workers as well as the country they operate played a role in the variation of their responses. Funding insufficiencies were among the major concerns for aid workers in Africa and Middle East while applicants from the Americas and Europe referred to localisation as a main humanitarian challenge. Localisation of aid and its relation with the effectiveness of humanitarian aid has is a widely studied topic in several ethnographic studies in the light of the localisation agenda (Barakat and Milton (2020), Krantz and Gustafsson (2021), and Pincock, Betts, and Easton- Calabria (2021). However, the concept of localisation is unclear for many, as it can denote different aspects of aid work, such as hindrance in accessing resources or challenges that are related to local identities and independence (Bollettino et al., 2024). Krantz and Gustafsson (2021) support defining the *local* as well as a pragmatic approach to what can be achieved locally and what globally can contribute to a power distribution that goes against working in silos in humanitarian responses. Our thesis contributes to this stream of literature by analyzing the discourses of NGO workers regarding the coordination with regional partners for Gaza, additionally including the regional experts' voices who conceptualize how local knowledge should become more trusted in order to address the complex emergency in Gaza.

Broussard et al (2019) have examined the ethical challenges faced by medical humanitarian workers in the context of armed conflict by conducting a systematic literature review. The adherence to humanitarian principles - humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence - can be influenced by hindrance in access and security implications as well as the politicization of aid. Maintaining neutrality is stated as the most common implication for staff that has experienced threats or born witness to atrocities conducted in conflict settings (ibid; Civaner et al, 2017). Similarly the principle of independence can be compromised when immoral activities by other actors in the conflict restrict the access and medical aid delivery (Burkle et al, 2017). Furthermore, independence is at stake when there are funding conditionalities with regards to scrutiny over services offered or the identity of the recipients of aid (Clarinval & Biller-Andorno, 2014), which makes decision making an extremely challenging process for humanitarians (Knox Clarke & Campbell, 2020). Furthermore, impartiality can be compromised and lead to aid diverted to armed groups or illegal entities, which can erode the integrity of humanitarian efforts (Clarinval, & Biller-Andorno, 2014).

Impartiality can also be impacted by external pressures and restriction to highly conflicted areas where the population is the most vulnerable (Broussard et al, 2019). In his book about ethics in humanitarian work, Slim (2015) agrees that the moral obligations that are attached to the humanitarian principles in complex conflict settings are often at odds with the practical challenges, especially in complex conflicts, and suggests that humanitarianism is tasked with the additional challenge of maintaining ethical clarity in difficult decision making situations. These studies are especially relevant in our case study, as will be detailed in the background and analytical chapters. Our contribution to this research stream lies in the analysis of NGO workers' discourse regarding their duty as seen through the lens of humanitarian principles. We will critically examine how they use these principles when faced with challenges that pertain to the intrusion of political interests in the humanitarian response.

3.2 Discourses among NGO workers, discontent and evolving thought

As NGO workers' testimonies form the bulk of our data, discourses among NGO workers are naturally a big area of study under examination. Despite the large academic attention paid to humanitarianism, data on the positions and discourses of humanitarian workers themselves is less plentiful than expected. Strohmeier et al (2024) conducted a systematic thematic analysis on the public discourse and narratives of "Secret Aid workers" between 2015 to 2018, a series published in The Guardian, exploring the only publicly available mainstream media resource on the everyday life of humanitarian personnel. Examining how the humanitarians frame their work, they found that their narratives "reveal a powerful discourse of discontent" (ibid; 1). The literature on humanitarian stories is of great importance as narratives can explain the "consensus about why things are the way they are in an organization" (James, 2022, p. 465). A major issue of discontent among humanitarian discourse concentrates on the power asymmetries and especially in the centralisation of power in the hands of the wealthiest and privileged countries, that are commonly donor countries as well (Owen, 2021). Aid workers perceived the typical strict donor requirements as the cause for most personal and operational problems such as delays in aid delivery, a lack of coordination, and colonial practices (Strohmeier et al. 2024), but also one of the main stressor specifically for the continuation of programs in the NGO sector (Strohmeier et al, 2024). Research suggests that the humanitarian sector should advocate further for a shift towards more distributed webs of resources and knowledge by including local actors in order to diffuse this power (Bennett,

2018; Currion, 2018). Strohmeier et al (2024) study is relevant to our study as it examines public discourses on media by relief workers in emergencies; our contribution to this stream of literature lies on the discourses of NGO workers in one of the most challenging conflicts through critically examining their utterances as responders to the Gaza crisis. A benefit of this research is that it examines the data collected through qualitative interviews of NGO workers, who work for humanitarian organizations that operate in the emergency response under examination.. Hence, the research offers an insight into the perspectives of NGO workers as linked to the practices within their organizations. Operating in a particularly volatile area under regimented and heightened political circumstances, the working conditions of our interlocutors are especially unique and pressured. The exact nature of their discontent - be it with their working conditions or the political situation as a whole - shine a new light on Bennet's and Currion's findings, as well as how the roots of bigger political developments in humanitarianism can be discovered through our interlocutors' discourses.

3.3 Politicization of humanitarian aid

In an area as politically difficult and conflicted as Gaza, it is inevitable that humanitarianism would likewise take on a political dimension. The implications of politicized aid are nothing new. Duffield, Macrae and Curtis (2001) criticize the evolution of humanitarianism, especially in conflict zones, that has become increasingly integrated into and aligned with Western governments' agendas to transform conflicts, reduce violence following their liberal governance lines. Similarly, Mills (2005) argues that the current state of humanitarianism is situated within the contemporary conflict, rather than in its margins, denoting its embeddedness into the political sphere. This is frequently called the 'new humanitarianism', and has characterized the international response to many recent conflicts. In his seminal work Humanitarianism Transformed, Barnett (2005) states that two significant instances shaped humanitarianism as known contemporarily; these are politicization and institutionalization. For many, the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of December 2004 was the catalyst in the state and private sector's mobilization and involvement into humanitarian affairs, who rolled military support and financial assistance under the humanitarian response (ibid) also used by Hilhorst and Jansen (2010; 1133). In their seminal ethnographic research about the intrusion of multiple actors with their respective interests in the humanitarian arena, Hilhorst and Jansen (ibid) argue that the humanitarian sector became *vulnerable* to specific agendas

and goals. Barnett argues that in the case of crises in Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo, humanitarian principles were eroded by the fact that relief agencies received funding from the same states that also were responsible for the spillover of conflict. As they become increasingly dependent on state funding for survival and access, humanitarian organizations are torn between the politics of governance and the politics of solidarity (Fox, 2001; Barnet, 2005). This binary is exacerbated by difficulties of state sovereignty and legal constraints in complex conflict settings, which has brought a lot of confusion for the humanitarian workers as well (Hilhorst; 2018).

Overall, Fox (2001) is very critical towards new humanitarianism, seeing its adherence to a human rights approach and effort to reach wider political goals that might do more harm than good, thus not serving its minimalist purpose of universalism. Using the example of Rwandan refugees in Zaire, she lays out how a "variety of well-respected actors", in spite of the camps containing thousands of innocent civilians, "called on agencies to resolve the political crisis on the borders of Rwanda by withholding aid, closing the camps and helping to repatriate the refugees against their wishes." (Fox, 2001, p. 280). Fox rejects both traditional and new humanitarianism approaches, suggesting that a new approach in humanitarianism is highly needed. To this end, she supports universalism as the key for humanitarian aid to serve its main purpose - save lives and provide relief - but does not suggest a concrete action on how this can be achieved in this rather complex world where politics have become an integral part of humanitarian aid.

Our interlocutors are also concerned with a similar crisis of values in their work due to the pressures of internal actors, but argue that the main obstacle to the universal meeting of all Gazans' needs is, in fact, the policies of Israel and international donors.

An interesting development in aid politicization is Dany's (2019) exploration of how NGOs can act like political agents in their own right, focusing on the case study of MSF's response to the European refugee crisis after the outbreak of the Syrian war. He explains how the MSF demonstrated political agency by challenging a common perception of NGOs as "depoliticizing actors in global governance" (ibid; p.5). In opposition to the EU-Turkey deal, MSF withdrew its presence from the hotspots, refused any EU funding and networked with the civil society, thus coming out as an actor that partakes in global governance. Although the author claims that NGOs should leverage their political agency against politics that are

inhumane, he is however skeptical about the long term implications of such an interference as they jeopardize and compromise their neutrality and credibility, thus risking receiving future funds. He concludes that humanitarian advocacy is deemed a good alternative to pure political action. This exact concept, the possibility of NGOs acting as agents of political influence in their own right, is a major theme in our interlocutors' discourses. The implications of “new humanitarianism” and external donors placing restrictions that reflect a broader political agenda, are played out in granular detail in Gaza. As their professional roles and identities has become obscure to our interlocutors, given the intertwined nature of their political and humanitarian agency as well as the heavy restrictions placed upon them, we have identified in their discourses new avenues that NGOs are exploring in order to challenge existing status quo and struggle for power, with their struggle reckoning with the precise risks laid out by Dany.

3.4 Implications of humanitarian work in Gaza

Lastly but not least, our research touches on the especially unique circumstances that humanitarianism exists under in Gaza. According to both our interlocutors and existing academic research, all of the aforementioned factors are amplified in this corner of the Palestinian territories, in addition to unique political/historical factors placing all of it in a new light.

Feldman (2009) "Gaza’s Humanitarianism Problem" investigates the complex dynamics of humanitarian aid in Gaza, stressing how humanitarian efforts in the region are compelled by ongoing political conflict and structural violence, additionally elaborating on the inherent dangers of constructing Gaza’s crisis as a primarily humanitarian one. Feldman argues that through these conditions, the humanitarian actors become embedded in the protracted crisis, resulting in a perpetuation of the crisis and conditions of suffering instead of a resolution.

Additionally, Winter (2014) elaborating on the 2014 Gaza war adds that the siege of Gaza is not solely Israel’s military strategy but essentially a form of spatial and biopolitical violence through collective punishment and regulation of Gazans’ existence. Regarding the role of humanitarianism, while admitting that it is crucial for survival, it can sometimes perpetuate the mechanisms of control if they fail to address the underlying political causes of the conflict. Similar to Winter’s critique, Bhungalia (2010) highlights the role of humanitarian

discourse and action as dangerous for legitimizing Gaza's liminal status, if humanitarians do not also address the political predicament that allows for the perpetuation of this violent liminality and exceptionality. By the concept of liminality, Bhungalia describes Gaza as a territory that exists in the intersection of being neither fully sovereign nor fully occupied, but fully exposed to exceptional measures of governance. This liminal status allows for uncertainty of legal and moral responsibilities, as the enclave is a place where the rule of law is selectively applied.

Elaborating on this, Farhat et al (2023) focus on how the especially protracted nature of Gaza's humanitarian crisis, beyond the political restrictions placed on NGOs, fundamentally challenges humanitarians' ability to achieve their goals. Comparing the Gaza Strip to cases of Iraq, Iran and Cuba, the authors lay out how sustained and extreme sanctions and embargoes do not result in a sustainable state, but the destruction of infrastructures, economic activity and living conditions of the populace, creating a "hermetically sealed space" that "hinders [Palestinians] ability to live a complete life while falling short of total death" (ibid; p. 3). In addressing the humanitarian emergency, NGOs and aid workers find themselves in an impossible situation; they are required to operate under the framework set by Israel and Egypt, as argued by the authors, effectively perpetuating the status quo. The apolitical approach that many of these NGOs take in Gaza, as argued, further precludes any capacity to challenge the occupation. However, rejecting these conditions means providing no aid at all, which only worsens their plight. As such, the authors call the crisis in Gaza the "forever emergency" (ibid; p.4).

This existential dilemma is a major source of frustration for many of our interlocutors, and it is their ruminations on their conflicted role in the Gaza Strip that spurs many of their other conclusions about what the purpose and politicization of humanitarianism should be.

These four areas provide the academic research foundation ofour thesis; in the analysis of this unique time and space, as well as the discourses of the NGO workers reckoning with its myriad of consequences, our research aims to contribute to the literature on the evolving politicization of the humanitarian field in light of the crisis in Gaza, and how geopolitical, historical and more pressing contemporary factors have an impact on the NGO workers' discourses. In turn, these discourses are highlighting nascent developments in the social

practice of the NGO sphere in Gaza, showcasing new ways in which they work in and around politicization to exert influence and challenge the status quo on their own terms.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Introduction

The theoretical premise of this study relies on academic works that focus on concepts and history of humanitarianism that aim to explain how the NGO workers develop discourses around their work for the emergency response in Gaza. Modern humanitarianism's traits, conditions, and practices have been extensively researched and often become the subject of critical debate. This area of study has grown into a field of interdisciplinary research (Barnett and Weiss, 2008). Given its complex history that grows with the increasing number of conflicts and human disasters over the decades, “humanitarianisms” are multiple (Wilkinson, 2016). Upon a careful review of the existing literature, some academic contributions to the topic of humanitarianism were favored as they provide a suitable foundation for knowledge and theoretical concepts that will inform our study on humanitarian work for the Gaza crisis, as well as how our interlocutors navigate the current humanitarian response. Humanitarian scholars frequently use distinct nomenclature to differentiate between two main types of humanitarianism. These are often referred to as variably "traditional” and “new," "traditional” and “liberal", "classical" and "resilient", "emergency" and "alchemical", or “Dunantist” and “Wilsonian”. In the same way, they also identify different periods and types of humanitarianism. We will focus on the most prominent humanitarian scholars, Michael Barnett and Dorothea Hilhorst, and present their classifications of the various “humanitarianisms” based on time as well as scope.

The current paper will present an introduction that entails a review of scholarly works on humanitarianism, and Hilhorst’s theoretical input on “Classical humanitarianism and resilience humanitarianism: making sense of two brands of humanitarian action”. It will conclude with Barnett’s article “Humanitarianism Transformed” which explains how the main trait characterizing the evolution of humanitarianism is located in the politicization and

institutionalization of the field. Certainly, several other theoretical scholar works will be discussed to corroborate theoretical discussions on the topic.

4.2 The field of Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism, in essence, emanates from humanity – the desire to alleviate the suffering of others - something which has existed since ancient times. In the modern world, however, the itinerary of humanitarianism follows the evolution of humanity since the 19th century as a result of the outbreak of several wars and human disasters. As such, most researchers claim that it was mostly a phenomenon that originated in the European continent (Davey et al, 2013). The expression of humanity at the time was the desire to help the people in need despite race or country of origin. (Barnett, 2013). According to Barnett humanitarianism is 'a concept in motion that has several enduring tensions' (2011, p. 21), including 'ethics that are simultaneously universal and circumstantial; a commitment to emancipation that can justify forms of domination (…) and ministration to the needs of both the giver and the recipient' (2011, p. 30).

Although historical accounts on humanitarianism usually admit that it was a movement for the relief of suffering caused by warfare and political tension, Barnett locates the roots of modern - also known as Dunantist - humanitarianism in the actions and legacy of Henry Dunant (Skinner & Lester, 2012). The latter was a benefactor who helped systematize aid upon the devastating Napoleonic battle of Solferino in 1959. Dunantist (or classical) humanitarianism was highly affected by the developments of international humanitarian law (Hilhorst, 2018). In the context of the first Geneva convention in the 1860s, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent stood as protector of the conventions and established the scope and content of the so-called "principled" humanitarian aid work. The Dunantist approach is based on the premise that humanitarian work is guided by its principles such as humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. This is the time when the humanitarian feelings of compassion and acts of charity moved into the discourse for humanitarian action and became materialized on the ground. To illustrate an example of a traditionally dunantist or classical humanitarian approach, the Red Cross was the only humanitarian organization to sign an agreement with President Milošević in the 1990s in order to gain access after the "ethnic cleansing" by warring factions and NATO's

humanitarian intervention (Gordon and Donini, 2016, p. 99). This approach demonstrates that despite highly controversial political landscapes, some organizations purely maintain their focus in delivering aid, even if they have to come in agreement with the political power.

Most modern scholars categorize humanitarianism in two branches: the Dunantist and the Wilsonian. The latter, named after the former US President Woodrow Wilson, suggests that humanitarianism should aim at changing communities through political, economic, and cultural mechanisms to eradicate the root causes of suffering and propose long-term solutions. (Barnett, 2011). Barnett adopts the terms "emergency" and "alchemical" humanitarianism to refer to the Dunantist and Wilsonian branches respectively. Similarly, Hilhorst adopts the terms "classical" and "resilience" humanitarianism; She adds to the discussion that the shift from classical to resilience humanitarianism in the 1990s was the increasingly protracted nature of many conflicts, resulting in the entry of several big development agencies that started engaging with developmental projects linking relief to rehabilitation and development (Hilhorst, 2018). To illustrate an example of Wilsonian humanitarianism, well known organizations like Save the Children and Oxfam were founded in wartime and worked for providing immediate relief, but later expanded their scope to include activities of developmental nature that were addressing inequalities. Advocacy efforts were equally developed later in combination with the increasing use of a human rights discourse. These Wilsonian discourses that address the root causes of inequalities are viewed by the Dunantists as clearly political, even though many times the organizations are rather hesitant to admit (Barnett, 2011).

The presentation of the theoretical premises behind humanitarian logics assists this research for two reasons. Firstly, in order to dive into the topic of the discourses of NGO workers in the case of the Gaza emergency response, it is deemed crucial to understand the evolution of humanitarianism; this is due to the fact that changes did not happen in a historical, political or social vacuum, but with inherent continuities that can be observed. Although scholars adopt different terminologies to describe the transition of humanitarianism, they all agree that the traditional branch refers to the principled approach and avoidance of interference with politics, whereas the new humanitarianism is described by enhanced collaboration with political authorities. Similarly, following this theoretical perspective, we can observe potential changes that our interlocutors discuss when referring to the specificities of their

work. Secondly, it offers a smooth transition to the more specific research by Hilhorst who has based her thoughts in the groundwork of Barnett's Empire of Humanity (2011).

