



ACCESS ENTANGLED

Negotiating access through high-level diplomacy

March 2025

Nutrition Nurse Adoum Moussa, 39, collecting boxes at the IRC RUTF storage location in Farchana, where the IRC provides life-saving health services to Sudanese refugees fleeing violence from the Darfur region. Photo: Jacob Zoeherman for the IRC.

Cover: Aerial view of IRC vehicles driving to the town of Kalemie, DRC. Photo: Hugh Cunningham for the IRC.



INTRODUCTION

IRC's Emergency Watchlist 2025 highlights the growing complexity of conflict. Internationalized civil wars now constitute over a third of all conflicts, rising from less than one in ten at the turn of the century. Conflicts are also getting harder to solve. In the 1990s and 2000s, about a third of all conflicts ended with a ceasefire or peace agreement. By the 2010s, this figure plummeted to just one in five.

As conflicts drag on, basic public services collapse, leaving many civilians reliant on humanitarian aid. In 2025, 305 million people are in need of humanitarian aid, a staggering 291% increase since 2015, when 77.9 million were in need of assistance. Yet, as demand for humanitarian aid grows, so do the barriers to humanitarian access. The IRC's Emergency Watchlist ranks 20 countries at greatest risk of new or deepening humanitarian emergencies. These same countries face some of the most severe access restrictions averaging 4.2 out of 5 on the ACAPS humanitarian access scale, up from 3.75 in 2020. In fact, the denial and weaponization of humanitarian access is increasingly becoming a hallmark of complex, internationalized conflicts, with warring parties manipulating the provision of aid and denying civilians access to lifesaving assistance to advance political and military agendas and in breach of conflict actors' obligations under IHL.

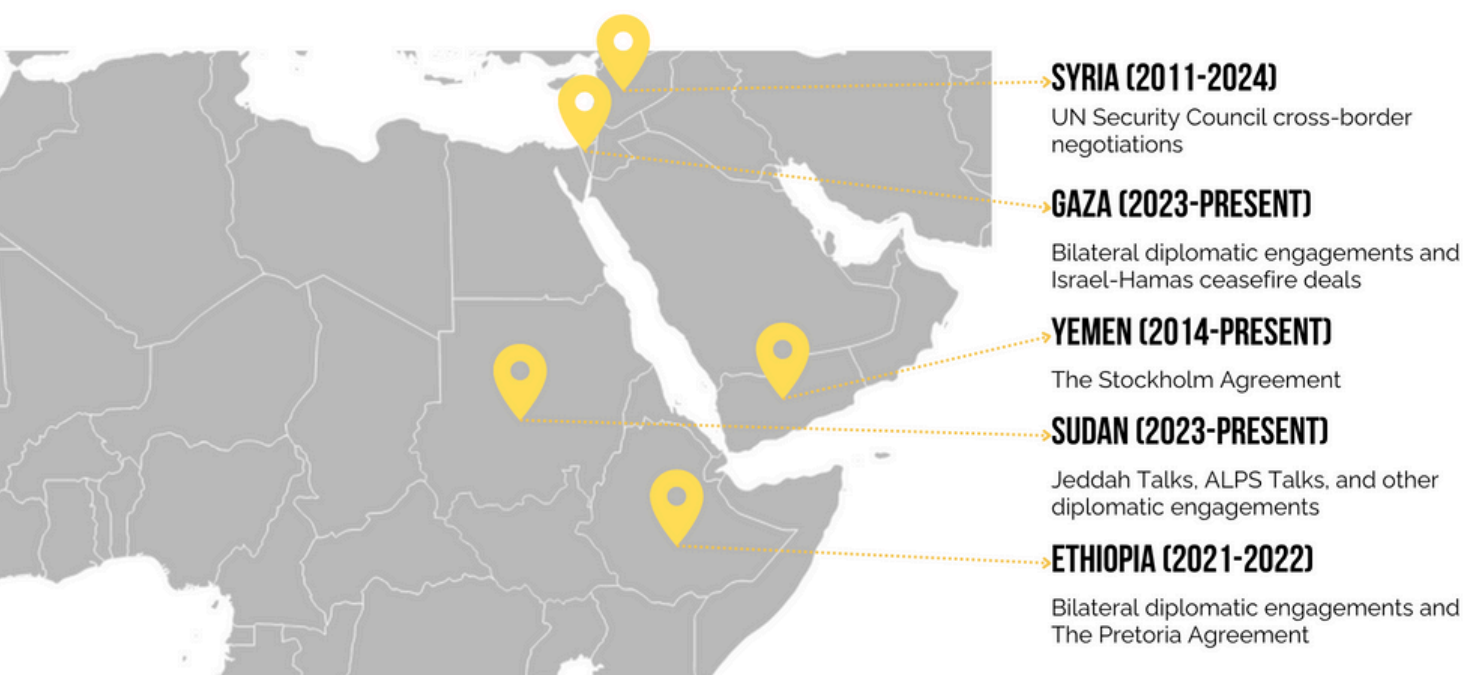
Improving humanitarian access is vital – it is the linchpin to success for every humanitarian initiative. The vast majority of access issues are negotiated and resolved at the local and national level, often through aid actors leading private negotiations with conflict parties. But, as conflicts intensify and aid actors face new and complex barriers to reaching those in need, there is growing motivation to find new ways to secure access. In recent years, access negotiations have increasingly involved non-humanitarians such as regional political bodies and third-party states at the highest level. This trend pulls humanitarian access negotiations into highly politicized spaces, the benefits and tradeoffs of which are not yet well understood.

