

# Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding in Protracted Conflict: The Role of the United Arab Emirates in Yemen

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**Abstract:** Contemporary armed conflicts are increasingly protracted, fragmented, and shaped by regional rivalries, limiting the effectiveness of conventional, troop-centered peacekeeping alone. In this context, humanitarian assistance has emerged as a crucial tool for protecting civilians and fostering a degree of stability. This study examines the UAE's humanitarian role in Yemen from 2015 onwards, exploring how its relief and reconstruction initiatives function as instruments of peace support. Employing a combined framework of human security, middle-power diplomacy, and humanitarian diplomacy, the analysis draws on UAE government reports, UN OCHA data, and recent academic literature. Particular focus is given to the UAE's USD 465 million unrestricted contribution to the Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan (YHRP) in 2018 and an additional USD 230 million pledge in 2021. Evidence suggests that these interventions have supported essential services, enhanced access to food and healthcare, and strengthened local resilience. While humanitarian assistance cannot replace a comprehensive political settlement, it can help create conditions conducive to peace by safeguarding civilians, maintaining critical institutions, and preventing further deterioration. Yemen illustrates how Gulf middle powers, in collaboration with the UN, can leverage humanitarian engagement as a core component of contemporary peace and security strategies.

**Keywords:** humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, human security, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, middle-power diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy.

## 1. Introduction

Twenty-first-century conflicts differ markedly from the interstate wars that shaped traditional peacekeeping. Modern conflicts often involve non-state armed groups, regional rivalries, and weakened state institutions. In cases such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya, civilians face persistent insecurity and institutional collapse even when hostilities fluctuate. Traditional peacekeeping approaches—focused on ceasefire monitoring or buffer deployments—are insufficient to ensure lasting peace. Consequently, peace operations increasingly encompass political facilitation, institution-building, and socioeconomic recovery alongside military objectives (Bellamy & Williams, 2019; Durch & Berkman, 2020).

Within this evolving landscape, humanitarian assistance has

assumed a central role. Relief operations, infrastructure rehabilitation, and livelihood support are now viewed as strategic interventions that help societies withstand conflict pressures. Humanitarian diplomacy—the negotiation, advocacy, and mobilization required to enable aid delivery—has also become a key tool for states and organizations seeking to influence conflict outcomes without resorting to force (Slim, 2021).

### A. The UAE as a Humanitarian Actor

The UAE has emerged as a prominent provider of humanitarian and development aid. OECD data indicate that in 2013–2014, the UAE ranked first globally in official development assistance (ODA) as a percentage of gross national income, reaching 1.25%—well above the UN target of 0.7% (OECD, 2020). Between 1971 and 2014, UAE foreign aid totaled approximately AED 173 billion, benefitting over 170 countries, primarily in the Arab region, Africa, and Asia.

Official UAE policy emphasizes that aid serves purely humanitarian purposes, is impartial, and is not governed by political, geographical, racial, or religious considerations. In line with this ethos, UAE humanitarian programs have expanded in crisis-affected contexts such as Syria, Iraq, and, most notably, Yemen.

Since the escalation of Yemen's conflict in 2015, the UAE has become one of the country's largest humanitarian donors. Between April 2015 and mid-2018, nearly USD 4 billion was provided to Yemen, covering emergency relief, development support, and maintenance of essential public services. In 2018, the UAE and Saudi Arabia pledged USD 930 million to the YHRP, with the UAE contributing USD 465 million as unrestricted funding. In 2021, an additional USD 230 million was pledged, aimed at meeting food needs for approximately six million Yemenis, including one million children. Collectively, UAE officials estimate over USD 6 billion in assistance since 2015.

### B. Research Problem

Traditional peacekeeping, built around troop deployment and ceasefire monitoring, addresses only part of the challenges in

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contemporary conflicts. Yemen exemplifies the severe human consequences of conflict, including food shortages, disrupted healthcare, and institutional breakdown. This study examines how humanitarian assistance functions as a peace support mechanism in such contexts, using the UAE as a case study to understand the interplay between humanitarian action, regional stability, and multilateral cooperation.

### C. Research Questions

1. How does humanitarian assistance operate as a peacekeeping and stabilization instrument in active conflict zones?
2. What roles have UAE humanitarian and reconstruction initiatives played in Yemen since 2015?
3. To what extent do these programs support local stability, governance, and peacebuilding, and what lessons emerge from the Yemeni case?

### D. Significance

This study contributes by (1) framing humanitarian assistance as a deliberate peace support tool rather than mere emergency aid, (2) offering an empirically grounded Gulf-focused case study of a middle power working with the UN, and (3) providing policy insights for states and international organizations designing humanitarian interventions to protect civilians, reinforce institutions, and support broader human security strategies.

## 2. Literature Review

### A. Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding

Peacekeeping has evolved significantly since the first UN missions in the 1950s and 1960s, which were small, lightly armed, and focused on interstate ceasefires (Bellamy & Williams, 2019). Post-Cold War missions expanded mandates to include elections, disarmament, police reform, and rebuilding state institutions (Durch & Berkman, 2020; Paris, 2019).