4.3 Hilhorst's Classical and Resilience Humanitarianism

After presenting the main theoretical viewpoints on the study of humanitarianism, we will explore the particular classical and resilience approaches that resonate with our topic in depth. The contribution of Hilhorst's classical and resilience humanitarianism concept lies in the use of two prevalent *paradigms* observed in humanitarian work, which have influenced its scope and practice (Hilhorst, 2018; p. 1). As the current thesis focuses on how humanitarian response is being shaped in the Gaza emergency through the narratives of its actors (i.e. the NGO workers), it seems necessary to discover the itinerary that contributed to the ongoing work in the area. With the theoretical contribution of paradigms as bodies of humanitarian practice, we will examine our interlocutor' perspectives on how humanitarian aid should be conducted in the case of Gaza, in relation to the humanitarian standards and principles, the politics, as well as the modus operandi of the organizations researched. The investigative aim is to showcase how these discourses are being articulated to suggest how humanitarian work ought to be conducted according to the NGO workers, and whether they develop a distinct discourse for the Gaza response.

The classical paradigm is the root of humanitarianism and remains the central narrative in humanitarian affairs, although it has been partly overthrown by the later emerged resilience paradigm, which attributes great importance to local and governmental actors in aid work. Both paradigms adopt robust viewpoints on the nature of the humanitarian system and scopes of work, as well as the identities of actors and institutions involved. By examining the two paradigms, we aim at discovering the transitions in practice of support; for instance how the NGOs managed to procure critical supplies or how they negotiated the challenges that derived from the border blockade and the enhanced security measures imposed to the entry of goods and services that cross from Israel and Egypt and into the Gaza strip. By extension, How do our interlocutors explain and respond to these political decisions that impact the widely accepted right of unhindered humanitarian access in time of conflict? Finally, these two paradigms will be presented separately to explain their differential characteristics However, their absolute distinction would result in a simplistic understanding of the

“humanitarian”, as they can coexist and become mixed in practice (Hilhorst, 2018). Investigating ethnographic studies in humanitarian aid, Hilhorst (ibid; 7) explains that while the resilience paradigm is gaining more popularity among humanitarian organizations, classical humanitarianism “has far from disappeared”; the classical approach is more prominent in high scale conflicts such as erupted wars whereas the resilient approach is found in protracted low to medium scale situations such as fragile settings or natural disasters.

Classical humanitarianism adopts an approach of exceptionalism and disruption from normal to emergency and is tied to the humanitarian principles throughout all stages of humanitarian support. Principles such as neutrality, impartiality, humanity and independence were the driving forces of humanitarian aid and denote that the assistance shall never interfere with or be influenced by political affairs. The current study unveils debates and reflections among our interlocutors on whether humanitarian principles resonate with their humanitarian practice and delivery of aid in Gaza, as a consequence of increased scrutiny in donor relations and political interference. Additionally, comparisons with other humanitarian responses are almost an inevitable discussion for them. It is worth examining the principles critically to discover whether the existing norms that characterize humanitarian work guide the the actors that perform it, or whether other norms and values are prevailing and shaping new understandings of humanitarian work.

The logic of exceptionality of the classical humanitarian mindset denotes that normality is distinctly separated from a crisis, and aid should be provided on a needs basis. The exclusive focus on principles is supposed to ensure that all emerging needs of the affected populations are addressed, without interference by other bodies such as national authorities or local institutions (Hilhorst, 2018; p.4). Certainly, a critical note here is whether humanitarianism can be totally disconnected from politics, especially when state jurisdiction and interests are at stake. Examining the ways that NGO workers’ try to navigate their current response in Gaza is important because we have observed a change in perceptions of adequate humanitarian conduct as well as an admitted politicization of the humanitarian crisis that is specific for the case of Gaza ; In a world where politics have become an inextricable part of decision making, what options do NGO workers deploy to ensure that aid is being delivered and how do they suggest that it should be done? Hilhorst (2018; p.4) suggests that classical humanitarianism “seems unaware of other trust-forgers that may enable access and work differently in different contexts, such as accountability and reliability or, in some cases,

longstanding solidarity". The interview responses of the humanitarian workers unveil a need for renegotiating some of the humanitarian principles, as they are faced with the reality of increasing interference with politics in their work, which hinders their ability to act accordingly and delimits their capacity to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance. The involvement of politics in humanitarian work will be analyzed later in this section, as there are theoretical contributions to the topic that are paramount to understand how the response in Gaza has been politicized according to our interviewees.

The classical humanitarian space, or system, becomes meaningful when studied within the arena perspective, where aid is seen as a social negotiation among actors throughout the entire aid chain (Hilhorst and Serano, 2010; Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010). The 'arena perspective' emphasizes the day-to-day practices in policy and implementation. It underscores how various actors create their own interpretations and strategies based on common language, aspirations, and realities of aid.. The importance of humanitarian discourses should be highlighted as in the current study we will attempt to showcase and analyze how the NGO workers describe their work by vacillating between the two humanitarian paradigms or leaning more towards one of these. The latter is aligned with our methodological perspective of reading through these commonsense utterances that NGO workers deploy to claim their space in the arena. We will examine whether discourses are constructed in a way that challenges the political decisions but also their own organization's actions in addressing the humanitarian challenges in Gaza. Do they try to challenge the political reality or tend to maintain a neutral position when faced with perceived inequalities that impact their work flow? Subsequently, do they believe that they should work within the increasingly restricted humanitarian space or do they try to redefine humanitarianism by addressing political issues that hinder them from achieving their goals?

Resilience humanitarianism views crisis as the new normality (Hilhorst, 2018; p). Especially when the world witnesses so many prolonged humanitarian or ecological crises. A noteworthy pattern that is met in the resilience humanitarianism paradigm, is the revived appreciation to the state authority and control in the humanitarian space (Hilhorst, 2018). Namely, this stems from the interest and pressures by many states that are prone to crises to be involved in the decision making and implementation of humanitarian assistance, as well as an expressed respect by several humanitarian organizations, with the UN agencies leading towards cooperation with the national authorities or host governments. In this analysis, we

will examine how our interlocutors perceive their relationships with donors, governments, and their local affiliates in Palestine. Additionally, we will discuss how they negotiate power dynamics and potentially reclaim space within the humanitarian arena.

As Hilhorst (ibid) critically points out, the new resilience paradigm has brought confusion to the humanitarians with regards to their identity, the added value of their work and the upholding of the humanitarian principles, in an arena where the multitudes of many diverse actors' interests have penetrated. This also applies to our interlocutors, who struggle with defining their role in between the political and the humanitarian, as the political agenda in Denmark on the war in Gaza, their organizational humanitarian goals, and their requests from Palestinian colleagues are not aligning.

Upon presenting the theoretical contributions of the two different approaches that describe the passage from the classical to the new humanitarianism, it is concluded that the main change is found in the increasing interference of politics to humanitarian work. Humanitarian organizations increasingly seek further cooperation with authorities, or even act as a governing body when there is lack of political consensus in the time of conflict. Therefore, in the following section we will elaborate on Barnett's article that explains how humanitarian work has become politicized.

4.4 Barnett's politicization of humanitarianism

As our case study is concerned with how operational, political and ethical obstacles are represented through discourse, it is crucial to understand the nature of how and why humanitarianism and politics have become intertwined in the first place, as our interlocutors' discourses are born out of these developments. Barnett identifies two main causes that led to the transformation of humanitarianism; be that politicization and institutionalization of humanitarian aid.

Humanitarian aid used to be recognised as a distinct sphere of activity, focusing on the relief of individuals in conflict and disaster; nowadays, however, it is largely connected to human rights, economic development and peace agendas, as well as assisting state building (Barnett, 2005). This development happened partly due to an increase in politicization of humanitarianism that boomed in the post-cold war era in 1950-1990, as humanitarian organizations grew in numbers in the backdrop of increased international concern for

protecting civilian lives during war time. States saw an opportunity to work closely together with humanitarian organizations in conflict areas, whereas NGOs seized the chance to expand their reach with target groups, develop their organizations, and receive generous funding from states. As emergencies multiplied and became a topic of international attention, so were the perceptions of domestic conflict and disputes between states being potential global security risks causing migration, suffering, and instability (Barnett, 2005). The developing political discourse of security was increasingly linked to populations in emergencies, e.g. securitization of forced migration, and was instrumental in shaping foreign policy among mainly Western states. Humanitarian organizations, especially UN institutions, were central to this process, with the UN Security Council legitimizing humanitarian interventions on security grounds (ibid, 2005).

In the aftermath of 9/11, humanitarianism was integrated into political agendas, with aid organizations working alongside military forces in Afghanistan to provide relief and promote security. NGOs negotiated with conflicting parties and governments, addressing the root causes of crises and reinforcing stability to address political vacuums. Being involved in political dynamics linked humanitarian efforts to human rights, development, and democracy-building, as seen in the invention of Humanitarian-Development-Peacebuilding nexus programs. The integration of human rights into the humanitarian discourse of NGOs marked a change in the way humanitarians perceive emergencies, and hence how they have shaped their practices (Barnett, 2005). The logic of human rights shares a direct connection to that of aid relief, in particular their common moral philosophy of putting the marginalized citizen and humanity at the forefront of the agenda while being critical to power relations (Chandler, 2005). The fuse of humanitarianism in human rights is important to our case study, as we discover how our interlocutors draw on discourses of human rights and accountability while discussing developments in their understandings of mandates and principles.

Another aspect that has transformed humanitarianism is the development of donor hierarchies and influence. Institutional aid funding rose significantly from an average of 5.8 percent between 1989 and 1993 to 10.5 percent in 2000 (Macrae et al, 2002). Consequently, the states would expect accountability through reporting that their grants were being well spent and aligned with their political interests (Barnett, 2005). Certainly, the NGO workers informing this research raise concerns of their primary donors inflicting political interest on their humanitarian response in Gaza, e.g. increased control of funding from the Danish MFA, as

well as internal discussions with the confederation's headquarters, CARE USA and Oxfam UK, on advocacy messaging, who are also the countries constituting the top donors of humanitarian action in European affiliates.

The developments of the late 20th century spurred the growth of humanitarian organizations, but even so, the process led to diverse paths among NGOs. Organizations like the International Rescue Committee and Oxfam professionalized aid relief, chose to focus on development and addressing root causes of conflict. In contrast, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médicines sans Frontières remained committed to traditional humanitarian principles, avoiding socio-political issues. Some NGOs specialized in specific socio-political causes, creating unique branches of humanitarian assistance (Barnett, 2005).

The 1990s saw the institutionalization of the humanitarian field, driven by increased information sharing, reliance on specialized knowledge, and advance in programmatic conduct requiring more streamlined work processes thus welcoming more bureaucracy to guide procedures and standardize responses. Additionally, institutionalization of humanitarian organizations grew in response to challenges in defending their legitimacy to secure a place in an increasingly competitive arena. To maintain legitimacy, NGOs adopted standardized codes of conduct and formalized good practices for disaster and crisis response. In the 1990s, NGOs introduced accountability measures such as the Ombudsman, systematized data methodologies, and official organizational strategies. Increased state funding and recognition of humanitarianism as a development force in the Global South elevated NGOs as significant actors in national foreign policy, including security. Consequently, institutional donors imposed stricter reporting requirements and accountability standards on NGOs (Barnett, 2005). As humanitarian organizations' work processes became institutionalized, their organizational identities were likewise solidified. Barnett draws upon sociological institutionalism, that explains how organizations build up their "social normative worlds" (Orru, Biggart, & Hamilton, 1991; p.361), and stresses how NGOs comply with social norms to be acknowledged by donors and governments. NGOs have developed social norms, standards of propriety, and models of legitimacy, and these socially constructed features define the culture of the humanitarian field. Humanitarian organizations are thus constrained to adapt to these normative practices if they want to be considered legitimate to organizations, donors and governments existing in and influencing the same environment (Barnett, 2005). Still to this day, NGOs shape their practices according to the rules and

principles perceived as legitimate in order not to be excluded or lose influence in the field. As an example, the the organizations represented in research are obliged to conduct and provide annually scheduled monitoring results and reportings, as well as provide transparency about screening processes of their partners. These tasks of upward accountability (Hilhorst et al, 2001) to the MFA and other donors are in fact a big part of the work executed in headquarters and country offices. This theoretical standpoint aligns with Hilhorst's focus on discourse and social constructionism in humanitarianism, and it helps us to further discover how our interlocutors are informed and constrained by the discursive space they operate in.

Barnett states that politicization and institutionalization of humanitarianism has made NGOs more vulnerable to external control and influence, claiming that "states are now able to use direct and indirect means to constrain and guide the actions of humanitarian agencies in ways that agencies believe potentially violate their principles" (Barnett, 2005, p. 731). The influence of external actors affects the identity of these organizations and inevitably impacts how humanitarian practice is shaped, which we will investigate further in analysis. Barnett suggests that external influence may push humanitarian agencies to change their understanding of what constitutes appropriate humanitarian action, leading to a redefinition of their principles and practices (Ibid). As we proceed to the analysis, we will explore how Israeli and Danish politics impose restrictions and scrutinize the workstreams of our interlocutors, causing them to critically reflect on the humanitarian principles and adopt discursive strategies that involve political contestation.

Humanitarianism exists in a place between the politics of solidarity and the politics of governance. Today, NGOs have gained ground in the wider international community of states, institutions, and legal entities. As Barnett points out, the shift towards politics also changes NGO worker self-perception and professional identity, as their field was born into an apolitical ideology or as reactions to power inequality and injustice. In any case, NGOs are increasingly involving themselves in collaborations with states and institutional donors, thus indulging in partnerships with the same actors whom they once defined themselves in opposition to (ibid, 2005). In our case study of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, we will present analytical reflections of how NGO workers and their organizations have been navigating in this political reality.

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza is deeply intertwined with the political complexities of the Israel/Palestine conflict. As will be described in the following background chapter, Gaza

remains under Israeli blockade, limiting access to essential goods and aid, while ongoing military operations exacerbate the situation. As humanitarian organizations face political interference from both Israeli and Danish authorities, their efforts to provide neutral aid becomes compromised. Barnett's theory of politicization in humanitarianism is particularly relevant here, as he argues that humanitarian aid is often entangled in political agendas, and in Gaza, this is starkly visible. Aid organizations must navigate a volatile environment where assistance is seen not just as relief but as a political act, subject to scrutiny or obstruction by political actors. The conflict's central issues - territory, legitimacy, and resistance - play out through humanitarian channels. Israel's blockade and security concerns are framed as defensive measures against terrorism, but they also significantly restrict aid. Meanwhile, humanitarian efforts are often accused of legitimizing one side over the other, further complicating their mission. This politicization creates a crisis within the humanitarian sector itself, where aid is no longer perceived as neutral but as a tool wielded within the politics of the broader conflict. Theories of traditional versus new humanitarianism also come into play. Traditional humanitarianism, which focuses on neutrality and impartiality, struggles to operate in Gaza, where the operational foundation for providing principled humanitarian work has been compromised by political interference. New humanitarianism, with its recognition of the interconnectedness of politics and aid, offers a more flexible framework but risks further entrenching aid organizations in political conflicts. These practical examples highlight the importance of Barnett's complimentative framework, which discuss the blurred lines between humanitarian and political spheres, and is crucial for understanding the unique challenges of the Gaza crisis

5. Background Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the historical and political context surrounding the events of 7 October 2023, which impacted the humanitarian aid delivery in Gaza following Israel's military intervention. It outlines the role of NGOs, whose representatives participate in the research, with a specific focus on their work in Gaza and the West Bank. The chapter also discusses the Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli military response that led to the current humanitarian crisis examined in this case study. While a full historical analysis of the Israel-Palestine conflict goes beyond the scope of this study, we will focus on the key

conflict dynamics that will facilitate the transition to the analysis of NGO workers' discourses in the current humanitarian response in Gaza. Finally, we provide the essential context on the NGOs activities and reactions to prepare the reader for the analysis that follows.

5.2 A brief historical overview of the conflict between Israel and Palestine

The UN partition plan of 1947 dividing the British Mandate of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states was perceived as highly unfair by the surrounding Arab nations, and following the mass displacement of Palestinians of their villages, Arab states declared war with Israel in 1948. This period of time is referred to as the Nakba, in which around 750.00 Palestinian were displaced by 1949 (Pappe, 2011). The question of Palestinian self-determination is widely perceived as an important part of peace negotiations (Falah et. al, 1996), but has historically been dismissed or only vaguely incorporated in peace deals. A central example is found in the Oslo Accords of 1993 that created the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a step toward self-governance, where Israel's former Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin “proved ineffectual in ensuring the sovereignty of the Palestinian administrative authority, limiting the spread of Israeli settlements, allowing Palestinians access to natural resources and arresting the rapid economic downturn experienced in the Palestinian Territories.” (Sen, 2015. p. 164; Slater, 2021; El-Kurd, 2020). As a result of conflicting interests, the rise of extremism on both sides, and numerous instances of truce agreements being broken (Slater; 2021; Kelman, 2007), any peace processes through time has proven unsustainable. Today, the land that both Palestinians and Israelis claim as their ancestral and religious home is divided in the Palestinian West Bank, Gaza Strip and Israel, with Israel enforcing an occupation on the Palestinian territories continuing to expand control of territory through increasing settlements being established beyond the 1947 borders (Zonszein, 2023; Slater, 2021). In the West Bank and Gaza, the PA has functioned as the governing entity up until 2006, where the political entity of Hamas took power over Gaza creating internal political division and exacerbated a dysfunctional system of governance in the Palestinian territories (El-Kurd, 2020; Qarmout, 2012). Since Israel’s establishment, numerous wars and tensions have occurred between the Islamist movements such as Hamas, most damaging being those in 2008, 2012 and 2014 in recent times (Qarmout, 2017). Lastly, as Palestine has historically existed in a unique situation of foreign interference and occupation, it has not been recognized as a sovereign territory of any state, leaving its residents under the status of statelessness under International Law (Feldman, 2007).