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Our analysis shows that high level diplomatic efforts to secure access offer mixed results. Humanitarian diplomacy for access is most successful when diplomatic actors are coordinated, well-informed by local experiences, and delineated from the political interests of third-party states. In these cases, high level humanitarian diplomacy can be a key tool to promote and protect humanitarian access in complex crises. But without utilizing the proper tools for engagement, third party states may well be causing more harm to humanitarian access than good.

RESEARCH PROCESS AND LIMITATIONS

Our analysis focuses on five major humanitarian crises: Sudan, Gaza, Ethiopia, Yemen, and Syria. With extreme access challenges, severe security risks to aid workers, and faltering efforts to negotiate peace – all of which have devastating impacts for civilians – these crises have been the focus of international efforts led by senior level UN officials and non-humanitarian diplomats to improve humanitarian access.



The study is based on desk-based research and key informant interviews with UN and non-UN humanitarians working within, or close to, high level diplomatic efforts to improve humanitarian access in the five selected case studies. Three of the selected case studies are historical and therefore enable a comprehensive analysis. Two – Sudan and Gaza – are ongoing conflicts, due to which our ability to holistically assess the short- and long-term impacts of different high-level efforts to improve humanitarian access is naturally bounded to the time of publication. Yet, both case studies are important in assessing how current world politics can affect the success of humanitarian diplomacy for access.

Further, we were not able to speak with diplomats or conflict parties themselves, limiting our ability to fully understand their motivations for engagement on access. However, as an operational agency working in all five contexts, and using information from the interviews conducted, we were able to document and assess some of the most significant outcomes of these negotiations.

UNDERSTANDING HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY

UNOCHA **defines** humanitarian diplomacy as “a range of diplomatic measures to influence decision makers, parties to armed conflict, and any actor with the ability to help prevent, mitigate and resolve humanitarian crises in the interests of people in need... [which] requires the nurturing of relationships at the highest level”. Key recent examples of humanitarian diplomacy include the **Black Sea Grain Initiative** in 2022, high-level efforts in **Syria for cross-border aid delivery**, and the humanitarian track of the **Jeddah talks in Sudan**.

