

COMMENT

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Humanitarianism under cognitive attack: narrative delegitimation in the information environment

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Abstract

Humanitarianism is increasingly portrayed as being “under attack”, a diagnosis most commonly linked to violations of international humanitarian law, geopolitical obstruction, and direct violence against aid workers. While these accounts remain indispensable, they are increasingly insufficient to explain the structural erosion of humanitarian legitimacy. This commentary privileges an additional lens: cognitive warfare. Humanitarianism is increasingly targeted by coordinated cognitive attacks operating in the information environment, pursuing narrative delegitimation, reputational undermining, and trust erosion, that fragment the shared sensemaking through which humanitarian claims to neutrality and impartiality are socially recognized. The central mechanism is not direct coercion but strategic manipulation of perceptions and credibility.

International humanitarian organizations have become cognitive targets in contemporary conflicts, where neutrality no longer reliably functions as a protective principle but is frequently reinterpreted as bias or complicity. These dynamics are amplified by structural vulnerabilities: bureaucratic fragmentation, donor concentration, and funding asymmetries that create cognitive openings hostile narratives exploit, particularly within a geopolitical context of resurgent power politics and declining normative constraints.

Local humanitarian actors increasingly serve as cognitive intermediaries, absorbing reputational risk without commensurate resources, raising the question of whether localization may also shift cognitive vulnerability onto those least equipped to withstand it. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, this framing reinterprets the crisis as a dual process: internal fragility coupled with external delegitimation, situated within the broader erosion of Western-led humanitarian authority. The future of humanitarianism may depend less on institutional survival than on preserving shared moral and cognitive authority in an increasingly contested information environment.

Keywords Cognitive warfare, Humanitarian legitimacy, Disinformation, Propaganda, Information integrity, Narrative delegitimation, Humanitarian assistance

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Introduction

Humanitarianism is increasingly described as ineffective, politicized, biased, or obsolete. These claims circulate across diplomatic discourse, policy debates, digital media, and conflict environments, portraying humanitarian actors as illegitimate witnesses or unwanted constraints (Beasley 2025). The erosion of trust has tangible consequences: restricted access, heightened security risks, and diminished political protection for humanitarian norms and institutions.

Explanations for this crisis diverge. One emphasizes external delegitimation (narrative contestation, reputational attacks/framing, and information manipulation/disinformation), which, despite a growing number of documented cases, has seen few systematic studies in the humanitarian sector and thus remains under-theorized as a driver of systemic crisis. Other focus on internal dynamics: bureaucratic inefficiencies, donor dependence, fragmented coordination, and a growing disconnect between humanitarian organizations and the political contexts in which they operate (Nocita 2019).

This commentary argues that these explanations are analytically interconnected. Processes of delegitimation gain force because internal fragilities render humanitarian action cognitively and politically vulnerable. At the same time, the intensity and effects of delegitimation cannot be understood without situating them within a broader transformation of the international system, marked by the return of realist political narratives, the erosion of the post-Cold War global order, and the absence of a viable multilateral humanitarian alternative to Western disengagement. What is at stake extends beyond reputation or funding to the system's operational legitimacy, it involves the very acceptance and access that underpin humanitarian presence and coordinated response. We adopt cognitive warfare as our analytical lens because, in NATO's conceptualization, cognition becomes the terrain of competition itself: the aim is to shape perceptions and decision-making in pursuit of cognitive advantage through coordinated activities across the continuum of competition (Blatny and Søndergaard 2025), consistent with Clausewitz's view of war as the continuation of politics by other means. Applied to humanitarian action, this shifts attention from communication alone to legitimacy itself as the strategic target. Delegitimation is therefore analysed not as incidental criticism but as a strategic instrument through which political objectives are pursued by shaping perceptions, trust, and legitimacy rather than through physical force.

Cognitive delegitimation: Weaponizing real weaknesses and internal fragilities

Within this framework, we conceptualize cognitive delegitimation as a cognitive warfare tool: the strategic exploitation and amplification of vulnerabilities within the humanitarian system to weaken its credibility, relevance, or perceived neutrality in pursuit of political objectives that extend beyond the humanitarian sector itself. These attacks operate through narratives rather than force, portraying humanitarian action as partial, inefficient, or ideologically driven.

Recurring frames depict humanitarian organizations as extensions of Western political influence, as bureaucratic and detached from local realities, or as selectively principled moral actors (Jayawickrama 2018). In some contexts, they are cast as obstacles to sovereignty or as shields behind which political or military agendas are pursued. These narratives circulate across diplomatic rhetoric, domestic debates, and digital platforms, producing a diffuse but persistent environment of suspicion (Krishnan 2025).

Importantly, these representations serve concrete political purposes. States and armed actors in conflict zones exploit perceptions of illegitimacy to justify restricting access, diminishing scrutiny of violations, and evading accountability (Grace 2025). For major donor states, humanitarian action increasingly becomes entangled in domestic political debates. Even as governments continue to provide substantial funding, political actors may deploy or tolerate narratives portraying humanitarian action as inefficient or biased to support electoral agendas or broader geopolitical objectives (Seven 2024). By reframing humanitarian presence as dispensable or obstructive, delegitimation functions as a deliberate tool of power politics rather than a neutral critique.