5.3 The role of Hamas and its relation to the humanitarian aid procedures in Gaza

Before Hamas advanced as a political group and established a military wing, the organization was part of a broader Palestinian Islamist movement that was involved in civic activism and community development through an extensive network of Islamic institutions in Gaza (Qarmout, 2017). During the first Palestinian Intifada in 1987, Hamas gained control of the Islamic social and economic sector that established new social institutions, thus building up a reputation as a grassroot movement that was able to help people in difficult times (ibid). Hamas' roots are closely tied to the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in 1946, and had been involved in supporting Palestinian uprisings against British rule and Jewish immigration since the 1930s. Hamas was presented as part of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1988 and adopted its Islamist ideology, positioning itself as a resistance movement against Israel (Koss, 2018). The organization played a significant role in the first Intifada and became the main Islamist political force in Palestine. Over time, Hamas also became a rival to Fatah in the PA, especially after rejecting the Oslo Accords and continuing its militant actions against Israel (ibid). Hamas' political dominance in the economic and social sector as well as their involvement in community work arguably enabled the group to govern Gaza (Berti, 2015). Their civic engagement combined with their aims of opposing the Israeli occupation also explains the fact that Hamas is regarded as a resistance movement by many Palestinians (Qarmout, 2017). On the contrary, Hamas is classified as a terrorist organization by Israel, USA, EU and Canada, among others, because of its radical political ideology threatening Israel's security (Zanotti, 2011), and the violent attacks against Israeli civilians (Robinson, 2004).

During the 1990s, international aid to Palestine was primarily focused on development initiatives, particularly infrastructure projects aimed at fostering economic growth. This approach was widely regarded as crucial for establishing long-term peace, with the US and UK as donors, believing that economic improvements would generate employment opportunities and stimulate both local and international trade and investment. However, following the outbreak of the second intifada, donor priorities shifted from economic development to institution-building and governance reforms (Taghdisi-Rad, 2011). Aid directed towards civic development projects declined substantially, as attention increasingly centered on supporting the PA budget and reforming governmental institutions. This shift in focus was accompanied by political pressure and conditionalities imposed by donors,

particularly from Western countries such as the European Union and the World Bank (Ibid). The conditionality imposed by international donors refers to the rules and requirements they imposed on the PA and were of political character, which meant that donors' willingness to provide funding was linked to the PA's effort and progress in areas like democratization and good governance (Qarmout et. al, 2012; Suleiman, 2021). In this research, we will showcase how these political imperatives in donor practice are still part of today's funding of humanitarian projects in Palestine with the Gaza response as a case example.

To further and strengthen the peace-process between Israel and Palestine, mainly the EU and UN, among other international donors, invested big amounts of funds to support PA's efforts in building state institutions and promoting democratic values and good governance. In August 2005, Israel executed a disengagement from the Gaza Strip, withdrawing its military presence and removing its settlements inside Gaza (Hirsch-Hoefler & Mudde, 2020). Despite the withdrawal, Israel maintained control and military oversight over the border to mitigate potential security threats from Hamas and other armed groups (Pinfold, 2023). This control has restricted the movement of goods and services between Gaza, the West Bank, and the outside world, effectively isolating the enclave (Mari, 2005). The blockade has had significant humanitarian and economic consequences, limiting essential supplies and contributing to Gaza's isolation from global trade and resources, while also shaping the broader political and security dynamics of the region by perpetuating cycles of violence and challenging diplomatic relations (ibid; Kretzmer & Ronen, 2021). For Hamas, Israel's withdrawal from Gaza was perceived as a result of persistent resistance and sustained pressure on Israeli forces and settlers, as well as a validation of its strategy of resistance (Hroub, 2015).

Under international supervision, the Palestinian parliamentary election was held on January 25, 2006 and was won by the Hamas Party (Shikaki, 2006). The key actors in the peace process, Israel and the Quartet, a diplomatic group consisting of the UN, EU, US and Russia, reacted in strong opposition to accept Hamas' electoral victory. They demanded that Hamas should renounce violence and recognize Israel as a state, and warned that the massive amount of aid funding that the PA relied on would be halted, if Hamas were to take over the role as the governing entity for the entire PA without meeting these repercussions. Hamas did not accept the conditions as they were in direct opposition to their organizational charter, which inherently oppose the recognition of Israel as a state and call for resistance of the occupation

through armed and unarmed action (Qarmout, 2017; Hroub, 2015). Consequently, Israel and the Quartet imposed economic sanctions against the PA (DeVoir & Tartir, 2009).

The 2007 Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip created a division in the PA, dividing the power into separate governing entities; the Fatah-led PA in the West Bank, and the Hamas-led entity in the Gaza strip. Upon the split, the international community alleviated sanctions on Fatah's, resuming financial support and political recognition. Israel enforced a blockade of the Gaza Strip sustained by military measures and cooperation with Egypt, and the Quartet applied a political and economic boycott of the political entity of Hamas. The military blockade of the enclave meant that well over 2 million citizens of Gaza were isolated from their families in Israel and West Bank, as well as being highly restricted from traveling abroad. The economic sanctions had a severe impact on the local economy, and Gazans became even more dependent on humanitarian aid from international humanitarian organizations, which led to strengthening radical factions within Hamas (Hovdenak, 2013).

Inside Gaza, Hamas was to govern the population under an international boycott. With Hamas in power, international donors restricted aid to emergency relief and humanitarian interventions, which meant that governmental and institutional development programmes were omitted (Hovdenak, 2013). Instead of providing aid directly to the Hamas-led administration, donors directed their assistance through humanitarian organizations, civil society groups, and UN agencies ensuring that assistance was provided to address humanitarian needs while avoiding legitimization of and direct engagement with the Hamas-led government. Another reason for this policy was an attempt to avoid financial support to schools and islamic social-welfare organizations that would teach and spread Hamas' ideology and thus strengthen Israel's neighboring threat (Qarmout et. al, 2012). In addition, Palestinian partner organizations, who often function as the implementing actors to international NGOs, were instructed to minimize contact with Hamas authorities. Donor engagement in Gaza became constrained, as donor countries and foundations were required to align their policies with the position of their governments, which were guided by the directives of the Quartet (More, 2006).

Delegating the responsibility of delivering basic humanitarian needs to international institutions and INGOs fostered an aid-dependent system. This strategy overlooked broader community needs, focusing primarily on immediate relief rather than fostering sustainable development and governance solutions (Feldman, 2009; Tabar, 2016; Qarmout, 2015). On a

critical note, Qarmout et al (2012) point out that the fact that INGOs were given essential responsibilities for the upholding of the Gazan society weakened Hamas' government autonomy and abilities to fulfill its obligations while enabling Israel to sustain its occupation. The most prominent international donors, namely the US and EU, continued support to the PA and boycotted Hamas from receiving any funding.

The UN, its specialized agencies such as UNRWA, and INGOs have played an important role in delivering humanitarian aid in the West Bank and Gaza since the creation of the PA. The activities of INGOs have been designed to support the PA's development initiatives and priorities, and humanitarian assistance has been coordinated and implemented in cooperation with PA authorities. The blockade of Gaza meant that humanitarian assistance was ever more vital in order to avoid a humanitarian disaster, but with Hamas in power, INGOs now had to deliver aid in a boycott environment, thus encountering operational challenges and principled dilemmas for the organizations. The boycott meant that humanitarian organizations were to execute their programmes and responses under new conditions. Obligated to follow the directives of the Quartet and meet donor requirements, UN agencies and INGOs were to execute their programmes and responses restricted from engaging in formal contact with Hamas government ministers and prohibited from providing financial support to Hamas-run or affiliated institutions, including local civil society organizations. This policy is also called the "no-contact" policy (Qarmout et. al, 2012; p. 37).

The no-contact policy remains a challenge for INGOs today, as they are bound to only engage in humanitarian aid interventions in Gaza, since development projects aiming at strengthening democratic practices and good governance would require working with governing institutions (Qarmout et. al, 2012). The humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territories is often considered "exceptional" among contemporary crises, because of its prolonged nature under a protracted occupation, further exacerbated in Gaza by the decade-long blockade (Weinthal et. al., 2019; Feldman, 2009). Under these conditions, the distinction between emergency relief and development assistance has increasingly blurred. Humanitarian organizations are tasked not only with restoring essential infrastructure, such as water and energy systems, but also with anticipating their repeated targeting in the conflict, while facing significant barriers such as settler activities targeting infrastructure (Ibid). In Gaza, humanitarian actors confront even more complex challenges, as their efforts risk unintentionally normalizing the blockade. By being restricted to only run humanitarian

operations in Gaza, INGOs also face dilemmas in regards to their “do no harm” policy, as development initiatives are made impossible and aid-dependency sustained (Feldman, 2009). Despite Hamas being designated a terrorist organization by the United States, Denmark and other nations, humanitarian NGOs operate under the norms of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), which mandates impartiality in providing aid to all parties involved in the conflict, although aid provision to and engagement with Hamas has been prohibited by international donors (Weinthal et. al., 2019; Council of the European Union. (n.d.); Qarmout et. al, 2012), including the Danish MFA in our case study. In this sense, the organizations represented in this paper play a crucial role in facilitating relief and reconstruction under these difficult circumstances .

Having established the context of regional tensions and the politics of Palestine in relation to the implications for humanitarian efforts, we will now turn our attention to the humanitarian organizations operating in Palestine that are represented in this thesis. A key shared characteristic is that their main donor is the Danish government. The Danish Strategic Framework for Palestine running from 2021-2025 allocates 450 million Danish Kroner to political, developmental and humanitarian initiatives in Palestine over these 4 years (Folketinget, 2021). Parts of these funds are managed by Danish NGOs cooperating with implementing partners on the ground, including the organizations represented in this research (ibid).

5.4 The NGOs and their work in Gaza before the 7th October 2023

The NGO employees informing this thesis work for Oxfam Denmark, Care Denmark, MSF and Dignity, and also staff from affiliates in close geographical proximity to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza and partners to the Danish offices are represented in our portfolio of interviewees. The organizations’ mandates vary based on their strategic and programmatic focus. Specifically, Oxfam's stated mandate is to fight inequality and end poverty and injustice both through humanitarian and development operations, a strong activist branch, and extensive advocacy and policy work. Care’s mandate is to fight poverty and social injustice specifically focused on empowering women and girls in humanitarian and development programmes. MSF’s mandate is to provide medical assistance to populations and victims affected by natural or man-made disasters or armed conflict, while Dignity’s mandate is to work for creating a world free of violence and torture of any kind. Care, MSF and Dignity are not advanced in activist work but primarily do advocacy on humanitarian issues, whereas

Oxfam's advocacy efforts also involve direct political messaging. As we shall uncover in the analysis, the organizational mandates differ in degree of humanitarian and political focus, which also reflects in our informants' discourses, who each work for different mandates.

Prior to the 7th of October 2023, the four NGOs were driving different programmes and initiatives in Gaza and the West Bank. Oxfam Denmark, as a member of the Oxfam Confederation, operates in the West Bank and Gaza in coordination with the Oxfam country office in Palestine. An example of Oxfam Denmark's initiatives in Palestine is a project initiated in 2021, focusing on providing technical and vocational education to young people in Area C of the West Bank and Gaza. This project emphasized employment in agriculture, aiming to equip Palestinian youth with skills necessary for future employment and enhance their economic opportunities (interviews). Care International has been present in Gaza and the West Bank since 1948, and the Danish Care affiliate has been part of driving the organization's to programs with focus on the economic empowerment of women and youth, as well as humanitarian responses to meet basic needs (Care International, n.d). MSF has been active in the Palestinian territories since 1989, delivering medical humanitarian aid, as well as conducting medical work such as surgical care and long-term medical treatments for war-related injuries. Additionally, MSFs work in Gaza has included addressing humanitarian needs, such as physiotherapy, women's health, and mental health (Médecins Sans Frontières. (n.d.); interviews). Dignity operates in the West Bank and Gaza with a focus on providing mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to individuals affected by torture and their families, as well as to survivors of domestic violence. Dignity is working closely with local partner organizations implementing and facilitating these services, aiming at supporting victims' recovery from trauma. Furthermore, Dignity is primarily engaged with systematic documention of cases of torture and violence, human rights abuses, and war crimes, as well as psychosocial support through advocacy work and accountability efforts (interviews).

The organizations represented in this research have a long presence in Palestine with regards to implementing humanitarian and development projects. The NGOs' engagement in Gaza and the West Bank has partly taken the shape of emergency responses, addressing acute humanitarian needs in the midst of hostilities, while long term development programmes have been focused on bettering living conditions and opportunities for Palestinians. The implementing actors of these programmes are Palestinian civil society organizations, Palestinian corporates, as well as larger actors such as The Palestinian Red Crescent

Movement, who are responsible for carrying out activities and ensuring that the intended target groups receive aid items and services.

5.5 The current humanitarian crisis after the 7th of October

As per Strawson (2024; p.121), “a massacre and a war have become a defining moment in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict”. Indeed, the 7th October 2023 marked the day when the current devastating war between Palestine and Gaza started and the conflict got officially revitalized again. Hamas crossed from Gaza to Israeli territory, arrived with paragliders and by road, and unleashed gunfire which led to killing of 364 civilians in an open air festival near kibbutz Re’im. While the Supernova festival was only one of the targets, Hamas simultaneously attacked several other communities in areas that were in close proximity to the border of Gaza. The total number of fatalities amounts to 1.250 citizens killings and it was the deadliest in the history of Palestinian attacks against Israel (The Economist, 2023). At the same time, 240 people were taken hostage (Vinograd & Kershner, 2023). Additionally, Hamas positioned themselves alongside non-state armed groups such as Hezbollah within the Iranian-backed axis of resistance. The attack produced significant psychological and political ramifications for Israel, undermining its confidence in its military capabilities, security infrastructure, and control over regional stability (Hokayem, 2023; H. Allin, 2023). Subsequently, following international condemnation of Hamas attack on Israel, the Danish government declared their unwavering support to Israel, with the Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen emphasizing Israel's right to self-defense. (Statsministeriet, 2024; Pedersen, 2023). This stance is shared by Israel’s closest allies, the US government, the UK, and Germany, while European nations such as Ireland, Spain, and Norway have declared their support for Palestinian statehood while also expressing condemnation for Israel’s attacks in Gaza (The Guardian, 2024; BBC, 2024).

Israel responded immediately to Hamas' hostilities, by declaring an increasingly long and large scale military response which has subjected the people of Gaza to tremendous consequences. As of October 2024, the death toll amounts to 42.979 fatalities of Palestinians in Gaza and West Bank, as reported by WHO who retrieves data from the Palestinian Ministry of Health (WHO, 2024a). The number of internally displaced persons estimates 1.9 million, who have been directed to the south of Gaza, creating a further humanitarian

predicament as the enclave has been already one of the most densely populated areas in the world (ibid). Israel's continuous attacks have imposed an unprecedented situation with the significant destruction of the infrastructure (Strawson, 2024), leading one million people to live in 450 overcrowded emergency facilities operated by UNRWA and partners, in appalling conditions (OCHA, 2024). According to a joint EU and UN assessment, it is estimated that approximately 72% of Gaza's residential infrastructure has been partially or totally damaged (EU, World Bank & UN, 2024). The severe food insecurity is prominent with warning for imminent famine by the IPC (2024a). Markets are facing a dire shortage of basic food items which has led to informal channels of supplies as well as selling humanitarian assistance items according to the WFP (2024). The about 75.00 thousands people injured as well as the high number of casualties has brought health facilities and staff in a very dire situation (ibid). According to WHO (2024b), 155 attacks on health care facilities were reported in the Gaza strip in the period from the beginning of the conflict until the end of 2024, which led to 685 deaths and 902 injuries. Currently, 64% of the 36 hospitals that used to operate in the area are not functioning anymore (OCHA). In a recent investigation carried out by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, the commission reports of extreme concerns of the humanitarian situation in Gaza (United Nations, 2024a). The report determines that Israel has enacted a deliberate strategy to dismantle Gaza's healthcare system, marked by attacks on medical personnel, vehicles, and facilities. These acts, including killings, arrests, and torture of medical workers, amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, particularly collective punishment. The destruction of healthcare infrastructure, exacerbated by blockades restricting essential supplies, has significantly heightened "morbidity and mortality" (ibid, p. 19) in Gaza and violates the right to life. According to Israel, EU countries and the UN, Hamas is also conducting war crimes by using civilians as human shields, operating from locations placed inside civilian infrastructure, whereas schools, hospitals, and residential buildings have become targets for attacks (United Nations, 2023; United Nations 2024a).

It becomes obvious that the humanitarian needs that arose after the 7th of October in Gaza are multi-layered and extremely difficult for humanitarians to address. This view aligns with the discourse of our interlocutors, who have been involved in multiple humanitarian responses in the past, describing the situation as "unprecedented". Another frightfully unprecedented fact pertains to the death toll of humanitarian workers. Since October 7th 2023, the UN has

registered a significant increase in killings of aid workers in Gaza, reaching a toll of 280 deaths by August 2024, (OCHA, 2024).

This humanitarian predicament led to the UN Security Council Resolution No. 2720 (2023) on 22 December 2023, that echoes the principal humanitarian issues described above. The resolution reiterates the goal of a two-state solution, emphasizing Gaza as part of the territory captured in 1967 (UN Security Council, 2023). It expresses deep concern over the declining humanitarian conditions affecting civilians, among them children, women, and vulnerable groups. The resolution highlights the importance of prompt, secure, and unimpeded access to humanitarian aid across the Gaza Strip (ibid).