Using the above definition, a comprehensive analysis of the selected five case studies reveals **three common characteristics** across the different high-level efforts to improve humanitarian access:

- A** **High political profile and interest** – significant diplomatic interest and public profile of the conflict
- B** **Diversity of objectives** – multiple political and nonpolitical agendas being pursued simultaneously
- C** **Broad stakeholder presence** – multiple stakeholders involved in negotiations

Each characteristic uniquely influenced how humanitarian access agreements were negotiated and implemented and thus offer lessons learned for future diplomatic efforts to secure access in conflict settings.

A High political profile and interest

High level humanitarian diplomacy to improve humanitarian access is often conducted privately between diplomats and conflict parties. However, the outcomes and agreements reached are made public. These negotiations are also led by senior diplomats from global powers and institutions. In contrast, local access negotiations led by frontline humanitarians and their outcomes take place in private and remain confidential. The high-profile nature of agreements made through humanitarian diplomacy can therefore have both positive and negative implications for humanitarian access.

A.1**Conflict actors are compelled to publicly recommit to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) – but without accountability for implementation, these commitments have limited operational relevance**

The high-profile nature of diplomatic negotiations, combined with the seniority of participants, creates pressure on warring parties to re-state their commitments and obligations under IHL, including those on humanitarian access. This fosters an element of public and normative accountability towards IHL.

However, these publicly announced commitments often create unrealistic expectations about improvements in access. Diplomats who negotiate these agreements often end their engagement once written agreements have been published without working to create mechanisms to monitor implementation. As a result, even when conflict parties publicly commit to new agreements, they often feel little pressure to follow them. The **Jeddah Talks (2023) in Sudan** illustrate this trend:

CONTEXT

The Jeddah Talks, led by the US, Saudi Arabia, and the Intergovernmental Authority of Development (IGAD) on behalf of the African Union, sought to bring conflict parties in Sudan to the negotiating table in May 2023. The talks resulted in the signing of a “Statement of Commitments” in which both the SAF and RSF committed to prioritize civilian protection and ensure humanitarian access in areas under their control. The Statement of Commitments has since guided diplomatic engagement on civilian protection in Sudan, and has been quoted by senior diplomats as a useful baseline from which to secure further commitments on access.

IMPACT

Despite its relevance to ongoing diplomacy, the Statement of Commitments has not meaningfully improved the operational reality for those delivering aid. In Jeddah, the conflict parties committed to facilitating the safe passage of humanitarian personnel and protecting humanitarian assets. Yet in the month following the agreement, OCHA reported continuing, severe access constraints: 21 planned UN trucks were cancelled due to insecurity and lack of safe passage, aid trucks were looted, and bureaucratic delays impeded aid delivery, with over 200 visa applications pending during the period. These dynamics have continued as the conflict progresses, with the RSF and the SAF both continuously violating their own commitments to this day.

A.2**Humanitarian diplomacy risks centralizing mechanisms that senior diplomats have the power to shape but local actors struggle to influence**

When senior diplomats use their influence to address severe access constraints, they become central to efforts to sustain access and in doing so, centralize decision making. This results in both humanitarian and conflict actors becoming increasingly reliant on senior diplomatic, rather than local level, engagement to resolve access challenges. However, without the capacity or knowledge to address granular access barriers and restrictions, this centralization can often slow and undermine collective efforts to improve access.

SUDAN (2023-PRESENT)

As part of their commitments made in the Jeddah talks, conflict parties agreed to partake in a **Joint Humanitarian Forum** (JHF) alongside staff from the UN, to operationalize commitments made to improve humanitarian access and unlock barriers to aid delivery. Despite high level political support, the forum suffered from high UN staff turnover and a lack of senior level participation from warring parties.

IMPACT: Key informants interviewed in this study from major INGOs who participated in the JHF reflected that the weaknesses in the Forum left many aid actors waiting for several months for progress to be agreed on a variety of access barriers, including agreements on visas for expatriate humanitarian staff. Meanwhile, the centralized forum undermined the potential for local level engagement to unlock access because UNOCHA, conflict parties, and many local actors deferred to the Forum for decisions on humanitarian access.