Cognitive delegitimation does not invent weaknesses; it weaponizes preexisting structural vulnerabilities. It is crucial to note that humanitarian principles themselves are not usually the primary targets, but rather the institutions and actors through which they are enacted. In this regard, over recent decades, humanitarian action has become increasingly bureaucratized, risk-averse, and donor-driven (Pearson 2025). Humanitarian international organizations are often characterized by slow decision-making, predominantly upward-facing accountability mechanisms, and engagement with affected populations is mediated through standardized procedures rather than sustained political dialogue.

Fragmentation compounds these challenges: competition for funding, overlapping mandates, and coordination failures undermine coherence and reinforce perceptions of inefficiency. Professionalization has sometimes produced a technocratic self-understanding that struggles

to respond to critiques rooted in power relations rather than operational performance (Wando 2025).

These inefficiencies become narrative resources. Delayed responses are interpreted as confirmation of operational irrelevance, flawed interventions as proof of hidden agendas, and governance failures as evidence of systemic decay. Internal fragilities thus lower the threshold at which criticism turns into delegitimation, transforming reform debates into existential challenges.

At the same time, not all criticism constitutes a cognitive attack. Humanitarian organizations and aid are politicized in practice, and many critiques accurately reflect donor dependencies, power asymmetries, or operational shortcomings (Elnakib et al. 2024). Practices such as whistleblowing or digitally mediated dissent may challenge humanitarian institutions precisely to defend humanitarian norms and principles. Their purpose is to expose wrongdoings in order to seek greater transparency and hold institutions accountable to those principles, not to invalidate them (Caycedo Casallas, 2019). The difference lies in strategic amplification: when empirically grounded critiques aim to recalibrate institutions toward their stated principles, it functions as normative correction; but when they are reframed to justify restrictions, evade accountability, or render norms expendable, politicization becomes a tool of delegitimation rather than an observation.

The realist turn and the end of Western humanitarian dominance

The current wave of delegitimation cannot be separated from broader transformations in the international system. Realist political narratives emphasizing sovereignty, strategic competition, and selective multilateralism are increasingly influential. Major powers pursue international institutions instrumentally, bypassing them when inconvenient (Rekhi 2025).

In this context, humanitarian norms impose limits on the conduct of war, on scrutiny, and on expectations of accountability (Yeola 2025). For actors seeking unconstrained action, these limits are costly, and delegitimizing humanitarianism becomes a rational political strategy rather than an ideological deviation.

International organizations are central to this dynamic. Humanitarian legitimacy is intertwined with multilateral institutions; as these structures are politicized, hollowed out, or bypassed, norms lose their scaffolding. This is compounded by a structural asymmetry: the humanitarian system remains overwhelmingly financed by Western donors while operating increasingly in non-Western spheres of influence. China and Russia, despite their rising global influence, have not materially or institutionally substituted Western financial and normative support, and their engagement remains selective and

sovereignty-based (Root 2025). This erosion is not uniform: government bilateral and multilateral aid budgets have contracted sharply, while several large INGOs and movement actors have so far remained financially resilient. Yet financial resilience should not be mistaken for cognitive resilience. Reputational and legitimacy-related threats may develop long before they become visible in financial indicators, suggesting that delegitimation can operate on a longer time horizon than funding data alone captures. The result is not simply a budgetary shortfall but an existential crisis. The humanitarian system was built around Western normative leadership and financial dominance; as that dominance recedes without a genuinely multilateral alternative emerging, cognitive delegitimation converges with material decline, reinforcing perceptions of obsolescence and accelerating institutional erosion.

Conclusion: A co-constitutive crisis at a strategic inflection point

Framing the crisis of humanitarianism as either externally imposed or internally generated obscures its true nature. Internal inefficiencies create cognitive openings; external attacks exploit them; and geopolitical shifts provide incentives for these processes.

Humanitarianism is neither delegitimized solely because it is weak, nor weak solely because it is delegitimized. Weakness and attack reinforce one another in a global system that no longer sustains Western-led humanitarianism and has yet to produce a viable alternative.

Recognizing this co-constitutive dynamic allows for a more nuanced perspective: humanitarian actors are not passive victims, nor should they shoulder blame that is detached from political and structural realities. The future of humanitarianism will be shaped not only by operational reforms or narrative defenses but by its ability to reconstitute legitimacy in a world no longer organized around Western-dominated assumptions. The perspective advanced here also opens a broader research agenda on the differential vulnerability of humanitarian actors, organizational responses to delegitimizing narratives, and the geopolitics of humanitarian legitimacy. Whether the system adapts or fragments further depends on its capacity to confront power politics, structural asymmetries, and internal contradictions with equal clarity.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to colleagues and mentors whose discussions, critiques, and intellectual engagement contributed to refining the arguments presented in this commentary.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the conceptual development of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

Not applicable.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations**UN Strategic Relevance**

This study contributes to the advancement of UN SDG 16 - Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, by strengthening cognitive resilience, institutional transparency, and preparedness against disinformation in complex operational environments.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Received: 5 March 2026 / Accepted: 5 August 2026

Published online: 25 August 2026

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Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.