“Peacebuilding” emerged as a concept to address the root causes of conflict, promote legitimate governance, and ensure socio-economic recovery. Regional organizations and ad hoc coalitions have combined military and civilian tasks, blurring lines between peacekeeping, peace enforcement, and statebuilding (Chesterman, 2021; Donais, 2018). Civilian-oriented measures, such as infrastructure restoration and livelihood support, are now central to sustainable peace, highlighting the role of humanitarian and development actors.

### B. Humanitarian Assistance and Conflict Management

Humanitarian assistance is guided by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Forsythe, 2020). Properly designed interventions can reduce grievances, strengthen community resilience, and sustain essential services (Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2019; Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2019). When assistance is perceived as politically motivated, however, trust may erode, and access may be restricted (Mackintosh & Duplat, 2018; Hillhorst & Jansen, 2019). Multilateral, needs-

based funding, such as through UN coordinated plans, is generally compatible with both humanitarian principles and peace support objectives (UN OCHA, 2021; WFP, 2022).

### C. Middle Powers, Gulf States, and Humanitarian Diplomacy

Middle powers, such as Canada and Nordic states, traditionally exercise influence through coalition building and norm entrepreneurship rather than military dominance (Cooper et al., 2018; Acharya, 2021). Emerging actors, including Gulf states, have increasingly adopted similar strategies, deploying aid alongside diplomatic engagement to enhance regional stability (Almezaini, 2018; Holslag & Van der Loo, 2020; Khan, 2023). Humanitarian diplomacy encompasses resource mobilization, negotiation, and adherence to humanitarian norms (Slim, 2021). UAE engagement illustrates how Gulf middle powers integrate aid with strategic diplomacy to demonstrate responsibility and foster regional governance.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### A. Human Security

Human security shifts the focus from states to individuals, asking whether people are protected from violence, hunger, disease, and institutional collapse, and whether they can live with dignity (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2019). In Yemen, conflict has severely weakened public institutions, disrupted basic services, and increased household vulnerability.

Viewing UAE humanitarian assistance through a human security lens emphasizes practical outcomes: Are health facilities operational? Do families have access to clean water and adequate food? Are schools functioning? UN OCHA assessments indicate that maintaining or restoring these services can distinguish between severe crises and societal collapse (UN OCHA, 2021). Hence, this study treats access to food, healthcare, water, sanitation, and education as core indicators of the human security impact of UAE interventions.

### B. Middle Power Diplomacy

Middle powers influence regional and global agendas through coalition-building, multilateral engagement, and niche expertise rather than military dominance (Cooper et al., 2018; Acharya, 2021). The UAE possesses substantial financial resources and an active foreign policy but does not pursue unilateral hegemony. Its humanitarian and development programs provide a strategic avenue to promote regional stability, cultivate partnerships, and enhance international visibility (Almezaini, 2018; Roberts & Portela, 2022; Ulrichsen, 2020). UAE involvement in Yemen exemplifies middle power diplomacy in practice, using aid and reconstruction rather than direct military intervention to support stability.

### C. Humanitarian Diplomacy

Humanitarian diplomacy encompasses negotiations, advocacy, and coordination underpinning aid delivery (Slim, 2021). In Yemen, the UAE’s engagement with the YHRP and UN agencies such as OCHA, WFP, UNICEF, and WHO reflects this approach. The USD 465 million unrestricted

funding in 2018 and USD 230 million pledge in 2021 demonstrate not only financial support but also a strategic choice to respect UN-led allocation processes. Statements from UAE representatives emphasize coordination, impartiality, and adherence to humanitarian principles.

#### D. Integrative Approach

By combining human security, middle power diplomacy, and humanitarian diplomacy perspectives, the study interprets UAE assistance as a multidimensional peace support instrument:

- *Human Security Level*: Assessing whether UAE-supported programs reduce vulnerabilities and maintain essential services.
- *Middle Power Level*: Evaluating how the UAE leverages humanitarian engagement to support regional stability and participate in multilateral governance.
- *Humanitarian Diplomacy Level*: Examining how UAE cooperation with UN mechanisms ensures principled, coordinated aid delivery.

This integrative framework guided data selection and interpretation of findings.

### 4. Methodology

#### A. Research Design

A qualitative single case study design was employed, focusing on UAE humanitarian assistance to Yemen between 2015 and 2024. This approach allows for a detailed, context-rich understanding of one actor's engagement in humanitarian peace support (Yin, 2018). The UAE-Yemen case is ideal due to the severe humanitarian crisis, the UAE's donor prominence, and its cooperation with UN-led mechanisms.

#### B. Data Sources

*Primary sources include:*

- UAE government documents, aid portals, policy statements, and press releases.
- UAE Permanent Mission statements on contributions to the YHRP.
- UN OCHA and YHRP reports documenting humanitarian needs, response strategies, and donor contributions (UN OCHA, 2021).

*Secondary sources include:*

- Peer-reviewed literature on peacebuilding, human security, and Gulf foreign policy.
- Policy reports and evaluations by international organizations and NGOs.
- Reputable media summarizing UAE aid pledges and program implementation (e.g., Arab News, Gulf News).