ETHIOPIA (2020-2022)

Since its onset, the Tigray war was characterized by a persistent denial of humanitarian aid due to the Ethiopian government's siege of Tigray. In an effort to improve access, **the UN brokered a deal** with the Government of Ethiopia that laid out a mechanism for coordinating humanitarian aid in Tigray under government oversight. The agreement was signed without appropriately consulting NGOs and required all humanitarian organizations to get **clearance** from the Ministry of Peace to transport goods and personnel into Tigray.

IMPACT: While initially celebrated as a win by the UN, the centralized system meant humanitarian organizations **lost the ability** to independently negotiate their access into Tigray. Ultimately, the Ministry of Peace exploited the mechanism to systematically **block and manipulate access** according to its own political agenda and have total control over what enters and exists Tigray.

B Diversity of Objectives

When humanitarian access is prioritized by third party diplomats, it becomes one of a number of competing objectives, including efforts to de-escalate conflict, secure a ceasefire, and set parties on a path towards a political settlement. This cross-walking of humanitarian and political objectives is evident in negotiations that took place in Yemen, Ethiopia, Gaza and Sudan. Ultimately, such cross-walking can affect how access is negotiated.

B.1 Progress on humanitarian access risks becoming conditional on political objectives

In all five case studies, conflict actors contained, barred or manipulated aid provision. In some cases, the objective of securing a military or political objective through manipulating access is more transparent than in others. Regardless, for all case studies examined, the scope for the politicization of humanitarian access

increased when negotiations took place alongside efforts to advance other political agendas. Unless these competing priorities are managed effectively, high-level diplomatic forums can inadvertently normalize or reward the weaponization of access.

ETHIOPIA (2020-2022)

Despite NGO, UN, and member state led efforts to increase the flow of aid into besieged Tigray, including the UN brokered deal mentioned above, it was not until the Pretoria Agreement was reached in 2022, which ended the war, that the Government of Ethiopia lifted its siege and allowed aid trucks to enter Tigray. Throughout the negotiations, diplomats reported that progress on access was routinely rejected by the Government until the TPLF agreed to surrender.

Ultimately, the Ethiopian government was able to exchange humanitarian access for their victory. Aid access only improved a few months after the agreement was signed when restrictions on the movement of humanitarian supplies and staff, and the amount of cash aid agencies could move into Tigray were eased.

GAZA (2023-PRESENT)

In November 2023, the first successful effort to bring Israel and Hamas to the negotiating table since the start of conflict that October resulted in the Prisoners for Hostages Agreement. The negotiations focused on establishing a temporary ceasefire, the terms for increasing humanitarian access, and political negotiations to secure the release of Israeli hostages.

Ultimately, the deal tied the release of hostages to the easing of humanitarian access controls at Gaza's borders. Israel agreed to allow 300 UN aid trucks to enter for every day of the temporary ceasefire. The deal also included the scope to extend the initial four-day pause in the fighting by an extra two days in exchange for the release of an additional ten hostages held by Hamas. Once the agreed number of hostages were released, Israel reinstated restrictions on aid delivery into Gaza even before the humanitarian pause officially concluded.

B.2 Humanitarian access can be overlooked as an IHL obligation

Access negotiations, whether led by frontline humanitarians or senior diplomats, rely in part on the access obligations of conflict parties under International Law. However, recent diplomatic efforts – often echoed by humanitarians – have deviated from rooting agreements in the responsibility of warring parties to protect access during ongoing fighting. Instead, recent examples from Gaza, led by humanitarians and non-humanitarians alike, illustrate the rise in calls for “humanitarian ceasefires.” While undefined under IHL, the term is used to describe a temporary cessation of hostilities to allow humanitarian aid delivery, building on models such as “days of tranquility” designed to support vaccination campaigns.