The humanitarian aspects of the UN Security Council's resolution emphasize the need for all parties to comply with international law by protecting civilians and ensuring accessibility and safety of relief workers. Moreover, it calls for humanitarian pauses to allow for the delivery of essential supplies and the unconditional release of hostages taken by Hamas. Finally, it addresses the importance of restoring access to basic needs such as water, food, electricity, and medical facilities. OCHA (2024), although acknowledging the importance of this resolution, reports that humanitarian aid still fails to reach the necessary provisions for civilian protection, underlining that humanitarian access is still highly circumscribed. The critical needs remain the same and affect the ability of humanitarian workers to operate efficiently in the area. Furthermore, the hindered access brings other security risks, such as the exacerbation of violence in the West Bank (ibid). Therefore, OCHA requests for more entry points to ensure supply provision through itineraries, highlighting that this is especially needed in the area of Northern Gaza. Humanitarian staff's protection should be guaranteed, meaning that their movement across the area should be protected as well as Israel to cease questioning and detaining staff in the checkpoints. Other essential conditions for the ability to deliver refer to the call for entry of critical humanitarian items such as parts for WASH (OCHA, 2024), and construction materials which are arbitrarily restricted on the ground of the dual use policy imposed by Israel (Jones et al, 2024).

Another significant developement that is deemed crucial for the current case study is that upon international criticism and humanitarian advocacy, the Republic of South Africa filed a formal complaint for alleged breaches in Gaza under the Genocide Convention before the the Interantional Court of Justice on 29 December 2023. The latter was supported by the

organizations involved in this research through public statements highlighting its importance for the efficiency of their operations in Gaza (Oxfam, 2024a, Amnesty International, 2024a). In January 2023, the International Court of Justice ruled a provisional order with regards to the case, urging Israel to prevent the commission of acts as described in article II of the Genocide Convention. It adds that Israel must take immediate measures to "enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance to address the adverse conditions of life faced by Palestinians in the Gaza Strip" (South Africa v Israel, 2024). At the same time the court requested that all hostages must be released. However, Israel did not comply to the court's ruling, as most organizations report and accuse the country for obstruction in providing basic goods which amounts to committing war crimes, and using starvation as a weapon of war through blocking the entry of food supplies (HRW, 2024; Oxfam, 2023; Sultany, 2024). Furthermore, HRW (February 2024) reported that Israel not only did not facilitate the entry of humanitarian aid as per the ICJ ruling, but it further restricted access with fewer trucks and fewer aid missions entering, especially in Northern Gaza. Additionally, Hamas has not refrained from continuing its attacks on Israel despite international condemnations of Hamas' alleged war crimes and pledges to refrain from further violence and escalate the war (Braimah, 2024)

5.6 Danish NGOs' responses to the Gaza Crisis after the 7th October 2023

Upon the 7th of October 2023, the organizations immediately concentrated their focus on initiating humanitarian responses in Gaza to meet the urgent humanitarian needs that staggered as a result of Israel's attacks in Gaza. Initiated by Oxfam Denmark, Danish NGOs formed a task force as it became evident that their activities had broader implications beyond their immediate programming. Specifically, the task force was created to address the increased political influence on their communication strategies in Denmark, their policy work in Denmark, and to find ways to effectively address the growing humanitarian needs in Gaza to the public and to political actors. The politically sensitive environment around the current crisis required a coordinated response to manage both the shared operational challenges and strategic dimensions of their work. In this way, the NGOs working group functions as a joint task force in which the different organizations formulate joint statements and open letters to newspapers as well as agreeing on direct messages to politicians aiming at putting pressure on decision makers to hold Israel accountable for the humanitarian crisis. The idea behind

such a task force was to mobilize a unified pressure from humanitarian and human rights organizations in Denmark in order to create political awareness of the humanitarian situations while demanding the Danish government to act on issues, thus creating a dynamic that would generate a greater push (interviews). The joint humanitarian task force is a part of advocacy efforts where each NGO, based on their respective mandates, carves out the messaging upon agreement and approval by the leadership. In the case of Gaza, Oxfam, Care, MSF, and Dignity each formulated their own standpoints and political and humanitarian messaging to bring to the meetings in the joint advocacy group. Additionally, the NGOs have also developed so-called "red lines", that are set standards for the use of language to ensure a harmonized public discourse. These red lines enable the NGOs to be consistent in their standpoints and avoid moving into significant political messages and taking sides.

As part of their humanitarian response in Gaza the NGOs chose to launch different campaigns in Denmark addressing some of the issues they identified. As an example, Oxfam initiated the Ceasefire Now campaign, calling for an immediate and permanent cease fire. Additionally, Oxfam, Amnesty, ActionAid and the Palestinian human rights organization al-Haq planned for a lawsuit against the Danish state, inspired by a similar lawsuit against the government in the Netherlands, for their role as a third state party continuing its weapon exports to Israel despite international accusations of breaches to international law and war crimes (interviews). Since the time of the data collection, the latter four organizations have carried out their lawsuit, although it has been met by initial rejection by the Attorney General and the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Amnesty International Denmark, 2024). Care, Oxfam and MSF directed their humanitarian focus towards emergency responses in Gaza, attempting to mobilize their local staff inside Gaza to facilitate distribution of aid (interviews).

With this background chapter, we introduced the reader to the historical, institutional, and political context, to understand the statements and positions of our interlocutors. In the following chapter, we will analyze the discourses of our informants working for different NGOs on humanitarian emergency responses in Gaza.

6. Analysis

6.1 Introduction

As discussed in the methodology, the analytical chapter of this thesis follows Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis on the data gathered from interviews with NGO workers coupled with secondary data related to the humanitarian response in Gaza upon the 7th of October, 2023. Upon categorisation of the main topics arised, we will attempt to delve into the discourses of our informants by systematically addressing the most pronounced issues they articulated. The first section will examine their discourses on the current humanitarian situation, focusing on how they address and navigate challenges to aid delivery, fundraising, and advocacy. The second section will analyze how the NGO workers reflect upon the meaning and use of humanitarian principles in the case of Gaza. In the final section, we will explore the NGO workers' discourses on politicization of the humanitarian response in Gaza and the strategies they use to navigate the complex political reality. While the topic of politicization overlaps across the previous analytical sections, it deserved a separate discussion due to the distinctiveness of the current humanitarian operation. It is crucial to remind the readers that the interviews were conducted between February and March, 2024, and therefore, the operational implications discussed by the interviewees pertain specifically to that period, as well as retrospectively since the beginning of the emergency response in Gaza.

6.2 Humanitarian Access and Aid Delivery

Humanitarian access is one of the most crucial yet challenging factors of humanitarian intervention. Primarily, it is the sovereign states that ought to offer protection to civilians, however in cases where the emergency is so complex as the one in Gaza, humanitarian organizations can intervene with assistance provision, according to international legal framework (international human rights law, international humanitarian law, international criminal law) and the Geneva Convention (Schwendimann, 2011, p. 995). These organizations should strictly adhere to providing help following humanitarian principles, such as impartiality and independence to prevent any kind of interference with state's internal affairs (ibid). However, humanitarian access denial is one of the most important challenges in the humanitarian aid provision (Labonte and Edgerton, 2013). OCHA states the three main forms of access denial by national authorities; bureaucratic obstacles, intensity of hostilities,

and violence against humanitarian personnel and theft of assets (UN Security Council, 2009). Labonte and Edgerton (2013; p.54) found a significant variation in the ways that states obstruct access and suggest that this serves as a strategic tool for states to pursue their specific foreign and domestic objectives. On the other side, humanitarians sometimes have to deploy innovative solutions in order to gain access (ibid). In the current study we will showcase how NGO workers' discourses are developed regarding the impediments in delivering critical supplies into Gaza through working with partners or finding alternative solutions due to restrictions in the borders. Subsequently, we will examine whether the discursive practices intend to contest the current situation and which actors partake in this process that form specific power dynamics.

As previously described, the Gaza strip has been completely dependent on international humanitarian assistance since the blockade of the enclave in 2007. For humanitarian organizations operating in Palestine, aid delivery has been running on routine-based work streams in coordination with the UN, WFP, Israeli and Egyptian authorities and Hamas (interviews). Our informant, Kyla, who was working for CARE Palestine West Bank, described the extreme food scarcity in Gaza that occurred after the breakout of the current conflict and narrated that a bottle of water can save the life of two infants; "it's nothing but everything" (Kyla, p. 36). She explains that the first thing that CARE managed to distribute as an emergency response actor, was the dignity kits, and this was met with plenty of challenges. As the local procurement of goods was very difficult to achieve due to the absolute depletion of the market, CARE Palestine had to rely on the Egyptian affiliate for support.

Alice, working for CARE Egypt who is the agency's affiliate in charge of supply management for Gaza, described the usual distribution process for the Gaza response, explaining that aid trucks usually cross from the Rafah border in Egypt driving through a 500 meter buffer zone and then enter Gaza. After the 7th of October 2023, the Israeli authorities requested a different route for supply entry, which the entire humanitarian system has since adapted to accommodate (Alice). Therefore, trucks should drive to Nitzana, a city on Israeli territory located 50 kilometers to the south near the Egyptian border. There, the trucks undergo inspection before being released, and subsequently return the 50 kilometers to Gaza, where they are received by UNRWA or the Palestinian Red Crescent Society. The supplies would then be transported to warehouses, where humanitarian agencies collect, deliver, and

distribute the aid according to their respective plans (Alice). In general, international aid organinzations's distribution takes place at five different border crossings in Gaza, all of them which have been closed or partly opened since the 7th of October 2023 (International Rescue Committee, 2004). The militarization of the Rafah crossing has meant that Israeli authorities have taken over the control on the Gazan side upon the Israeli military offensive in Rafah City in May 2024, whereas the crossing has been closed ever since. On the Egyptian side of the border, tons of goods are awaiting Israeli inspection and approval, while food and medicine are expiring in the aid trucks (International Rescue Committee, 2024; Fenton, 2024; Rodgers et. al, 2024). In the backdrop of this operational challenge, the humanitarian organizations have attempted to get their items into Gaza through the only other crossing in the South of the strip, Kerem Shalom. There, aid trucks are facing delays due to heavy congestion caused by security controls and access restrictions (International Rescue Committee, 2024). In the north of Gaza, aid delivery has been completely denied in the early months of the escalation, while only the UN gained partial access since March 2024 (United Nations, 2024b; Reidy, 2024).

Our interlocutors who work in this challenging operational reality, express a profound frustration to the circumstances. For instance, Alice says:

"Every single agency was in a learning process and continues to be in a learning process. So, our ability to respond directly from within Gaza has been quite critical for us. Now, we're no longer able to do that. And now, also, other organizations are unable to do that. Adding to this, on a daily basis, there are new requirements being put forth by the Israeli government. Some of these requirements are also undeclared or unannounced. So, that's why I say it keeps to be a learning process for every single agency, including the UN agencies. (...) It's an extremely complex, long, and, you know, a process that wasn't even there before October 7th. It wasn't negotiated or discussed with anyone." (Alice, p. 4-5).

By using the words "learning process", "undeclared", "unannounced", "complex", "long", she presents the distribution process as a hindrance of aid with no clear direction of how to reach the intended target groups. According to Labonte & Edgerton (2013), blocking of humanitarian access can be categorized into different forms of access denial that governments can impose, each with different effects and motives. Alice's testimony suggests that Israel is denying access through means of precarity, accommodating lack of clarity and predictability

in the Israeli authorities procedures making the delivery of aid extremely fluid and ad hoc based, which suggest that Israel is using elements of "latent access denial" (2013; p. 51) that entails imposing arbitrary obstacles and unclear restrictions to keep organizations out. As a result of the restriction in access, aid delivery in Gaza has decreased significantly. Before the war, an average of 500 trucks entered Gaza daily, with 150 of them carrying food (IPC, 2024b). However, from October 7, 2023 to February 24, 2024, this dropped to only 90 trucks per day, with just 60 carrying food (ibid). Alice' use of words also reveals an information gap between controlling actors and the NGOs, as the Israeli authorities and the aid organizations are not negotiating access directly. This resistance that is met by Alice, expressed by other interviewees as well, is a central element of hegemony. When stating that the humanitarian actors not only were excluded in the decision-making but even unaware of the decisions taken by the Israeli government regarding the access of humanitarian aid, they manifest their resistance by attempting to negotiate the power imbalance and challenge the dominant practice through discourse (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). As access for international organizations has become part of the political negotiation process, humanitarian aid has been something that can be "turned off and on depending on other political factors" (Rodgers et. al, 2024; n.p.), all the while humanitarian organizations are standing on the side, awaiting permissions and orders. Another interlocutor, Jennie from MSF, stated,

"And then of course another major barrier is the blockage of humanitarian aid into Gaza which has meant that we've had very limited means to help the patients, in particular those that are most sincerely affected, those who needs amputations, who needs surgery, who needs a higher level of hospital care, given that the hospitals have been structurally, systematically closing down one by one. I think now there are 12 out of 36 that are minimal functioning left, and there are, I think on average, around 300% coverage of the beds in those hospitals. So there is a huge need for additional space, there's a huge need for medical profiles to help the patients, and then all kinds of medicines and fuel to run the hospitals, water, sanitation, etc. So growing needs. And no aid" (Jennie, p. 91).

Her discourse is centered around the observations made on the ground and the needs that have derived from the destruction of medical facilities and lack of services. She includes statistics that serve to underline the grave situation in the healthcare system, functioning as a discursive tool to establish perspective and trustworthiness. A noteworthy use of words is the formulations of hospitals closing down *structurally* and *systematically,* which insinuates an

intent behind this event. As will be illustrated, many of our informants believe that the hindrance of humanitarian access and delivery of aid into Gaza, is an intentional act, which showcases the ideological effects of discourse, meaning that the discursive practices of NGOs workers criticize and challenge the system in which they act and the social group who is in power. Besides, the humanitarians are facing unequal power dynamics as the state of Israel impedes the exercise of the right of humanitarian access during emergencies, thus the discourse becomes a manifestation against this practice with a view to reclaiming this lost space.

As illustrated in the examples above, our interlocutors' discourses largely revolve around telling the stories from the ground in Gaza. It can be argued their discourse competes with Israeli authorities counter narrative, leading to a factual battle of truth claims regarding the humanitarian reality at the borders (Rodgers et. al, 2024; COGAT, 2023). To illustrate an example, the figures provided by the Israeli Unit for the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), which regulates all military and humanitarian affairs in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, contradict the narratives of our interlocutors. COGAT argues that from the onset of the current war up to April 2024, the Unit "provides a unique proactive system" in facilitating the entry of humanitarian aid into and across Gaza (COGAT, n.d.). As of October 7th 2023, COGAT states that 84,4% of humanitarian agencies' requests were approved, with only 14.2% rejected of which 7.2% was on the grounds of preventing aid from reaching Hamas (ibid). Furthermore, the report states that most recently a number between 150 to 200 of trucks are admitted to Gaza daily, most of which are food trucks, which is an 80% increase compared to the period prior 7 October 2023. In contrast, the Integrated Food Facility Phase Classification (IPC; 2024b) reported that from October 7, 2023 to February 24, 2024, the number of admitted trucks dropped to only 90 trucks per day, with just 60 carrying food. COGAT argues that despite ongoing hostilities, food, water, fuel, and medical supplies enter the area on a continuous basis, especially in Southern Gaza urging civilians from Northern Gaza to relocate in order to ensure access to aid. As opposed to the discourse of the COGAT, our interlocutors and other humanitarian organizations contradict its discourse that presents a unique and proactive humanitarian response system, which reveals a fight over facts and narratives.

6.2.1 Dual Use

For nearly two decades, Israel has imposed restrictions on goods entering Gaza based on the dual use rationale. The designation as dual-use means that Israel acknowledges that these items have an inherent civilian use, but that they can also be used for military purposes. The principle of distinction is found in the International Humanitarian Law, where distinguishing between civilians and combatants is required, adding that attacks should be directed solely at military objectives (International Committee of the Red Cross, 1977). For Jones et al (2024; p.1), removing the boundary between civilian and military, signifies a shift from "from binarism (either/or) to dualism (potentially both)". This dualistic perspective enables states "to unmake civilian objects or, rather, to remake them as military objects". It can be argued that the dual use imperative is built upon the same logic of dualism, enabling Israel to deem often basic humanitarian items to be of military use as well (ibid; p.1). Following the Hamas' 2006 election, Israel in 2007, initiated the ban of items deemed to have both civilian and military purposes from 2008 onward. The dual use list, administered by the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), changes regularly "often leaving businesses and humanitarian organizations guessing as to what might be permitted or prohibited" (ibid; p.2). Items like cement, cancer medications, and fishing equipment have been restricted, as well as seemingly benign goods such as A4 paper and children's toys (Gisha Legal Center, 2022).

The majority of our interlocutors referred to the operational challenges that have occurred due to Israel's restrictions on dual use items, which prohibits items that could contribute to or enable fighting. They explain that the official dual use list is not being adhered to, and that Israeli border guards continue to arbitrarily add new items to the official list without announcing any updates (Alice). This has resulted in aid trucks being withheld from crossing into Gaza and that humanitarian aid organizations were unable to deliver food, shelter and medicine. For instance, anesthesia was being rejected, leading to surgeries being done without it. Consequently, the blocking of aid stopped NGOs from attempting to send certain items, because of the financial costs of losing deliveries (Alice). Lastly, the organizations represented in this research have documented that Israel has rejected items such as clean water, fresh food, and clothes that were supposed to be distributed in Gaza (Danish Refugee Council, 2024). Alice calls the dual use list "the big elephant in the room that no one actually

is willing to address" (Alice, p. 5), underlining her perspective of the list being a highly controversial practice that only humanitarian organizations seem to contest.