#### C. Data Collection and Selection

Purposeful sampling identified documents explicitly referencing UAE humanitarian or reconstruction activities in Yemen, detailing funding, sectors, or UN cooperation. Approximately 70 documents were included, encompassing UAE government statements, UN reports, and academic

publications.

#### D. Analytical Strategy

Analysis followed three steps:

1. *Descriptive Mapping*: Quantifying UAE assistance by scale, sector, and channels.
2. *Thematic Reading*: Identifying recurring themes, including humanitarian principles, UN coordination, and human security outcomes.
3. *Interpretation through Framework*: Evaluating the human security impact, alignment with middle power diplomacy, and adherence to humanitarian diplomacy practices.

#### E. Limitations

Reliance on publicly available documents may reflect favorable portrayals of UAE assistance. Absence of fieldwork limits insights into local perceptions and implementation nuances. Triangulation across UAE, UN, and third-party sources mitigates bias, providing a robust basis for assessing UAE engagement.

## 5. UAE Humanitarian Engagement in Yemen

#### A. Humanitarian Context

Since 2015, Yemen has faced one of the most severe humanitarian crises globally. Infrastructure damage, disrupted public services, and widespread displacement have left tens of millions dependent on assistance. Health, water, and sanitation systems function largely due to international support (UN OCHA, 2021; World Bank, 2021).

#### B. Scale and Modalities of UAE Support

Between April 2015 and mid-2018, the UAE provided nearly USD 4 billion in assistance, covering emergency relief, development projects, and essential services. The 2018 USD 465 million YHRP contribution and the 2021 USD 230 million pledge exemplify the UAE's approach, combining unrestricted UN funding with targeted bilateral initiatives.

#### C. Sectoral Focus

- *Food Security*: Large-scale distributions and nutritional programs, primarily through WFP.
- *Health*: Support for hospitals, clinics, vaccination campaigns, and medicines, reducing cholera treatment times and improving primary health access.
- *WASH*: Water network repairs and safe drinking water provision, mitigating disease risks.
- *Education & Infrastructure*: Rehabilitation of schools, roads, ports, and public buildings, facilitating education, trade, and local governance.

The Emirates Red Crescent (ERC) has been instrumental, coordinating logistics, pre-positioning supplies, and reaching vulnerable communities efficiently.

## 6. Findings and Analysis

### A. Human Security Outcomes

UAE humanitarian assistance has had tangible positive effects on human security. Health, WASH, food, and education programs have maintained essential services and prevented severe deprivation.

### B. UAE as a Cooperative Humanitarian Partner

A large share of UAE funding was channeled through the YHRP as unrestricted contributions, allowing UN agencies flexibility to allocate resources impartially. Bilateral programs implemented by the ERC complemented this by targeting emergency relief and basic services.

### C. Middle-Power Diplomacy and Soft Power

The UAE's contributions, visibility at UN pledging conferences, and on-the-ground projects enhance its image as a responsible regional actor. Strategic and humanitarian objectives operate in tandem, demonstrating how middle powers can use aid for both governance influence and tangible civilian benefits.

## 7. Discussion

### A. Humanitarian Assistance as Peace Support

Humanitarian assistance can function as a peace-support mechanism when sustained, well-resourced, and oriented toward human security outcomes. UAE-funded programs have mitigated institutional collapse, reduced grievances, and preserved spaces for everyday life, aligning with broader peacebuilding objectives (Mac Ginty & Firchow, 2019).

### B. UAE's Role in Multilateral Humanitarian Governance

Channelling aid through the YHRP demonstrates UAE commitment to multilateral coordination, promoting impartiality, efficiency, and trust in UN mechanisms. This approach offers a model for emerging donors seeking to combine visibility with principled engagement.

### C. Middle-Power Strategies and Regional Stability

The UAE leverages humanitarian engagement alongside diplomatic support, illustrating niche leadership typical of middle powers. Such strategies underscore the continued importance of Gulf states in humanitarian and peacebuilding initiatives in the region (Almezzaini, 2018; Ulrichsen, 2020; Khan, 2023).

## 8. Policy Recommendations

1. Prioritize unearmarked funding to UN response plans to maximize flexibility and impartiality.
2. Integrate emergency relief with infrastructure rehabilitation to enhance long-term human security.
3. Strengthen partnerships with UN agencies, local authorities, and civil society.
4. Maintain transparency and detailed reporting on contributions and outcomes.
5. Align humanitarian interventions with broader peace and

development strategies.

## 9. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that humanitarian assistance can serve as a peace-support instrument. The UAE's engagement in Yemen, characterized by unrestricted contributions, multilateral coordination, and sectoral breadth, has sustained essential services, improved access to food and healthcare, and enhanced local resilience. While humanitarian action cannot replace political solutions, it constitutes a vital component of broader strategies to protect civilians, maintain institutions, and foster conditions conducive to peace. Gulf middle powers, such as the UAE, illustrate how regional actors can strategically integrate humanitarian engagement with diplomacy to advance both stability and international norms.

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