The framing of a humanitarian pause as a necessary step to deliver aid, particularly at the very beginning of a conflict, risks establishing an alternative understanding that aid delivery is only possible when a ceasefire has been agreed. This position stands in stark contrast to IHL, which obligates conflict parties to allow and facilitate humanitarian access, regardless of the presence of conflict. It also has a practical effect on the conduct of war where the best access occurs when violence cedes. In the Israel-Hamas war, for example, more aid trucks entered Gaza during periods of ceasefires than in the days directly before or after them. Only one day after the

January 2025 Israel-Hamas ceasefire agreement went in effect, over 915 aid trucks entered Gaza, including 300 aid trucks to the north, when in fact less than 100 aid trucks per day had entered Gaza in the earlier parts of the same month.

The **Stockholm Agreement in Yemen** illustrates a further trend of high-level diplomacy undermining the centrality of IHL to access. In this example, maintaining a localized ceasefire and demilitarization process around the city of Hodeidah took precedent over maintaining and improving access for humanitarian aid entering Yemen:

**“Parties shall facilitate the freedom of movement of civilians and goods from and to the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa and the delivery of humanitarian aid through the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa”
(Stockholm Agreement)**

CONTEXT

The negotiations in Stockholm in 2018 were primarily focused on securing a localized ceasefire agreement to prevent conflict over control of Yemen’s Hodeidah port, a critical point for imports of food and other essential supplies, amidst concerns of an impending famine. In addition, the deal included some provisions to address restrictions on the import of commercial and humanitarian supplies imposed by the Saudi-led Coalition. The agreement was also codified in UNSCR 2451.

IMPACT

During implementation, the UN placed greater focus on monitoring the ceasefire than on investing in the UN’s Verification and Inspection Mechanism’s (UNVIM) efforts to streamline and fast track aid delivery. This was in part because most stakeholders were concerned with avoiding further violence. As a result, all conflict parties maintained their own inspection mechanisms and faced little pressure to improve the movement of aid supplies into Yemen. While an escalation of hostilities in Hodeidah was avoided, which was the primary focus of diplomatic actors in Stockholm, humanitarian access only marginally improved, with ships still waiting an average of 36 days for clearance to enter Hodeidah.

C

Broad Stakeholder Presence

As conflicts become increasingly internationalized, the breadth of diplomatic stakeholders (e.g. global and regional powers, regional bodies, and the UN) who have the potential to influence warring parties also increases. Emerging and middle powers already play significant roles in conflicts, as reflected by the experience of Yemen, Syria and Sudan. These countries illustrate a trend identified by the International Crisis Group, with powers often simultaneously fueling wars through weapons supply and acting as the lead mediators of peace and access in high level forums. As the United States retreats from global development engagement, the role of these powers will likely increase further, as will their access to senior decision makers within conflict parties. It may also affect the ways in which humanitarian access is negotiated at the senior diplomatic level.

C.1**Diverse senior level stakeholders can deploy their leverage to achieve specific agreements on humanitarian access**

When third-party states and representatives from the UN coordinate and align their engagement, they can encourage conflict parties to agree specific access outcomes. The collaborative diplomatic efforts in Sudan in mid-2024 that led to the **opening of the Adre border crossing** in Chad for UN led aid delivery in RSF-controlled areas reflect this trend:

CONTEXT

Cross-border aid is crucial for millions living in Darfur. Initially, SAF concerns over arms transfers resulted in the closure of the Adre border crossing point in early 2024, halting UN-led aid delivery to Darfur. Rapidly escalating humanitarian needs in Darfur reflected in the first **declaration of famine** in Zamzam camp in August 2024 prompted diplomatic efforts to reopen the border. Led by the **Aligned for Advancing Lifesaving and Peace in Sudan (ALPS)** group, talks in Geneva in late July 2024 resulted in an **agreement** with the SAF to reopen the Adre crossing border for an initial period of three months.