Kyla, who has worked in multiple humanitarian emergencies, such as in Myanmar, Venezuela, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Greece, notes that while all these conflicts, despite having as common denominator the politicization of humanitarian aid, the Gaza response differs in one significant aspect; the weaponization of aid. According to Kyla, this is an unprecedented and unique characteristic of the current humanitarian conflict which she has not encountered in her previous deployments as an emergency humanitarian worker. Weaponization of aid refers to the infliction on humanitarian aid processes for non-humanitarian purposes, often with a political goal, that is practiced through different actions such as restrictions on access and diversion of aid (Armed Conflict Survey, 2019), under which the dual use list arguably can be categorized, as aid delivery is being conditionalized while contributing to degrading life conditions and induce further suffering.

A concrete example of our interlocutors encountering restrictions based on the dual list comes from John working in Oxfam Denmark. He describes that although Oxfam managed to procure advanced water desalination units into Gaza and obtaining initial permission from Israeli authorities to deliver the required materials, the Israeli authorities later prohibited the entry of the piping fittings of a certain size needed for the assembly, resulting in the implementation of improvised solutions on the ground while some installations had to be dropped (John). In a critical note on the dual use list, John stated that:

"I mean, as it has been highlighted many times by Oxfam, it's (the dual use restrictions) *not a question of, you know, Israel is slow or being over-careful with the distribution. It's really a deliberate withholding of aid from the people of Gaza. And that, according to the people we have on the ground, does not serve a military purpose. There's no military purpose to withholding that aid. It doesn't make it easier to spot who is a Hamas combatant. It's just simply, mentally difficult. And then should be put in place by Israel to make life as unbearable as possible for the people of Gaza, which is, of course, part of the strategy to make them leave or create at least so much despair so that, as Israel actually believes is the strategy of Israel, when there is an opportunity, fear of death really, in Gaza, that Israel will have achieved its main objective."* (John, p. 73).

This statement represents an interpretation of Israel's dual use restrictions being a piece of a strategic puzzle, in which humanitarian aid has become a tool for escalating the war. Furthermore, John articulates his disagreement with Israel's action on prohibiting items of desalination, as they can not be logically associated with the fight against Hamas, expressing his opposition to the measure. He elaborates that he perceives the actual aim of the dual use policy to serve an underlying purpose of spreading a feeling of moral and physical exhaustion for the people of Gaza, thus challenging Israel's military legitimacy of the dual use list by bringing in a contesting perspective of the practice. Speaking of the dual use list as a part of "the strategy of Israel" and "Israel's main objective", John claims that the list is facilitating Israel's ability to achieve other political goals. Additionally, his perspective speaks into Oxfam's concern of Israel's political and military maneuvres in Gaza being a part of unfolding war crimes with a risk of genocide (Oxfam Denmark, 2024a), in which practices like the dual use requirements is interpreted to reinforce the obstruction of opportunities for external actors to provide life saving supplies (John). According to Labonte and Edgerton (2013; p. 53), states may impose "proxy access denial", where governments use the blocking of humanitarian aid as a tool to achieve other political goals as part of their agenda. In the same vein, John suggests that this kind of access denial is materialized in the case of Gaza, as he perceives the blocking of aid and selective access allowances as a de facto part of Israel's political agenda and military strategy that accommodate Israel's ability to further its political purpose "to make them (Gazans) leave" (John, p. 73). In this sense, John views the dual use list not only as an operational challenge in the aid delivery process, but it is also a phenomenon that is given political meaning as part of proxy access denial practices. Furthermore, can be argued that since the practise of the dual use list is lacking transparency and consistency in its execution, John places the dual use list within the politicized nature of the crisis and gives it meaning based on his perceptions of the war, which is informed and developed by reports from Palestinian colleagues on the ground, who questions the military incitement to the withholding of aid (John).

As illustrated above, John links his perceptions of concrete political acts and agendas currently unfolding in the Israeli government to the challenges that Oxfam encountered in their humanitarian intervention in Gaza. His discourse is an expression of the complexity of the crisis, where opposing views of who is perceived as the victim and who is the perpetrator is disseminated and reproduced by competing discourses. Ultimately, John's perceptions and observations define the space in which he develops his discourse and executes his

humanitarian profession. It can be argued that John exemplifies how humanitarian workers play a role in the politicization of the crisis, as his discourse on the humanitarian response is shaped by his perceptions of Israeli politics on the war. In this way, the discourse he deploys when speaking about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is interlinked to his discourse on the political aspects of the war. This discursive interplay also bears witness of the general politicized nature of the crisis in Gaza, which will be further elaborated in the following sections.

6.2.2 The safety of humanitarian aid workers

Another concern pertaining to the conditions for humanitarian aid delivery in Gaza, is the safety of their Palestinian partner organizations on the ground, who are implementing the organizations' humanitarian response efforts and are responsible for distributing food, hygiene kits, shelters, medicin, etc. to the intended target groups. Teresa, working for Dignity, points to the ethical dilemmas that the unsafe working environment in Gaza creates in Dignity's headquarters in Denmark, expressing,

"Then, there are so many challenges on the ground. Like, you know, there's just the security of it. I mean, it's human rights organizations. They're not exactly, you know, popular with the Israelis. So there's also a lot of security concerns, particularly in our partnership. Like how can we have, you know, secure connection and platform to have meetings, to share documents. How can we communicate around our partnership without putting them at risk, the ones that are on the ground there? Because there have been examples of human rights workers being targeted directly and these sort of things. So that also links with the ethical part of it. Like how can we, as Dignity, work with these partners without putting them at risk?" (Teresa, p. 105).

Her articulations shows a profound feeling of responsibility towards Dignity's Palestinian partners, while describing the complexity of the work environment in relation to security measures, that stretches all the way from concerns of Israeli perceptions and consequences of Dignity's actions on the ground, to practical considerations of creating secure communication paths for information sharing purposes. A noteworthy perception in Teresa's expression, is how she links the ethical concern of how to ensure her Palestinian colleagues' safety to the experience of human rights workers being targeted "directly", showing an understanding of

the attacks against her colleagues being intentional acts that Dignity is attempting to work around.

The alignment of Jennie's, John's and Teresa's perceptions of Israel's maneuvers in Gaza being an intentional effort to obstruct humanitarian aid delivery which results in detrimental consequences for civilians, is a common experience among humanitarian workers (interviews; Rodgers et. al, 2024). Another example of this view is an MSF medical referent for Gaza, who suggests that Israel's arbitrary approach to international humanitarian organizations and aid delivery is a deliberate act to sabotage their activities (Rodgers et. al, 2024). Our interlocutors' experience of Israel intentionally attacking aid workers is moreover backed up by investigative organizations such as HRW (HRW, 2024), thus suggesting that Israel is also using acts of "deterring access denial", characterized by increased violence to keep aid away from the population in Gaza (Labonte et. al, 2013, p. 51).

Framing their work situation as hindered, inacceptable, and unprecedented and as a question of intent, NGO workers discourse speaks into issues of accountability and responsibility. The integration of accountability into the organizations' humanitarian response in Gaza, adds a new layer in the approach to the crisis that has a distinctive goal of holding Israel accountable. As access is constrained, humanitarian workers become targeted, and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza worsens day by day, the NGO workers administering the processes feel obliged to address adverse situations and actors that they perceive as responsible for these. In the case of Gaza, humanitarian organizations are seen to leverage their role as humanitarian actors to voice concerns specifically targeted towards Israel and third state parties like Denmark. In the next chapter, we will dive into how our interviewees give meaning to their advocacy and communication efforts by highlighting elements in their discourses.

6.3 Fundraising and power dynamics

The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs halted its funding for humanitarian and development projects in Palestine immediately after the attack on the 7th of October. Consequently, humanitarian organizations used a strategy to mobilize previously secured grants. As an example, Oxfam Denmark, CARE Denmark and DIGNITY had prior to the 7th of October

succeeded in gaining in a strategic partnership with the MFA, which provides the organizations with funding over a period of 3 years. Some of this money is so-called “flexible funds”, which are lump sums of the funding that the organization can allocate to the desired projects or emergency situations, in order to ensure agile and fast humanitarian responses (Clara). As the humanitarian crisis in Gaza escalated quickly, humanitarian organizations with flexible funds attempted to mobilize this money, although some of them met obstacles with banks being unable or unwilling to facilitate transfers, as well as security implications for their implementing staff on the ground (Teresa). The blockade of humanitarian access on the ground also meant that foundations were hesitant to provide funding, since the organizations were unable to present a promising distribution plan in Gaza (John). On the other hand, private donations arose significantly in relation to Oxfam's Ceasefire Now campaign and to a lawsuit against the Danish state initiated in cooperation with Amnesty International, ActionAid, and the Palestinian human rights organization Al-Haq for continuing weapon exports to Israel, showcasing an eagerness in individual giving (John; Bech, 2024).

Humanitarian emergency responses, like the ones implemented by the organizations represented in this research, are realized by funding from major donors such as institutional donors like governments, private foundations such as companies and contributions by private individuals supporting a cause. As previously stated, politicization of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is an overarching issue among the topics addressed in this research, and that has also come to expression in fundraising processes. As previously described, the organizations represented in this research are affiliates of larger organizational confederations, in which the headquarters of Oxfam, for instance, is located in the UK and the headquarters of CARE International is placed in Geneva, while CARE USA plays a significant role in the decision making processes as the affiliate brings the biggest amount of funding into the organization. The headquarters are responsible for aligning the overall strategy of the organizations in the different country offices around the world, including ensuring that advocacy messaging are streamlined and nurturing networks among major donors. In the previous section, John expressed a concern for the interplay between donor interests and Oxfam’s advocacy efforts on Gaza, suggesting that the organizations are navigating a delicate line of exactly how contesting and critical they can be in their advocacy efforts, until donors will consider imposing financial consequences. This concern has not occurred in a vacuum, but is a continuous consideration among our interlocutors amid the challenging circumstances to

secure funding for their humanitarian projects in Gaza after October 7th. As Kyla from Care stated,

"It's the hardest thing I've ever seen in terms of funding. No one was contributing as they were contributing in other crises like Ukraine, for instance. Traditional allies of CARE Palestine, such as CARE Germany, there was no substantial funding that was coming from them. CARE USA, the same. I think the biggest chunk of the funding that we secured was from CARE Denmark and also from CARE Canada (...) Because I know that for CARE USA, for instance, I understand that they have a lot of, not only Jewish financial supporters, but pro-Jewish, pro-Israeli supporters. You start training them on what are the humanitarian principles, and then you pass on the protection principles. You can remain neutral, as an individual, as an individual humanitarian. But when you start getting funding from different donors, such as the USA, (...) the UK, the organization, the UK funding, or ECHO, I think you need to be aware that some of your principles should be parked somewhere." (Kyla, p. 46-47).

Kyla's statement shows the power relations at stake on the topic of fundraising, showcasing a significant decision making power within donor states like the US, UK and Germany. These major donors are inevitably influenced by their respective political lines in regards to the ongoing war (Qarmout et. al, 2012), which underlines the fact that politics certainly is intertwined in humanitarianism. Interestingly, Kylas statement showcases that she is consciously navigating how the current geopolitical reality is reflected among donors, counterweighting and anticipating possible financial and influential consequences for the actions taken within her organization. Her statement that some of the humanitarian principles "should be parked somewhere" in the case of receiving funding from the US and the UK, shows that politics takes over humanitarianism when finance becomes central. The awareness of how major donors' political affiliations, that are positive towards Israel, have a limiting effect on the organizations' fundraising opportunities, is arguably present among all of the humanitarian workers interviewed in this research (interviews). As our interlocutors meet challenges attempting to fundraise for their humanitarian response in Gaza, they become highly aware of the fact that the humanitarian principles will not be considered by the donors, as donors navigate in a politically controversial crisis where political interests play a distinguished role. Our interlocutor Clara, working for Oxfam Denmark, explained the interplay between fundraising and advocacy in the Danish Oxfam affiliate, stating that

"So it's not only the ties, right, to Israel. But it's also how much Denmark is influenced by U.S. politics and policies. So in Oxfam, we don't take funds from the U.S. So that's one that doesn't influence us directly. We take funds from foundations, et cetera. So we are not kind of silenced in that sense directly, because we don't take funds. However, still, we can lose access to the White House. We have a very strong U.S. affiliate. We can lose access to the White House if we are very vocal." (Clara, p. 24-25).

By using words such as "influence" and "lose access", Clara presents how the US has a controlling impact on how contesting Oxfam's advocacy may be, without jeopadizing access to political decision makers within the White House, where Oxfam practice high level advocacy directly to political actors thus gaining political influence. It is this unequal power relation that makes our interlocutors hesitant to develop their discourses in a further contesting direction (interviews). She expresses an underlying dilemma of the possibility of losing access to the White House, which would have a negative impact on Oxfam's ability to influence the political agenda on the topics that the organization is concerned with. On a confederation level, this specific concern translates into practices of constraints to the overall organizational discourse in the advocacy efforts produced especially in Oxfam US. On the other hand, Oxfam Denmark has a larger room for expression, as the Danish affiliate does not receive funding from the US directly. This financial distance between US donors and Oxfam Denmark comes to expression through an increase in the level of contesting language adopted by Oxfam Denmark, which is disseminated through press releases and official publications that critically analyzes Israel's actions on the ground in Gaza (for example Oxfam, 2024b, Oxfam, 2024c). But even so, our interlocutor's express concerns of how their critical voices may have similar implications to their relation with the Danish Foreign Ministry (interviews).

The unequal power relation between donors and the NGOs thus influences the discourse among our interlocutors, as their discourse is constrained by the dependence on funding which limits their space for expression, as they are concerned to cross any political red lines that donors may have. On the other hand, their organizational mandate also creates a certain discursive space detached from politics, in which NGO workers can express concerns for humanitarian issues with slight political latitude. But even so, there is an unequal power relation between donors and NGOs constituted in the institutionalization of the humanitarian field, where major donors have the power to decide which organizations are deserving of

funding (Barnett, 2005). As the NGOs represented in the research cannot rely only on member donations, healthy relationships to state donors are essential to running humanitarian projects like the one in Gaza (ibid).

6.4 Advocacy and Public Positioning

Another topic that pertains to the main humanitarian work and has been mentioned by our interlocutors is the advocacy efforts as well as internal and external communications regarding the humanitarian response in Gaza. For non-governmental organizations, advocacy is a method of strategic communication aimed at spreading awareness on topics of concern, and is thus a form of public discourse that aims to "promote, maintain, and resist dominant political and economic ideologies" (Motion & Weaver 2005, p. 64)".

Jennie explains that the impediments in access in Gaza led MSF to changing their focus towards advocacy. Therefore, MSF opted for a more "extreme advocacy" (Jennie, p. 93) that was centered on the need for a ceasefire and immediate action through addressing this request to the UN advocate, as the number of deaths, wounded people, lack of adequate medical support in hospitals, hunger and disease were significantly increasing (interviews). At the same time, Jennie requests for respect of international humanitarian law and assurance of protection of medical and humanitarian workers to do their work. Her wording acquires a tone of imperativeness and call into action by using a more "extreme" advocacy approach as a result of the obstruction of humanitarian access on the ground. NGOs advocacy discursive efforts are usually based on appeal on credibility (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, Ziberi et al, 2024). Providing evidence boosts the persuasive ability of NGOs to influence the public opinion, especially given the challenges they encounter in their capacity to establish their position when competing with other powerful parties such as political parties or governments (Ziberi et al, 2024).

Clara talks about the lobbying and the ways of communication in Oxfam and affiliates globally, explaining that there are clear lines regarding what Oxfam can speak about and what they cannot, based on the agency's mandate. "*So we can speak. We can speak about the ceasefire. We can speak about the unhindered humanitarian access. Where we can't have different opinions is on things like, and rightly so is, on things concerning the court case and the ICJ and genocide, ethnic cleansing, all these issues. We have to follow what the*

organization has agreed upon." (Clara, p. 25-26). She elaborates on what forms of discourse Oxfam can adopt as an organization that is centered around the humanitarian principles, whereas political and legally charged discussions of genocide and ethnic cleansing lack organizational consensus. Where Oxfam has moved in a more political direction, is by advocating publicly for a ceasefire, a two state solution, and whereas pushing for unhindered humanitarian access is rooted in the humanitarian principles. She highlights that the guiding light for Oxfam's advocacy efforts are the humanitarian principles, whose role will be discussed in the following sections. However, there are also "silent advocacy" efforts that take place behind closed doors, such as the ones in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Denmark and briefings with the Biden administration, as she mentions. She admits that Oxfam did not adopt a "strong enough" (ibid, p. 27) language at the beginning and she identifies forced displacement of Palestininas within Gaza as an issue that Oxfam should have addressed earlier.

The majority of our interviewees expressed that their respective organization proceeded to public statements only later than the start of the conflict. Our interlocutors from Care and Oxfam explained that there was an internal friction among the employees and the leadership regarding the initial reluctance of the organization to talk in public channels about the war in Gaza at the beginning of the conflict. The staff's pleas and pressure for a more vocal stance was eventually heard and resulted in a joint NGO statement published in New York Times on an international level (Nunn et al, 2023).

Kyla provides information on the key conversation between the high executive of CARE and the staff working in Ramallah for the Gaza response, as well as her perspective on the demands of the humanitarian staff;

"*I must say that after a meeting that was held between the CEO and the country team in Ramallah in Gaza, things changed. She (*the CEO*) also understood that this was a very important moment for the country. She understood that these voices should be heard. She understood that they understand that there is a very highly sensitive political agenda in the middle. However, you cannot turn your back to this. You cannot say, I don't know. You have reports coming on a daily basis. Everything has been televised*" (Kyla, p. 39).

