

Lieber Studies Series – Why the Term “Humanitarian Corridor” is a Misleading Expression

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by [Julia Grignon](#) | Apr 28, 2025



Editors' note: This post is based on the author's chapter in Civilian Protection in Armed Conflict: Select Issues (Jelena Pejic & Margaret Kotlik eds. 2025), the eleventh volume of the Lieber Studies Series published with Oxford University Press.

“Humanitarian corridors” are not a humanitarian activity but rather a military operation. The term describes the implementation of measures designed to react in the very last resort to a dire situation of the civilian population, often the result of a series of legal violations.

Moreover, the expression “humanitarian corridor” cannot be found in relevant international humanitarian law (IHL) treaties. The term poses both legal and practical challenges. I address some of these in my chapter in Civilian Protection in Armed Conflict: Select Issues. This post aims to shed light on an indirect consequence of this semantic indeterminacy.

Humanitarian Corridors: Inapt Implementations of the Right to Humanitarian Assistance

The reason “humanitarian corridors” are not referred to in relevant IHL treaty provisions is that if the law of armed conflict were respected, there would be no need for such operations. In other words, while the establishment of a humanitarian corridor may appear to be a measure aimed at implementing IHL, it is in fact the opposite. A humanitarian corridor is needed when there have been massive violations of the law and when no other solution can be envisaged to alleviate the suffering of a given civilian population.

This is the case when the right to humanitarian assistance is denied. According to rule 55 of the International Committee of the Red Cross *Customary IHL Study*, summarizing relevant conventional provisions: “The parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, which is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction, subject to their right of control.” As a result, parties to an armed conflict (be it international or non-international in character), as well as States whose territories must be crossed by (food and medical) relief operations, have an obligation to both permit and actively support the swift and unhindered passage of essential supplies, equipment, and personnel involved in food assistance or medical relief efforts.

While States retain the right to prescribe the technical details of such passage, they must do so with utmost good faith. Furthermore, such measures should not impede the prompt and principled delivery of food and medical assistance in any way concerning their character, scope, or consequences. If this rule and the obligations that follow from it were respected, there would be no need for “humanitarian corridors.”

Humanitarian Corridors: More Threat Than Protective Measure

The fact that humanitarian corridors do not (properly) implement IHL is confirmed by the threats they pose in practice. Because of both their name and stated purposes, humanitarian corridors create a false belief of neutrality; just as humanitarian assistance must be. To the contrary, humanitarian corridors are in fact military operations, enforced by military means but with a humanitarian label.

Even if humanitarian organizations are sometimes involved in their implementation, humanitarian corridors consist of agreements between parties to the conflict (State entities and/or armed groups) and are therefore *per se* barely neutral.

As a result, when actively participating in the establishment or operation of humanitarian corridors, humanitarian actors might be perceived as taking sides in a conflict or aligning themselves with a specific party to the conflict. Such a perception can undermine the humanitarian organization’s reputation, endanger its personnel, and, in the long run, prevent it from participating in future operations, including worldwide. Furthermore, such organizations’ active engagement in supporting a humanitarian corridor might contribute to conveying a false impression of safety for people intending to use the corridor.

Despite the parties to the conflict consenting to the humanitarian corridor, civilian protection therein is never totally guaranteed. Humanitarian organizations must be cautious not to convey such an erroneous impression of safety. This concern led forty such organizations to adopt a joint statement in 2016 that considered them “deeply flawed on humanitarian grounds” in the context of the siege of Aleppo in Syria. Another considered them to give the “illusion of an ideal solution” while another contemplates them even more broadly as “hazardous.”

The Gaza Test

My contribution to *Civilian Protection in Armed Conflict: Select Issues* was written before October 7, 2023. However, its conclusions are not contradicted by the events in the Gaza Strip since then. Among the four resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council (UNSC) regarding this conflict (S/RES/2712 (2023), S/RES/2720 (2023), S/RES/2728 (2024) and S/RES/2735 (2024)), one refers explicitly to humanitarian corridors. As early as November 15, 2023, the Council “call[ed] for urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors throughout the Gaza Strip for a sufficient number of days to enable, consistent with international humanitarian law, the full, rapid, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access.” This appeal was recalled a month later, on December 22. This leads to at least two conclusions.

First, it confirms that humanitarian corridors are called for when the situation is so dire that no other solution seems helpful in a given context. These resolutions were indeed adopted after the Israeli Ministry of Defence “ordered a complete siege on the Gaza Strip [and said that] [t]here will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything [will be] closed,” a statement that is in total contradiction with IHL requirements.

Second, the call for humanitarian corridors may give the impression of asking for respect for IHL. In the resolutions quoted above, one can indeed read that humanitarian corridors are meant to “enable, consistent with international humanitarian law ... unhindered access” or that the call for corridors is a result of the necessity for the parties to the conflict to “comply with their obligations under international law” (emphasis added). However, while IHL does not contain the term “humanitarian corridors,” it does contain many provisions relating to the right of the civilian population to receive humanitarian aid, provisions that are customary in nature. In a word, the appearance of “humanitarian corridors” in a UNSC Resolution is simply an admission of failure.

Conclusion

Fragile both in law and in practice, humanitarian corridors tend to “serve to improve [the] image and sometimes reinforce [the] credibility [of those who set them up] in the eyes of the international community when they are not purely and simply used for political purposes.” In

any case, they are not a satisfactory way of implementing IHL and/or a useful practical tool for humanitarian organizations.

Their only real purpose appears to be to warn of the existence of a dramatic situation and to draw attention to the failure of what still calls itself the “international community” to ensure respect for IHL, an obligation that appears at the forefront of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949.

Julia Grignon is an Associate Professor of the Faculty of Law at Laval University (Canada).

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