Throughout the three-month period, as humanitarian negotiators directly with conflict parties, the UN and the US also continued bilateral engagement with senior leadership of the SAF. At the same time, the UN Security Council conducted briefings on the humanitarian situation in Sudan and the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, presented a **report** to the Security Council on his recommendations for protecting civilians in Sudan in October in which he pushed for the permanent opening of the Adre border crossing for humanitarian aid. Further, diplomats also passed **messages** to friendly states along the border to keep their crossings open for the use of humanitarian aid. These different but coordinated diplomatic efforts played a role in pushing the SAF to **renew** the cross-border agreement for another three months in November 2024 and then again in **February 2025**.

IMPACT

This agreement has contributed to the continuation of vital UN delivered aid with over **732** aid trucks delivered through Adre between August and December 2024. The agreement did face challenges, with ongoing bureaucratic challenges to the movement of aid within Sudan but has still been a vital instrument to deliver aid in RSF controlled areas.

C.2**Diverse goals of diplomatic actors can result in fragmented humanitarian diplomacy**

The types of leverage diplomats use and how they use them can be influenced by their distinct political objectives towards a state or conflict party. During the Ethiopia-Tigray war, the **EU suspended** over €90 million in development aid, while the US extended a formal pause on all non-humanitarian assistance to pressure the Government to lift the siege of Tigray. However, at the same time, the US continued to retain a **rhetorical commitment** to maintaining ties with Ethiopia and Germany **continued** to provide development aid, even after the European Commission withheld its financial support. In both cases, states sought to balance their pressure to secure improvements in access with their strategic desire to maintain political relationships with the Ethiopian government.

In other cases, third-party states may seek to achieve agreements with conflict parties on humanitarian access that are designed more to deflect scrutiny and international pressure rather than to meaningfully improve humanitarian access. For example, in late 2024, the United States threatened to suspend military aid to Israel within **30 days** if Israel did not take substantial steps to improve access in Gaza. Despite the 30-day period passing without meaningful improvements to aid access in Gaza, the US failed to follow through on its threat to suspend aid. In fact, multiple aid actors **declared** that humanitarian access was the worst it had been in this period since the start of the conflict in October 2023.

Efforts led by multiple third-party states for a particular conflict, if not coordinated well, can also result in parallel diplomatic initiatives that significantly overlap in their agenda items and risk negating each other. This is evident in Sudan where Saudi Arabia, the United States, IGAD, AU, and the UN attempted disparate ways to gain traction with conflict parties in 2023. This resulted in two fragmented diplomatic tracks – **the Jeddah talks** and the **IGAD talks** both backed by different third-party states and institutions – allowing conflict parties to ‘forum-shop’ which ever suited them best, and ultimately resulted in the dissolution of both tracks.

THE UN MANAGED SYRIA CROSS BORDER AID MECHANISM

A CASE STUDY OF ALL 3 CHARACTERISTICS WORKING IN TANDEM

Since 2011, Syria was engulfed in a **conflict** involving government forces and opposition groups, resulting in a severe humanitarian crisis and prompting one of the world’s largest **refugee crisis**, with more than 14 million Syrians forcibly displaced. Humanitarian access was critically constrained, with the Syrian Government **weaponizing aid** flows as a war strategy. Several **diplomatic talks** were established to mitigate harm in the conflict such as the Geneva talks in 2012, 2014, and 2016 initiated by the UN. The absence of progress on the peace track led to member states in the **Security Council** to prioritize improving humanitarian access in Syria.

Despite many appeals to Syrian sovereignty, led by the Syrian government, the Security Council passed **UNSCR 2165** to allow cross border aid delivery from Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. UNSCR 2165 is a unique example of members of the Security Council directly managing and negotiating the details of UN led cross border aid delivery into opposition-held Syria. The resolution demonstrates the potential for positive access outcomes when all three qualities of high-level diplomatic fora identified above align.