Her discourse is centered on the need for change in the organization's public advocacy approach in order to include the humanitarian workers' experiences witnessed in the field. Kyla suggests that in order to take the realities on the ground seriously, NGO workers are forced to address political issues ingrained in the crisis, as ignoring them is not an option with the daily reports coming in from palestinian colleagues. In this sense, it can be argued that humanitarians feel an obligation to take a political stance, when they are presented with a direct window into the humanitarian situation in Gaza through their partners. Kyla refers to the reports by humanitarian agencies and the televised images as an objective piece of evidence that should prompt the organization to be more outspoken despite the political strings attached to the conflict. It could be argued that this is the reality of humanitarian workers who are the front lines and have witnessed distinctively difficult situations in this emergency response. Another interlocutor, Teresa, provides an interesting perspective on the decision making on what should be communicated and what should not, by reflecting on the following:

"we're thinking a lot about it also in the way we communicate, you know, how do we limit our exposure to being targeted by the right wing in Denmark or, you know, media or whatever (...) So there's really a lot more consideration around how do you phrase different things? What words do you use? Do you say genocide or do you say, you know, alleged war crimes or do you just say war crimes? Like all these things where in the again, in the context of Ukraine, you don't even you don't have to worry about that so much because everyone's on the same side there. Right. We have a clear idea of who is the bad guy in that situation and that's just not the case for this. So it's all the time this navigation of how to communicate, what to discuss with the ministry, when to raise these things." (Teresa, p. 107-108)

Teresa discloses the skepticism that characterizes her organization's external communications regarding the depiction of the situation in Gaza. The ethos of the NGO worker becomes front and center, as her identity imposes a careful review of any statement that could deviate from humanitarian purposes, and thus potentially link the organization's work with politics and adherence to perceived controversial political views. Additionally, her reflections showcase how humanitarian workers are turning to means of diligent examination of their own wording in public or professional statements in order to avoid repercussions, something that is a unique characteristic to this conflict, as distinct from the way they could communicate about the conflict in Ukraine. At the same time, her considerations holds an inherent political

character, where use of words such as “genocide” and “ethical cleansing” is being internally discussed.

NGO workers have to ‘navigate’ a complex space involving multiple political implications that interfere with the principled humanitarian processes. The considerations in the discourse of our interviewees include the recognition of these political issues, but are also manifesting the principled ethos of the NGO worker that constructs their social identities. However, at the same time, their humanitarian identities call for addressing the political issues that prevent the main purpose of their job, that is to provide relief aid.

6.5 Humanitarian Principles

Humanitarian principles have been a central focus of most researchers of the humanitarian field of studies. Undoubtedly, they have also been a key concern for our interlocutors who referred extensively to them as a mechanism guiding the operationalisation of their work for the population in Gaza. As discussed previously, the main theoretical contributors to the topic classify humanitarianism on the basis of the level of commitment to the humanitarian principles, with Dunantists devotedly adhering to the principles of humanity, neutrality, independence while New Humanitarians distancing from these and focusing on a human-rights centered discourses (Gordon & Donini, 2015). However, one can assume that the ethics and values that guide the two prevalent branches of humanitarianism are not static but continuously evolved and described as “work in progress” (Barnett & Weiss, 2011, p.105) to reflect “the politics of its time, and its relationship to suffering and vulnerability” (Fiori, 2013). Furthemore, the two paradigms can coexist and become mixed in practice (Hilhorst, 2018; p.1), as we will discuss below. The aim in this section is to examine the discourses around the principles and examine whether they constitute and are being constituted by the reality of the Gaza response. To achieve this, we will focus on texts that showcase how the interviewees perceive the principles and examine whether new elements are introduced. While others focus on research about how humanitarian organizations action base their work on the division of the two paradigms, our focus is to examine the negotiation processes around the principles, identify whether ideologies are expressed and whether there is a hegemonic struggle to challenge power relationships in this convoluted humanitarian space.

The principles have historically been used by agencies as a means of depoliticization of humanitarian action to ensure its disassociation from politics (Barnett, 2005). In this sense, humanitarian organizations largely view the principles as significant elements that guide their work and distinguish their identity in accordance with humanitarian ethics. This identity that differentiates humanitarian work in language and practice from other kinds of work and most importantly from politics is being embraced by NGO workers participating in this study. In fact, they highly identify themselves with these principles, not solely because they feel bound by them following their constituted organizational mandates, but also because they are ingrained in their self understanding as professionals working in this specific field. The current conflict has brought friction even on an internal organization level, with people working for the same purpose expressing opposing opinions with regards to the warring parties. The latter makes our interlocutor Nadia, working from CARE Jordan, reflect on her own values, as she must choose her words in conversations with colleagues in order not to create further tension. Although she also has her own personal opinion which sometimes contradicts the ones of her colleagues, she claims that to avoid internal conflict in a way that is "fair" for everyone, humanitarians should rely on humanitarian principles. She states:

"There aren't a hundred interpretations of humanitarian principles, right? They are called principles for a reason. They have been there. They were put on paper. We train people on them. People study IHL for a reason. They're not open to interpretation. It's not something that you say, oh, well, I will pick and choose. Today I want to be impartial, but maybe in the next response, I will be neutral. It doesn't work that way." (Nadia, p. 63).

Nadia's perception of humanitarianism being a principled and rule-based field, is largely found in the notion of the classical humanitarian paradigm. The principled approach is an integral part of the humanitarian ethics which incorporates a moral language for NGOs to establish their position at an institutional level and gain popular acceptance. In this case the principles are viewed and expressed in a normative way, thus presented as unquestionable. Her way of listing the attributes of the principles underscores their indisputable universalism while insinuating a criticism towards actors who try to bend their meaning or diverge from them in practice. In addition, her discourse reinforces the humanitarian principles' centered place in her own self-understanding as a humanitarian, making no room for doubt that conforming to these principles are a key aspect of her professional identity. The NGO workers who inform this study largely build their discourse around their professional role and

organizational mandates, namely that of saving lives with humanitarian principles as the main impetus to achieve this goal (interviews). This ethos relates to ideas of moral universalism which maintains that there are objective, universal standards of justice that surpass local customs, traditions, or laws (Kurasawa, 2013). Equally, they aim at realizing their humanitarian responses based on a universal and indiscriminate approach to the selection of target groups and locations (ibid). Nadia presents her statement as a necessary consideration when working within diverse teams, which is often characteristic of NGOs where individuals come from various nationalities, cultures, and social backgrounds. For her, these principles serve as a tool to safeguard the core objectives of their work.

Although all of our interlocutors put great emphasis on the importance of the humanitarian principles as ethical/moral guidelines, they do diverge from each other in the way they interpret them. This can be explained by relating their discourses to the mandates and heritage of their respective organizations, derived from their different historical origins and starting points. As an example, our interlocutor representing the MSF, states; *"Of course we are neutral and impartial and we have offered to Israel the same kind of help that we're offering within Gaza now after the 7th of october but we have not been asked to come and help even though we've proposed it several times but they have very well functioning health place, which Gaza, as we knew because we were there before the 7th of October, does not have."* (Jennie, p. 94), thus confirming that principles of neutrality and impartiality are principles highly emphasized particularly by Dunantist organizations like the MSF who, like the ICRC, has historically been critical to humanitarianism becoming political (Barnett, 2005). Moreover, Jennie supports that MSF raises its concerns everytime there is a situation that obstructs their humanitarian mission. These challenges range from restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian aid to attacks and arrests of MSF personnel. She emphasizes that the organization's vocal stance on these matters is not driven by political motivations but rather from the harsh operational reality. Therefore, MSF locates the source of the problem in the obstruction of aid reaching the population in need and is not engaging with Israel's political decisions to hinder the provision of humanitarian assistance.

6.5.1 The postcolonial imperative

On the contrary, another interesting take on the humanitarian principles comes from our interlocutor John, who explains that, *"I think that humanitarian principles are a good tool to*

navigate but you cannot rely on them exclusively. You have to also take other rights and also I dare say the whole principle of anti-colonialism which is of course also rights-based but also more political. Much broader and more far-reaching than humanitarian principles" (John, p. 88). As elaborated in the previous chapter, Oxfam is characterized as a Wilsonian organization, and has a distinguished focus on social inequality and is known to address root causes of humanitarian crises. In John's expression, he presents his view of the humanitarian principles through interdiscursivity, drawing upon an anti-colonialist and human rights-based discourse. In this sense, he diverges from the classical Dunantist discourse by opening up a discussion on anticolonial ideas that should also guide their work. The act of drawing upon this discourse, resonates with Oxfam's commitments to the fight against inequality and its stance that colonialism is a root cause for the reproduction of injustice. Opposite to some of our other interlocutors, John's discourse questions the humanitarian principles' centrality as they are seemingly out of play in the case of Gaza, thus stressing the need for more political involvement. Therefore, although he admits that principles serve as a tool to base their work upon, he adds a new layer that emphasizes the political aspect of delivering humanitarian assistance in the Middle East, an area that has historically been confronted with political issues that had a direct impact on the civilians. For John, this anticolonial viewpoint is an imperative of the human-rights approach in the case of Gaza, because it is not only the humanitarian work that is jeopardized in the current conflict; but also emphasize "The rights that are at stake in Palestine with regards to this conflict" (John; p. 88). However, his colleague Clara expresses a different opinion. For her, humanitarian work needs to be disconnected from any form of political interference in order to ensure that they can deliver to the people affected by political and military security crises. She explains, "In practice, humanitarians do not operate in a vacuum, right? You do operate in quite complex systems and situations. But I do believe they should be strongly guided by humanitarian principles" (Clara, p. 28). Clara, although a firm supporter of the distinction between the "humanitarian" and the "political" admits that in practice humanitarians are operating in an arena where political interests have intruded.

6.5.2 The role of accountability

John is stressing the fact that Oxfam has slightly shifted focus from the traditional humanitarian advocacy, that usually refers to taking the part of the affected population (Meyer, 1996), to incorporate accountability as an ethical consideration at the epicenter of

their advocacy efforts. Referring to the “Ceasefire Now” campaign and the planning of a lawsuit against the Danish state for its arms support for Israel, as discussed in the previous section, he is one of the few participants that highlighted accountability as a necessary principle to tackle the political discord that characterize this conflict. The ethical aspect of accountability is not merely about holding others responsible; it is, more importantly, about taking responsibility by addressing specific issues. According to Hilhorst et al (2021), accountability is a consequentialist ethics topic that came only later in the humanitarian discussion and it serves as a way to protect the classic principles. It is not enough to state that humanitarian work is driven by humanity, neutrality and so on. Accountability is about “taking responsibility for ensuring the quality and “rightness” of their actions” (ibid; p.365).
John introduces accountability as a central discursive element to showcase a shift in Oxfam’s approach from the purely humanitarian to the more political; he clarifies that accountability does not only be a concern for Israel, but also for the third state parties that partake in this war, such as concerns for Denmark exporting weapon parts to Israel risking to contribute to violations of international law including alleged war crimes. John is talking about the so-called downward accountability (Hilhorst et al; 2021); in social sciences, downward social accountability refers to the premise that states are responsible to uphold the rights of citizens. Adapting this idea into humanitarian studies, Hilhorst et al (2021; p. 368) suggests that NGOs' role has to a great extent been transformed into fully fledged institutions and thus enables them to leverage this power-holding position to “display other forms of power abuse” carried out by other state or non-state actors. Therefore, John brings forward Oxfam’s lever as an organization that is committed to fighting for human rights and uses a discourse that introduces the idea of holding the state and other power holders responsible, through the Ceasefire Now campaign. The most traditional form of donor accountability is upward accountability and it refers to the case where NGOs should report to the donors about their activities to ensure transparency and that funds are spent according to the agreed project plan (ibid); however, in the Gaza response, there is an additional expressed need for the powerholders to be held accountable to the population of Gaza. This becomes a fundamental issue in the case of the Gaza response as the numbers of civilian casualties are alarmingly high and the living conditions for civilians on the ground has become close to irreparable (OHCHR, 2024). Referring to the CeasefireNow campaign, our interlocutor highlights that not only Israel but also other political power holders should be liable for not addressing the issue efficiently. The latter aligns with the joint call for ceasefire that is co-signed by Oxfam international, as well, and which calls “The UN Security Council, the UN Secretary-General

and all world leaders with influence to take immediate action to ensure a ceasefire comes into effect" (Oxfam International, n.d.).

Similarly, Teresa highlighted that Western European human rights organizations have an enhanced responsibility to represent the civil society in Palestine because of their role as power holders. This responsibility requires "to be there" (Teresa, p. 112) for the civil society in Palestine since they can't access the actual power holders in the EU or in Denmark, meaning the political leadership. What is of high interest here, is that NGO work is perceived to have an additional purpose, namely to address the gaps that the political leadership is unable to address. Anti-colonial discourse and the issue of accountability are being employed by our interviewees, in the light of the challenges that affect their ability to get humanitarian access on the ground and deliver aid to the population in Gaza, as mentioned more extensively in the chapter above. The humanitarian access that is historically one of the most guaranteed rights in emergency settings (Schwendimann, 2011) is being contested; therefore, anticolonial discourses with an added demand for accountability can be seen as a discursive struggle for preserving their interests and challenging power relations.

6.6 Humanitarianism and Politicisation

One of the most pronounced issues addressed during our interviews are challenges to our interlocutors' work streams occurring from politicization of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Although politicization as a phenomenon is reflected throughout the different topics in analysis, in this section we will explore deeper how they respond to some of the specific issues related to political interference.

Barnett and other researchers claim that the political economy of funding has been one of the most outstanding factors for the institutionalization of humanitarian aid (Barnett, 2005; 727; Donini, 2012; Hilhorst, 2018). In the 1990s, the sudden influx of humanitarian organizations along with proliferation of funding opportunities was the precursor of the institutionalization of humanitarianism, as a means of maintaining control and staying accountable. The emergency response in Rwanda stood as a decisive moment, as it was found that the ones who were responsible for genocide were receiving funding as discplaced beneficiaries, and this was feeding the continuity of funding the armed conflict (Terry, 2002). Further

standardization processes including bureaucratised methods were developed both by private and public donors, whereas states imposed further funding requirements, as well, bringing humanitarian organizations' focus into prioritizing their presence and survival over their own principled commitments (Barnett, 2005). In the following paragraphs, we will focus on how our interviewees perceive and describe the main donor requirements, that is the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). By focusing on the discursive elements of their speech we will examine the power asymmetries that these pose in their work, contributing to the politicization of humanitarianism in the light of this emergency response, and we will investigate whether and how they challenge the current status quo.

Although there is a plethora of data provided by the NGO workers, we have opted to analyze the discourses that articulate common challenges and perceptions that are repeated across the interviews to provide an overall picture of how politicization is experienced and addressed through shared discursive practices. We have selected the data for this section in this way, in order to reflect the shared discussions on politicization's effect on the humanitarian sector, and at the same time allowing for diverse opinions on the same topic.

6.6.1 Due Diligence

In November 2023, the European Commision published the C/2023/8300 Communication, a final review of the ongoing financial assistance for Palestine after the attacks conducted by Hamas against Israel on 7 October 2024 (European Commission, 2023). The review intensified scrutiny on funds to Palestine in order to prevent fund diversion to entities that incite to violence, that is Hamas. The additional due diligence measures include incorporating anti-incitement clauses in all new contracts, ensuring their strict implementation and expanding the monitoring of beneficiaries (ibid). Ministries of foreign affairs are usually the political bodies to receive the funds and then funnel them down to the NGOs operating in the respective EU country. The Danish MFA, as one of the most prominent donors funding several Danish NGOs humanitarian and human rights projects in Palestine (CARE Denmark, 2022; Oxfam Denmark, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d; Folketinget, 2021), had to comply with the EU requirements, as well. (Ritzau, 2023a; Council of the European Union, n.d). Therefore, the MFA sent out an inquiry to all Danish NGOs working for a humanitarian response in Gaza either directly or through partners, requiring them to undergo a

reassessment of their beneficiaries and partnerships in Gaza with the aim of identifying any affiliations with Hamas (Ritzau, 2023a; interviews). The inquiry can be found in Appendix 3. Although the humanitarian funding for Palestine was later reestablished upon satisfactory investigations, the sudden request for conducting screenings of Palestinian partners inflicted different problems in our interlocutors' work streams (Ritzau, 2023b). Alice describes that there are increasingly further questions from the donors about screening of the recipients of aid, which is rather realistically impossible to comply with but also "unfair" (Alice, p. 3) because it obscures their role as anti-discriminatory aid relief agents (Alice). Our interlocutor points to the grave humanitarian crisis on the ground in Gaza, which makes it a complicated task to identify who may or may not be directly or indirectly affiliated to Hamas. In addition, the question of aiding individuals regardless of their personal affiliations are one of the key principles to humanitarians (Barnett, 2005). Another interlocutor from Oxfam Denmark, John, articulated the same issue, referring to the request arrived by the Ministry of Foreign affairs, which is attached to the Appendix of this research. He states,

"We received a letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where they demanded us to give an account of our anti-terror funding policies and practices. And one of the questions they asked was, how are you ensuring that beneficiaries are screened in terms of these policies? And that just couldn't be done. And I think it goes against all humanitarian principles to ask a person if he or she is affiliated to Hamas before you hand out a water bottle, right? (...) I don't think it's even a genuine concern about anti-terror. It's Hamas fixation" (John, p. 77).