THE UN CROSS BORDER SYSTEM ENABLED

4.1 MILLION

SYRIANS TO ACCESS HUMANITARIAN AID

Elevating the crisis in Syria to the highest levels of international diplomacy, coupled with the unanimous support of Council members, allowed for the adoption of a legally binding resolution that gave the UN the political protection it needed to deliver aid to Syria without Government consent. Over **4.1 million** Syrians living across north-west Syria gained better access to humanitarian aid, and **2.4 million** were reliant solely on aid provided through the UN cross border aid system. The success of the cross-border aid response is in part a result of the close engagement between diplomats and aid workers, with the UN providing regular feedback to council members on the functioning of the agreement.

However, the creation of the mechanism within the Security Council also centralized – and ultimately politicized – decision making on access. UNSCR 2165 was renewed on an annual basis, with roll over resolutions agreed for 9 years. As Russia entered the conflict in support of Assad, it provided both military assistance and political support in the Council, using negotiations of the resolution to push for sanctions relief, reconstruction funding and a reduction in cross-border aid delivery points, leaving just one, Bab al-Hawa, by 2020. In 2023, Russia vetoed all draft resolutions proposed to renew the mechanism which ended UN-authorized aid delivery, leaving UN cross-border assistance reliant on Syrian government consent.

CONCLUSION

The findings of our analysis demonstrate the mixed impact of diplomatic efforts to improve humanitarian access. Missteps in strategy—whether by overemphasizing high-level diplomacy, neglecting local engagement, or mixing political relationships with humanitarian objectives—can create imbalances that lead to sub-optimal access agreements, or no agreements at all.

Above all – investments must be made to build the capacity of humanitarian actors to negotiate and engage with conflict parties in a way that is safe, sustainable, and produces quality humanitarian access. This could include donors investing in training mechanisms that boost NGO capacity in access engagement or supporting NGO coordination fora in leading collective access negotiations. At the same time, the grim reality of longer, more complex conflicts and declining respect for IHL is narrowing options for civilian protection. Using humanitarian diplomacy to negotiate and maintain access has become one of the central tools to mitigate civilian harm and hence ensuring these diplomatic efforts function effectively is vital.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Reinforce the importance of humanitarian access as an obligation for under IHL.

- **UN member states should increase the profile of humanitarian access in high level UN fora.** Existing mechanisms and UN agendas such as Protection of Civilians (POC) and the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agenda give inadequate attention to the effects of humanitarian access denial to civilian populations. Although the Secretary General's Protection of Civilians annual report sometimes features humanitarian access, it fails to present a holistic analysis that can raise the concern of diplomats over this issue. As such, senior UN diplomats, particularly the Emergency Relief Coordinator, should ensure humanitarian access becomes a standing agenda item during Protection of Civilians week and create space to holistically analyze humanitarian access on a broader level, the role of the UN in improving access, and the role of member states in advocating for it. For the CAAC Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, member states should push for greater profile on the impact of humanitarian access denial on children. As a first step, the CAAC mechanism should publish a guidance note on what is considered humanitarian access denial so that it is accurately represented in reporting mechanisms.
- **Member states should take steps to improve their compliance with IHL and share best practices publicly.** States can collaborate with organizations like the **ICRC** to integrate IHL into military training programs to ensure armed forces are well-versed in their legal obligations, including on humanitarian access. This could include simulation and scenario-based training where troops can apply IHL in their decision making. To promote a shared sense of transparency and accountability, states could also emulate Switzerland's example in the UN Security Council of voluntarily **self-reporting** its lessons learned on implementing IHL and facilitating humanitarian access. Member states should even establish global initiatives, such as the **ICRC-led** efforts to build political support for IHL, to reinforce support for IHL protections of humanitarian access across global and emerging powers.