Stating that the due diligence requirement stems from a "Hamas fixation", exemplifies a general perception of them serving a political purpose and represents a concern about political interests infiltrating the work streams, forcing the NGO workers to succumb to the politics of the war, rather than focusing on providing humanitarian assistance. Barnett (2005) explains that states may impose requirements on humanitarian organizations in order to direct their work according to certain goals and values. The due diligence measure taken by the MFA can thus be understood as a result of the Danish government's attempt to prevent aid legitimizing or directly aiding Hamas, in order to preserve its integrity as a European state donor. Although, this "overcorrection", as John sees it, has implications to his professional duty of working according to the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. Carrying out this measure in practice would require implementing partners to directly ask beneficiaries about their political affiliations, which, according to John, is in direct

contradiction with the humanitarian principle of impartiality, and further imposes the risks of Oxfam being perceived as politically coloured by Palestinian partners and aid receivers.

The due diligence requirements can in itself be seen as a political practice carried out by the MFA, and as our interlocutors interpret them as an ideological statement of who is deserving of aid, it can be argued that it influences our interlocutors discourse to take on a more contesting character (interviews). In addition, they support that these particular requirements and their perceived ethical underpinnings are not a part of normative humanitarian practice. Therefore, there is a widespread perception among them that their humanitarian response in Gaza is subject to a disproportionate amount of political interference due to the tense and polarized political environment of the ongoing war, which is increasingly politicizing the humanitarian field (interviews). The political and humanitarian discourses at play in this instance, takes part in a discursive struggle of competing narratives, and the humanitarian principles serves as a discursive tool to win hegemony by promoting ideas of neutrality and impartiality in an increasingly polarized political reality (Fairclough, 1992). As suggested by Barnett (2005), classical humanitarianism was designed to counterbalance politics and provide aid relief without becoming entangled in political power struggles. The humanitarian principles were invented to ensure that aid was provided based on needs without political influence, whereas politics was seen as a "moral pollutant" (Barnett, 2005. p. 724) to aid work that would enforce discrimination in situations of life and death. It can thus be argued that our interlocutors are bringing back the principles in their discourses on the Gaza response, in an attempt to create a humanitarian space isolated from the political interference that they perceive as restrictive and obstructing their work.

Another challenge pertaining to the due diligence requirements from donors, is the fact that it has made the Danish NGOs appear politically coloured in the eyes of Global South affiliates and Palestinian partners on the ground, thus compromising the essence of the humanitarian principles that our interlocutors have built their professional identity and practice around (interviews). There is a shared experience among our interlocutors, that the screening assessments of their beneficiaries are jeopardizing their partner relations in order to meet donor requirements. Teresa expressed, *"While, of course, you have to respond. They're* (the MFA) *our donor. We have to have that dialogue with them. We have to kind of give them what they want. But at the same time, we also have to have a responsibility with our partner to let the ministry know that these questions are not necessarily received very well by the partners*

because they find it disrespectful or it incriminates them a bit, you know, to be asking all these questions." (Teresa, p. 106). The relational concern and moral reflections in her formulations indicate the difficult position these NGO workers are in, as they work in a humanitarian bureaucracy affected by the politics of the war, while attempting to take into account how the bureaucratic measures of due diligence is received by their Palestinian colleagues' and the underlying mistrust that these requirements indicate. The example also showcases how our interlocutors are bound by "resource dependence" (Barnett, 2005; p.728) through their pragmatic obligation to comply with donor requirements over other priorities, thus forcing them to take an unwanted action that may have severe implications on their operational collaborations in Gaza. In addition, to ensure that the MFA will continue to provide funding for their projects in Palestine, the NGO workers must ensure that their humanitarian action is perceived to be conducted according to the requirements of the donor which are usually politically and ideologically driven (ibid).

Additionally, Teresa perceives this imposed requirement as a game of power, where the organization have to comply, hence the utterance "*We have to kind of give them what they want"*, and she adds later that "*it's a bit of a balance to comply, but also to not panic about it and spend too much time on it, because it really just is a distraction from the real work*" (Teresa, p. 106). The adversity faced on the ground, that is known to our interviewee through the partners in Gaza, is more significant and thus should be the primary consideration as the NGO should prioritize the emergency needs, pertaining to prevention and rehabilitation from torture and provision of psychosocial support. In this way, the political requirements are being viewed as a distraction from the ultimate goal of delivering actual aid to the population.

Teresa's speech is loaded with elements of ethos (Fairclough, 1992; p.166-167) that build up her professional identity as a care provider. She diligently attempts to explain the navigation that NGO workers should go through by carefully balancing their mandates to align with the donor restrictions but at the same time angling for committing to the delivery of their mandate. When asked to provide an example that illustrates how this affects her work she elaborates "*it's very unethical for a mental health provider or anti-torture organization to be filtering who their beneficiaries are according to this list (...)You can't discriminate against who you help*." (Teresa, p. 107). She explains that especially for the documentation of torture, not only civilians but also combatants' cases must be recorded as the infliction torture is a crime regardless who has committed it (interview). Additionally, this increased scrutiny over

recipients of aid has led some of DIGNITY's partners from Palestine to withdraw from receiving funding as they consider the requested procedures highly unethical (interview). Despite the widespread perception that new humanitarian organizations will value funds over principles and mind their survival, it is observed that in this highly politicized donor intervention, the humanitarian ethics can precede, and this is an articulated reaction to the restrictions from the power holders.

6.6.2 Ethical dilemmas and faltering partnerships

Politicization of the humanitarian response in Gaza not only puts established partner and donor relations to the test, but it also challenges the understandings of our interlocutors in regards to the identity and legitimization of their own organizations. As John stated,

"I think we're at the crossroads as an organization. We can choose from this point on to take that battle or we can become more complacent. Maybe we're going to get a really big strategic partnership agreement next time around because we're not so critical. The reason I'm seeing those two scenarios is because it normally doesn't work if there is no direct correlation (to donors). Of course you can't be overly critical anymore of the Danish government and expect them to just still hand out the same amount of funds that they have done and passed out. I think that's a reality. But I think it's something that we need to consider if we want to be a movement that speaks truth to power and really works to combat the effects of inequality in all forms. I hope we will make the integrity choice" (John, p. 79). And when we asked him to elaborate on what is one stake for him and the organization, he answered, *"It is the counter argument of what happens to our organization next time we ask the government for 150 million, right? And that is really in itself a huge ethical dilemma. How vocal are we going to be in defense of what we believe is right?"* (John, p. 87).

John finds himself caught in an ethical dilemma of how he visions Oxfam proceed in their humanitarian efforts in Gaza. On the one hand, his discourse reveals a pragmatic view on the fundraising issue, by considering the consequences of Oxfam adopting a critical language and thus losing the chance of engaging in a strategic partnership, which is a prerequisite for gaining impact on the ground. On the other hand, his perception of the government being morally compromised by its one sided support for Israel, leaves our interlocutor in doubt of

whether succumbing to political interference will in fact weaken the NGO's position as a humanitarian organization by undermining the voices of their partners and beneficiaries on the ground. In the relational network of the humanitarian aid chain, the NGOs exist in between donors and beneficiaries (Foottit et. al, 2020; Barnett, 2005), which require a delicate discursive practice of counterweighting the use of words to satisfy both donors and partners while freely expressing issues of contesting nature. In this sense, our interlocutor's discourses represent an ethical internal struggle and an attempt to reproduce this discursive practice of being "in the middle", in order to secure their chances for future funding.

As the NGO employees attempt to balance their rhetoric, they are simultaneously considering how an unwanted precedence of politicization in humanitarianism is increasingly gaining ground in their field (interviews). Our interlocutors present a fear of the humanitarian principles being shattered in the case of Gaza, as it happened in the case of Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, where operating humanitarian agencies were funded by the warring governments who contributed to human suffering (Barnett, 2005). As a response to this concern, organizations with a human rights mandate have strengthened their focus on accountability. Hence, the Danish government is being put under increased scrutiny for its role in the war, as it is currently being sued by Amnesty International, Oxfam, ActionAid, and the Palestinian human rights organization Al-Haq, for continuing export of weapon parts used in F36 aircrafts operated by Israel. According to the organizations, there is a high risk that Danish weapon components are being used to commit crimes against civilians in Gaza (Amnesty International Denmark, 2024b). This means that Denmark may be violating international rules for arms trade, contributing to violations of international humanitarian law, as well as enabling the commitment of war crimes "and a plausible genocide" (ibid). The case is part of a principled discussion that is currently taking place within humanitarian aid and human rights organizations of whether Western democracies, such as Denmark, will adhere to their international obligations and restore faith in the rule-based world order (Amnesty International Denmark, 2023). As the organizations represented in this research stated in a joint op-ed on the 12th of December, *"If Denmark perceives itself as a pioneering country that stands up for human rights, international law, and democracy, we cannot be selective about when and how effectively we defend these values. Instead, we should at all times, and regardless of our own interests and alliances, speak out and prioritize human life above all else, whether it is close to or far from Denmark." (ibid)*. In the same vein, our interlocutors receive testimonies and reports from their colleagues operating in Gaza, who are affected by

the war on the same terms as any other Gazan and express a *"loss of any kind of faith in the international community"* (John, p. 72). On the ground in Gaza, Oxfam's implementing partners, who are responsible for the distribution of aid, are increasingly being perceived as being complicit in the suffering by beneficiaries. As John further expressed,

"You might think that Oxfam shows up with an aid truck and we are sort of like heralded as sort of saviors or people are very grateful about the humanitarian aid that we've been delivering. But it's the opposite. I mean, we are still just representatives of the outside. The outside that allows this to happen to them. So there's a complete lack of trust from the beneficiaries. Because also when you show up with a truck with water bottles, for people that are stepping on each other and people are getting hurt. And it's the scenes of utter chaos. So there's, even in terms of the people delivering aid, they are just seen as, that they have betrayed them, betrayed some kind of the idea of humanity in Gaza." (John, p. 72).

In practice, this relational mistrust that exists between beneficiaries, partners, and country offices comes to expression by Palestinian partners resigning from collaborations or colleagues expressing dissatisfaction with the nature of the Gaza response through internal open letters to their superiors (John). For instance, a significant controversy has emerged within the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) over the last months, where employees and volunteers of the organization anonymously expressed that the management has been silent in addressing the humanitarian disaster in Gaza, despite pressure from the staff. Importantly, some employees were threatened with dismissals in case of public criticism (Globalnyt, 2023). Lastly, they mentioned that in other conflicts such as Sudan, Ethiopia or Ukraine, the leadership took a public critical position, while in the case of Gaza the management is perceived by DRC employees to follow the Danish state's policy agenda. Therefore, this political influence results in the lack of addressing humanitarian adversity on the ground (ibid).

6.6.3 The comparison with the case of Ukraine

Similarly, in each of our conducted interviews, a repeated topic among our interlocutors is their experience of a difference in the political attention given to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza versus in Ukraine. One example is our interlocutor Alice from CARE Egypt expressing,

"You think about the Ukraine response, it was politicized, right? But it was politicized in favor of protecting the lives of civilians. So essentially there were no outcries from the humanitarian community that this is such a politicized conflict. This time it's politicized that it's impacting pressure and advocacy on the Israeli government to address the multiple layers of challenges I've explained. It's politicized that you're unable and sometimes unwilling to fundraise for humanitarian assistance. It's politicized that as a humanitarian system. We have continuously obstructed access of humanitarian assistance to the people being shelled on a daily basis." (Alice, p. 13)

According to political scientific institutes, comparisons are inevitable due to the significance in the two wars' influence on international security, their instrumentalization of history, and the central role of the US as the primary security provider and arms supplier for Ukraine and Israel (Raine, 2024; Finaud, 2024). Speaking from the logics of resilience humanitarianism, Alice expressed a profound understanding of politics being an inherited part of humanitarian work, stating that all humanitarian crises are subject to interference by political actors (Hilhorst, 2018). Despite this awareness, she points to an aggravation of politicization when it comes to the crisis in Gaza, which pertains to the specific political interference that is felt among humanitarians, characterized by a political unwillingness to provide funding, restrictions on advocacy messages protecting the Israeli government, and inadequate political pressure to seize the blocking of humanitarian access on the ground (Alice). In order to stress the distinctiveness of her experience, she builds her discourse upon a comparison between the political treatment of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and in Ukraine. The comparison to Ukraine works as a form of intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992) within the discourse of our interlocutors, who draw on their previous experiences in their professional roles, as their organizations also run humanitarian responses in Ukraine. According to Alice, the main difference lies in the political discourses that are currently dominating the two crises, and serves to problematize politicization and its negative consequences for civilians. Ukraine stands as an example of how NGO workers do not inherently resist politicization, if political interference proves to be beneficial to their work streams and humanitarian goals. Evidently, politicization is not problematic by nature, but it is the perceived character of the politicization in question that is problematized by our interlocutors. Hence, their common use of Ukraine as an example for comparison works to underline an inconsistency in political effort and funding opportunities pertaining to the response in Gaza, thus building their

discourse upon notions of an experienced injustice taking place within the politicization of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

The comparison with Ukraine reveals a significant ongoing discursive negotiation about what humanitarian assistance means. For our interlocutors, humanitarian work is largely constructed upon the universal humanitarian principles that is applied in all stages of aid delivery. As they experience a blockade of their operational work on the ground as well as a significant political attention to their work streams in Gaza as in opposition to their response efforts in Ukraine, the universality of humanitarian work becomes questionable. By using the wording "double standards" (interviews) to describe this phenomenon, they adopt a contesting nature to their discourse, framing the politicization as in opposition to moral universalism. The particular relevance of word meaning in the use of *double standards* are highly linked to the comparison with Ukraine, as the term is given its meaning through the experienced difference in the political treatments of the two humanitarian crises (Fairclough, 1992). In practice, the experience of double standards is highly compromising the ethical standards of universalism that the NGO workers try to uphold in their professional role. As Nadia, *"if it's okay for me to speak about what is happening in Ukraine but not okay to speak about what is happening in Congo or in Sudan or in Palestine or in Myanmar, then I don't want to be working here."* (Nadia, p. 62).

Another aspect of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza that has triggered experiences of "double standards" and "dehumanization" is the way states and international institutions have been handling the crisis, and what academic and public discourses that have been deemed politically tolerable. Clara from Oxfam Denmark states,

"where this crisis is very, very different, is where you totally see double standards. You've seen them before, but you're seeing them again. You have the vetoing in the UN Security Council, where all countries agree on something, and then you have the US and the UK following different kind of perspectives, so this is repeated. You have a very divided public opinion, you have universities and students being muzzled and shut up, and if you speak on one side, you're anti-Semitic. In demonstrations, if you say from the river to the sea, it's very divisive in the public's minds. But this one the world cares about, also because of the history of the Second World War and the Holocaust of course strongly affects Europe and the West, and so there's a difference, and how of course we're approaching it and it's very sensitive,

also, to speak about. If you spoke about the scale of displacement, you can easily speak about Syria with no problem, so there's a lot of hypocrisy, and double standards, and a complete dehumanization of people." (Clara, p. 22).

What is significantly different in the case of Gaza according to Clara, is a discrepancy in the international response to the crisis compared to the attention given to other crises. She particularly points to the role of influential nations like the US and the UK, and argues that these countries adopt positions that diverge from the consensus of the broader international community, a divergence most clearly demonstrated by their repeated use of vetoes in the UN Security Council. This repattern suggests a lack of cohesion in addressing humanitarian crises, which, according to Clara, contributes to a sense of frustration with the inconsistent application of international norms and unequal treatment in global governance. Her perception highlights the structural limitations of international institutions in dealing with conflicts where geopolitical interests play a decisive role, thus enforcing perceptions of selective humanitarianism among our interlocutors. Additionally, Clara emphasizes the polarized nature of public opinion, and expresses concern about the suppression of free speech, where use of language in support of Palestinians may lead to accusations of anti-Semitism. According to her, use of language has become a point of contention in public debates, which arguably turns the humanitarian crisis into a sociopolitical battleground, where discourse is being censored or manipulated due to different interpretations.

6.6.4 Contesting the political discourse in Denmark

The discourse of our interlocutors does not exist in isolation but is developed and reproduced in relation to other competing discourses (Fairclough, 1992). The political and humanitarian no longer discursively exist in opposition, but share points of intersection in wording and meanings (Barnett, 2005). As our interlocutors pose criticism to the position of the Danish MFA and the unequal treatment in global humanitarian crises among major states in international institutions, it is relevant to consider their discourse as functioning in correlation to the contemporary political discourse on the crisis in Gaza.

The NGOs stated in the previously mentioned op-ed published in December 2023, that "While the Danish government has maintained Israel's right to defend itself, it has not equally

distanced itself from the country's military actions in the Gaza Strip, which have resulted in a widespread humanitarian catastrophe." (Amnesty International Denmark, 2023), showcasing a perception among NGO workers that the Danish government is favoring one side in the war, and failing to adequately contest Israel's military actions and address the humanitarian consequences in Gaza. (interviews). We argue that there exists a profound discrepancy in how the war is perceived by the Danish state and the organizations respectively, which influence the discourse among the NGO workers who primarily work for the population in Gaza. As an example, three of our interlocutors speak of a dehumanization of the Gazan population that is experienced to be derived from politicization (Clara, Kyla, Alice). Alice states,

"In the Gaza situation, I think this is the first time that we're seeing a humanitarian crisis being so politicized that it essentially dehumanizes the people that ought to receive the assistance. And hence, would have implications on the level of funding, on the advocacy, on the pressure that would be exerted on Israel as basically a carrier of violence now on civilians." (Alice, p. 6).

By using the word *dehumanizing*, our interlocutor underlines a moral disapproval of the politicization that has undergone in the case of Gaza, and invites the audience to understand the issue through an ethical lens, insinuating dichotomies of the humane and inhumane (Fairclough, 1992). Another notable discursive element is the framing of Israel as *"a carrier of violence"*. The example shows that a part of the discursive practice among our interlocutors revolves around negotiating perceptions of who is the victim and who is the perpetrator. The same tendency is seen in the political discourse, as in the instance where the Danish Prime Minister decided to lay flowers at the Israeli Embassy in Denmark initially after the attack on 7th of October. This social practice was followed by a question from a journalist, asking Mette Frederiksen if she intended to do a similar gesture in solidarity with the Palestinian civilians killed as a result of Israel's military response. The Prime Minister answered the journalist, stating that *"I must admit, I think you're contributing to relativizing something that is not comparable. It is Hamas – a terrorist organization – that is attacking a democratic country, Israel. (...) Israel has the right to defend itself, and that will require some casualties"* (Schuldt, L. K., 2023). In a question centered on her stance on the situation for civilians in Gaza, the Prime Minister also turns to framing of victim and perpetrator imagery, by drawing on discursive oppositions of terrorism versus democracy framing Israel as the only victim and a rights holder, whereas Palestinian civilians are reduced to "some

casualties". It can be argued that our interlocutors' discourse is contesting the political discourse, in order to change the political narrative on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, by representing a counter-narrative that aims at challenging knowledge claims and framings. The hegemonic struggle for defining victims and perpetrators has thus become a central marker in the battle for dominating the public debate. The NGO workers, perceiving political actors as biased in their support to Israel, who they view as the aggressor in the conflict, emphasize the injustice faced by Palestinian civilians in their discourse. Their aim is to push for accountability regarding the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, particularly in light of the Danish government's limited efforts to hold Israel responsible for its actions (interviews). By foregrounding perceived inequities and injustice, they seek to bring greater attention to the need for political and legal consequences..

The experience of operating with significantly different perceptions of the humanitarian makes our interlocutors question and challenge the political and ethical values in the MFA's conduct (Interviews), which complicates the relations between the NGO workers and their networks, as they are dependent on maintaining a healthy relationship with donors and political actors to ensure smooth workstreams and efficient humanitarian work (Barnett, 2005). Discursive competition between the political and the humanitarian is not an isolated case (Stein, 2005; Dany, 2015), but the experienced magnitude of politicization in the case of Gaza has created a sense of relativity, and even complete irrelevance, around the humanitarian principles, rules of war and international human rights law among the NGO workers (interviews, Redbarnet.dk, 2024). As the NGOs expressed in an open letter to the Danish Prime Minister in May 2024, *"As the EU's foreign affairs chief has pointed out, the Gaza Strip has become the world's largest cemetery – for the many killed, but also for important principles of international humanitarian law. Right now, the Geneva and Hague Conventions, which exist to ensure basic humanity in wars, seem useless."* (Redbarnet.dk, 2024). This tension has strengthened the experiences of injustice among our interlocutors and inevitably contributed to shape their discourses when speaking of their humanitarian response in Gaza. It can be argued that our interlocutor's discourse is a means of working against a seemingly excavation of the humanitarian principles and international law as a consequence of heavy politicization, by reminding us of their original meaning and contemporary relevance.

7. Reflective evaluation of our Analysis

In this chapter we intend to reflect upon our analytical findings on the discourses of the NGO workers, by putting their discourses into perspective in relation to the ideologies they hold and the societal change they aim at creating.

7.1 Differing ideologies and the conflict between them

Our analysis reveals how NGO workers construct their discourse based on humanitarian principles - a key component of the humanitarian identity - to contest the influence of politics on the humanitarian response in Gaza.

With the exception of one, all informants acknowledge, that it is impossible to fully separate humanitarianism and politics; John acknowledges that Oxfam is at crossroads as an organization as of whether to prioritize donor relations over local partnerships in situations where clashing political values are prominent, while Jennie from MSF strongly denies that their work involves political engagement. Nevertheless, the common ground in their discourses is the universality of humanitarian principles, which is used to contest the experienced political influence and is rife with ideological elements. Relying on the principles to pose criticism to the challenges and obstacles they have faced in their humanitarian response in Gaza is part of everyday "common sense" utterances (Fairclough; 1992) among our informants. The normative elements in their criticism hold particular ideological meanings of justice and fairness, and are articulated as a disapproval of Danish and Israeli political interference. In this sense, the humanitarian principles are central for our interlocutors' discourses, as they perceive the principles as a space where justice and fairness, in their universal meaning, is preserved. We argue that the question of universality in the case of Gaza poses an issue of clashes between the value systems and perceptions of the crisis among the NGO workers, the Danish MFA, and Israel respectively. Our informants stress the need to reinforce and protect the core values of humanitarianism, while Israeli and Danish politics pose restrictions in aid delivery and funding, which have directly affected the ability of humanitarian objectives within the NGOs. We argue that these conflicting perceptions take place, because the crisis in Gaza, according to our interlocutors, is first and foremost a *humanitarian* one, that requires classical humanitarian efforts. As per Hilhorst (2018), the

two humanitarian paradigms - classical and new humanitarianism - coexist in practice with the classical humanitarian approach gaining momentum in complex humanitarian situations, such as in our case study. The act of emphasizing the need for upholding the principled approach signifies that the challenges faced in the case of Gaza are of paramount complexity leading to predicaments in aid delivery.

On the contrary, we argue that the Israeli and Danish government's perceptions of the crisis are dominated by security concerns, in which the universality of the humanitarian principles is not as important. Perceiving the humanitarian crisis within the framework of securitization arguably places the needs of Palestinians as a secondary issue and the humanitarian crisis as a consequence of a security threat, rather than as a situation requiring immediate response. The policies that are born out of this perception, such as the blockade of aid and restrictions on aid funding, can thus be more easily justified even though they exacerbate suffering. In addition, instead of being perceived as a people suffering from a humanitarian crisis, they may be viewed collectively as dangerous or as associated with violent groups like Hamas. In the midst of this clash of perceptions, our interlocutors experience a pronounced politicization in their humanitarian response, where access into Gaza is being blocked and aid is militarized. Furthermore, the NGO workers express concern of how critical they are allowed to be in their criticism of Israeli and Danish politics, and how supportive they can be of the people in Gaza, without risking being perceived as sympathizers of Hamas. Simultaneously, the NGO workers observe how the political affiliation of the "giver" begins to matter in Gaza, where aid workers are increasingly perceived as complicit in the humanitarian crisis and "guilty by association" among local partners and beneficiaries who mention that they feel betrayed by the West in terms of addressing and acting on the dire humanitarian needs on the ground (Donini, 2012. p. 185; Interviews). We argue that these experiences have influenced the NGO workers to adopt contesting discourses that questions Israel's intentions and Danish political involvement. In this sense, as a response to the politicized nature of the crisis, we argue that our informants discourse takes shape not only of humanitarian character, but is in fact highly political.

7.2 Humanitarian actors' realization of their political role

As they develop a more critical discourse to the MFA and the Israeli government, we propose that the NGO workers gradually take shape as more political actors than they seem to admit.

According to Janice Stein (2005), humanitarian organizations seem to desperately hold on to ideas of humanitarian principles as outdated domains, since the organizations are struggling to define themselves in a new era, where they are much more vulnerable to political influence. While Barnett (2005) supports this line, arguing that politicization and institutionalization of humanitarian organizations bring undesirable consequences to the ethics and self-understanding of humanitarians, Stein believes that this development has created a momentum for humanitarians to mature and redefine themselves within an expanding and inescapable politicization of the field. But only recently has the humanitarian community started to seriously realize and reflect on their political roles and responsibilities; as Stein states; "Bearing witness is, at its essence, a deeply political act that shapes the reality of those who tell the story" (2005. P. 741). As the NGO workers likewise bear witness to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, they find themselves in professional and organizational dilemmas of how to address the implications of the crisis, which is inherently a political act, without overstepping mandated red lines, not complying with donor requirements, and risking being excluded in future funding opportunities but at the same time conform to their professional values, principles and ethics. In this balancing act, we argue that they turn to the humanitarian principles as a "safe space" in which they are able to call for political change without adopting a pure political discourse that becomes detached from the humanitarian implications they face. This showcases that humanitarians return to the "essence of humanitarian principles and values" (Stein, p. 742), as their way to influence the political agenda, given the fact that they are not entitled to adopt a purely political discursive repertoire in their professional roles. In this sense, humanitarians are in a state of moral perplexity when it comes to the case of Gaza.

The political role of our interlocutors take shape through different organizational practices, as they carefully thread into political discussions and even taking political action. Most pronounced is the example of Oxfam partaking in a lawsuit against the Danish state for the continued weapon exports to Israel, thus in fact suing its own biggest donor - namely the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A more temperate example is MSF adopting a critical discourse towards Israel, despite claims of apolitical conduct. Certainly, the initiative of several NGOs to create a joint working group on their Gaza response, is an act where humanitarians request to influence the dominant political agenda by pushing for dialogue with the MFA and negotiating their space for gaining political influence. In this sense, the NGO workers can no longer ignore the fact that they possess and exert power, even though

major states, donors, mandates, and principles shape their trajectories. The question is how far the NGO workers and their organizations dare to go in terms of the financial and organizational consequences they risk, when adopting critical discourses in highly contested humanitarian crisis such as the one in Gaza, as well as the braveness and internal reforms it requires for an organization to redefine its mandate in order to embrace their expanding responsibilities as political powers (Stein, 2005).

7.3 Decolonization as Political Contestation in Humanitarian Thought

As humanitarians become more politically involved, another relevant reflection pertains to the nature of their political contestation and the political values that the NGO workers adopt and express through the ideologies in their discourses. It is evident that our interlocutors' discourses are first and foremost rooted in a conscious disassociation to the way that the international community as a whole has responded to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, proving unable to contain Israel's military actions with the international institutions and legal provisions currently available. We argue that our interlocutors' discourses is a reaction to the international community's seemingly insufficiency and lack of enforcement power, which has come to underline the decisive power of the US in the UN system, and at the same time revealed an inability to provide protection for less powerful countries and populations. In this sense, we argue that the NGO workers' discourses challenge international power dynamics and the global world order as such. Our interlocutors' discourses are highly centered around notions of injustice that are expressed through a profound perception of principled humanitarian work and the ruled-based world order being put at risk in the case of Gaza. According to them, Israel's ability to act autocratically despite pressure from the UN and increased global isolation has currently left a question mark at the functionality of the UN institutions, as member countries' sanctions seem to be imposed not based on the character of actions but on who executes them. As an example, Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered global condemnation and sanctioning, whereas Israel's disproportionate response in Gaza and expanding aggressions into Lebanon and Syria are left with no consequences. This exemplifies the perceived selective application of global sanctions and pressures, questioning whether they are truly based on principles of justice and international law or are instead shaped by political alliances and power dynamics. And the current developments do not go unnoticed among powerful actors (Scriver, 2024). China and Russia are closely following the

international community's response to Israel's aggressions and the absence of international sanctions, as the lack of consequences can be leveraged to attempt their own goals of dominating and annexing East European countries and Taiwan respectively (ibid). Working to mitigate that the humanitarian principles become irrelevant to humanitarian work, and that international law and institutions become undermined by powerful states and left dysfunctional, we argue that humanitarian organizations are increasingly involving themselves in issues of political injustice. The increasing effort that is put into accountability initiatives is a practice that is developed as the discourse among humanitarians are becoming of more political contesting nature in defense of the humanitarian principles and international law. We argue that accountability is becoming a key tool for humanitarians to scrutinize political actors and thus pushing to change the status quo.

The question of unequal distribution of power within international institutions such as the UN Security Council is a question of colonial heritage and depicts the global world as it looked at the time of the Cold War (Harsant, 2016). Contesting the efficiency and representation in the current UN system is therefore also a confrontation of unjust power dynamics that has roots in colonialism. Therefore, we argue that the dominating ideology ingrained in the NGO workers' discourses and their practices are largely connected to a decolonial approach encompassing justice and agency to marginalized groups, that is characterizing humanitarian organizations' current organizational and political development. As the humanitarian principles theoretically serve as a leverage to safeguard humanitarian work from political influence (Weiss, 1999), they have proven insufficient to address the humanitarian predicament in the case of Gaza. Therefore, we argue that the NGO workers find alternative ways to challenge the current power dynamics, by articulating issues of dehumanization, double standards, and Western supremacy, thus deploying decolonial ideological values in their discourses. This discursive struggle is exercised and practiced through accountability measures, as a means to challenge political power holders such as the MFA and Israel, thus attempting to redistribute power.

Humanitarian workers are not only seeking systemic and political change in the power balance within international institutions, but their own organizations are also taking measures to decolonize the NGO sector. A part of this effort is to foreground voices and realities in the Global South, while Global North affiliates ought to become less dominating in defining projects and executing project implementation, posing the localisation agenda as a priority, a

highly studied topic in academia (Barakat and Milton, 2020, Krantz and Gustafsson, 2021; Pincock et al, 2021). Our interlocutors' humanitarian response in Gaza is highly informed by Palestinian partner organizations and the affiliates in Egypt, Jordan and Palestine, who identify the needs and the beneficiaries on the ground. The idea of relying on Palestinian and regional voices in the Danish affiliates in itself holds political and decolonial ideological value.

As Palestinian and regional perceptions of the crisis evidently channel into the common discourse of our interlocutors, it may be assumed that our interlocutors' discourses are uncritically embedded in the politics currently dominating in the Gaza war, by adopting perceptions that are proclaimed by Hamas. Although, such an assumption rips our interlocutors for any present nuances and individual reservations, and also takes for granted that Palestinians have diverse political views on armed groups such as Hamas. On the contrary, we suggest that our interlocutors' discourses are embedded in ideas of a liberal political belief system within humanitarianism, where current global power hierarchies in decision-making processes between Global North and Global South actors should be altered or flattened. In this sense, our interlocutors deem that the local and regional voices are the most capable of defining their own needs and the most qualified to report on the events on the ground as experts on the local context, as well as undeserving of being subjected to political suspicion.

As de-colonization and localization are cementing as core values in modern humanitarian NGOs today, it requires an unprecedented political self-examination of scope and values, as well as consistency from the Danish affiliates to stay true to these values when the MFA’s and Israel’s interests and perceptions pose operational and ethical obstacles for humanitarians to fulfill their goals. A central question for future research is how humanitarian NGOs will leverage their political voice and define their political values, if these values and their perceptions on crisis don’t reflect those of their donors, governments, and the dominant global world order as a whole (Stein, 2005).

8. Conclusion

Israel's full blockade of the Gaza Strip in the backdrop of Hamas' attack on the 7th of October 2023 caused immense operational difficulties for NGO workers aiming to deliver aid in Gaza. Increased scrutiny from their institutional donor, Denmark's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, concerning their collaborations with Palestinian organizations and aid recipients as well as hindrance in access and intensification of due diligence requirements, made the humanitarian endeavor in Gaza an extremely hard issue to tackle.

The research examines how humanitarian NGO workers in Denmark, along with regional affiliates in Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine shape their discourse amid increased political interference in their work. To better understand the current humanitarian predicament in Gaza and investigate NGO workers' discourse, we posed the following research question: *How do NGO workers in Denmark and their global affiliates shape their discourse on the humanitarian response in the 2023 Gaza crisis in the light of the challenges they face to their efforts?* and *How does interference by political actors influence their discourse?* For the examination of this research question, we used Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis and specifically the three dimensional model - text, discursive practice and social practice - as a methodological approach to understand and analyze how discourse shapes social practices and expresses ideological positions.

Our findings highlight the complex intersection between humanitarianism and politics in the context of Gaza. NGO workers, though dedicated to upholding humanitarian principles, increasingly confront the political nature of their work. While they strive to maintain a principled approach to their response in Gaza, the influence of Israeli and Danish policies underscore the difficulties in separating humanitarianism from political agendas and makes the role of the principles of impartiality and neutrality increasingly blurred. We argue that the NGO workers are engaging in a careful discursive strategy, pushing the boundaries of criticism towards Israel and the Danish government while attempting to reshape dominant political narratives without jeopardizing their financial stability. As access to Gaza becomes increasingly difficult, and the humanitarian crisis worsens, NGO workers feel compelled to address the actors they hold responsible for these developments. In the case of Gaza, humanitarian organizations have begun to leverage their dual roles as humanitarian and political actors, voicing concerns specifically aimed at Israel and third-party states like

Denmark. Their ethical obligations, particularly regarding their professional identities and perceived responsibilities towards Gaza's population, have manifested in accountability efforts towards political actors involved - an unconventional but increasingly prominent aspect of humanitarian work responding to the irreparable destruction suffered by Gaza's population.

The discourse they develop reflects an expanding scope of their political role, revealing ideological tensions tied to justice, fairness, and decolonization in opposition to perceived Western double standards in international politics, particularly in comparison to other contemporary crises. The politicization of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza challenges NGOs to navigate ethical dilemmas and contest political structures while staying true to their core values. The discourses of our interlocutors reflect a shift towards elevating local voices and resisting current power dynamics within international institutions such as the UN. This shift is part of a larger ideological evolution, as NGOs grapple with how to define their responsibilities in an increasingly politicized world. By embracing local perspectives, NGOs challenge traditional power hierarchies, pushing for a more equitable distribution of decision-making power between Global North and Global South actors.

The thesis poses critical questions for the future of humanitarian organizations. As they face mounting political pressure and growing involvement in operations and advocacy, NGOs must carefully balance their responsibilities with the practical realities of donor relationships and geopolitical constraints. This evolving role demands not only internal organizational reform but also a broader rethinking of the place of humanitarianism in an interconnected, politically charged world. Future research should explore how these tensions shape the sector's trajectories, especially as humanitarians continue to navigate the delicate balance between humanitarian principles and political engagement in crises like Gaza. Additionally, researchers may investigate how humanitarians perceive the scope of their political role, and to which extent their organizations are willing or prepared to embrace and tackle the increasing politicization of humanitarian work such as in the case of Gaza.

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