2**Ensure high level access diplomacy is effectively coordinated.**

- **Explore all forms of leverage to push for improved humanitarian access.** Ethiopia's example above shows precedent for states leveraging development finance to pressure conflict parties to ensure aid access to communities, but these efforts must be coordinated and strengthened. As Multilateral Development Banks play an increasingly active role in conflict contexts including in efforts to advance key SDGs on poverty and hunger, they should explore the role they can play in supporting humanitarian access diplomacy through for example, temporary suspensions of, or reductions in, assistance.
- **Where there is evidence of IHL violations and the weaponization of aid, states should consider imposing limits on security assistance until compliance with IHL improves.** For states that have signed and ratified the Arms Trade Treaty, they are legally obligated to stop arms transfers when there is an "overriding risk" of IHL violations.
- **Invest in efforts to understand the influence of emerging powers in today's conflicts.** As the above analysis shows, when diplomacy is effectively coordinated among the UN, global powers, and emerging powers, it results in demonstrable improvements in humanitarian access. However, success depends on understanding the motivations of emerging powers and their influence over conflict parties. States should invest more diplomatic and analytical resources to identifying and understanding these levers of influence with warring parties and their sponsors.
- **Firewall humanitarian diplomacy from political partnerships with conflict parties.** For example, in countries where the head of the UN mission acts as both Resident Coordinator and a Humanitarian Coordinator and therefore holds responsibility for the UN's longer-term relationship and development agenda, additional senior UN capacity should be deployed to lead access engagement. The appointment of an independent Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza following a UN Security Council resolution offers a further example of an approach that raises the profile of access concerns, while separating it from the UN's political agenda. Member states with long term relationships with conflict parties should also carefully explore how they use leverage to support access as a standalone priority while ensuring that agreements are not exchanged for other political or military advantages.

3**Ensure high-level humanitarian diplomacy is informed by the operational experience of local actors.**

- **Diplomatic access leads should consult with NGOs and other local actors to ensure operational humanitarian knowledge reaches third party diplomats.** Existing mechanisms for UN and NGO dialogue and decision making on access, such as Humanitarian Country Teams and Access Working groups, offer opportunities to share insights on access barriers and solutions. However, these groups are not often systematically consulted or engaged regularly in support of high-level diplomatic efforts. While systematic consultations are complex, at a minimum, diplomatic actors should strive to integrate the perspectives of UN agencies, and a selection of national and international non-governmental aid actors into the process.

- **Consider the creation of an independent access organization to monitor and report on humanitarian access challenges and raise the profile of humanitarian access.** A key reason why UN mechanisms fail to successfully report on and push for humanitarian access is their direct connection to member state politics that complicates their ability to be effective humanitarian access advocates. As mentioned in our **Emergency Watchlist 2025**, an Independent Access Organization (IAO) would create a space that is both safe for NGOs and local actors to report into and defended from the influence of major global political actors. Using this information, the IAO would develop robust analysis to galvanize global, regional and national policymakers, including non-traditional actors and middle powers, to effectively utilize humanitarian diplomacy to push for humanitarian access.

4 Ensure accountability for delivery of access agreements

- **Give access agreements appropriate backing and resources for monitoring.** When access agreements are reached, they should be accompanied by effective and funded monitoring mechanisms that regularly report back to the diplomatic actors that facilitated the agreement. The monitoring mechanisms should include opportunities for confidential input by NGOs and local civil society partners to identify and rectify any roadblocks. Within the agreement, diplomatic interlocutors should also decide upon follow up meetings with conflict parties where they can address non-compliance.
- **Incorporate accountability mechanisms to ensure conflict parties implement their commitments.** Just as diplomats are encouraged to utilize their political, military, and development partnerships to push for aid agreements, they could use similar instruments such as the suspension of trade partnerships, military aid, and development aid to underline clear consequences should conflict parties not follow through on their commitments. Diplomats could also consider supporting legal, institutional and procedural mechanisms at the national and international levels to ensure access to justice for victims who were denied humanitarian access during conflict.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises. We help to restore health, safety, education, economic wellbeing and power to people devastated by conflict and disaster.

This paper was published on March 2025. It is the first in a new series of analyses produced by the IRC's Conflict and Humanitarian team to examine trends and the response to humanitarian access challenges globally.

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