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ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Non-Western Agency in Refugee Humanitarianism: Turkey and ‘Operation Provide Comfort’

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The evolution of refugee humanitarianism is commonly studied in terms of critical junctures. One such historical moment is the creation of a ‘safe zone’ for Iraqi Kurdish refugees above the 36th parallel of Northern Iraq through the 1991 United Nations (UN) mission known as ‘Operation Provide Comfort.’ The UN intervention is widely accepted as a critical juncture because it marked the beginning of international humanitarianism’s extra-territorial phase. ‘Operation Provide Comfort’ brought a paradigm shift in the management of displaced populations by means of introducing “preventive protection” as a novel approach combining protection with control as the idea is to keep refugees in their own countries and offer them help without the need to cross an international border. The standard narrative underlines Western historical priority by attributing the preventive protection to a single source of ideas and processes stemming from the West. Drawing on postcolonial research, this paper argues for recognizing the agency of the non-West in the formulation and execution of the safe haven concept as a historical milestone. More specifically, it demonstrates the pioneering role that Turkey played through international debates and diplomatic action, which culminated into the new episode of refugee humanitarianism. The findings also invite us to revisit current explanations of the evolution of international humanitarian norms by showing the entanglement of refugee protection on the one hand, and domestic and regional questions of ethnicity and counter-insurgency on the other.

La evolución del humanitarismo con respecto a los refugiados se estudia, frecuentemente, en términos de coyunturas críticas. Uno de esos momentos históricos es la creación de una “zona segura” para los refugiados kurdos iraquíes encima del paralelo 36 del norte de Irak, lo cual se llevó a cabo a través de la misión de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas (ONU) conocida como “Operación Proporcionar Confort”, que tuvo lugar en 1991. Esta intervención de la ONU está ampliamente aceptada como una coyuntura crítica, debido a que marcó el comienzo de la fase extraterritorial del humanitarismo internacional. La “Operación Proporcionar Confort” supuso un cambio de paradigma” en la gestión de las poblaciones desplazadas mediante la introducción de la “protección preventiva”, que era un enfoque novedoso que combinaba la protección con el control, y cuya idea consiste en mantener a los refugiados en sus propios países y ofrecerles ayuda sin necesidad de cruzar una frontera internacional. La

narrativa estándar subraya la prioridad histórica hacia el Occidente ya que se atribuye la protección preventiva a una única fuente de ideas y procesos, los cuales proceden de Occidente. Este artículo parte de la base la investigación poscolonial y, en consecuencia, aboga por el reconocimiento de la agencia de lo no occidental dentro de la formulación y ejecución del concepto de refugio seguro como un hito histórico. De forma más concreta, el artículo demuestra el papel pionero que desempeñó Turquía a través de los debates internacionales y de la acción diplomática y que culminó con este nuevo episodio en materia del humanitarismo con respecto a los refugiados. Nuestras conclusiones también invitan a revisar las explicaciones actuales en materia de la evolución de las normas humanitarias internacionales, mostrando, así, el solapamiento entre la protección de los refugiados, por un lado, y las cuestiones nacionales y regionales en materia de etnicidad y contrainsurgencia, por el otro.

L'évolution de l'humanitarisme vis-à-vis des réfugiés s'étudie souvent en termes conjoncturels. Parmi ces moments historiques figure la création d'une « zone de protection » pour les réfugiés kurdes d'Irak au nord du 36^e parallèle de l'Irak du Nord, grâce à l'opération « Provide Comfort », une mission des Nations Unies (ONU) de 1991. L'intervention onusienne est largement considérée comme un événement crucial, car elle représente le début de la phase extraterritoriale de l'humanitarisme international. L'opération « Provide Comfort » a entraîné un changement de paradigme dans la gestion des déplacements de populations. L'introduction de « protections préventives » constitue une nouvelle approche : elle combine la protection au contrôle, l'idée étant de maintenir les réfugiés dans leur propre pays et de les aider sans les faire traverser de frontières internationales. Habituellement, l'on souligne la priorité historique de l'Occident, en allouant la protection préventive à une seule source occidentale d'idées et de processus. En se fondant sur la recherche postcoloniale, cet article affirme la nécessité de reconnaître le rôle des acteurs non occidentaux dans la formulation et l'exécution du concept de refuge comme jalon historique. Plus précisément, il démontre le rôle de pionnier joué par la Turquie dans des débats internationaux et des actions diplomatiques, qui a abouti sur un nouvel épisode de l'humanitarisme vis-à-vis des réfugiés. Les conclusions nous invitent par ailleurs à revoir les explications actuelles de l'évolution des normes humanitaires internationales, en montrant les liens étroits entre la protection des réfugiés d'une part, et des questions nationales et régionales d'ethnicité et de contre-insurrection d'autre part.

Keywords: refugee humanitarianism, postcolonial theory, Turkey

Palabras clave: humanitarismo con respecto a los refugiados, teoría poscolonial, Turquía

Mots clés: humanitarisme vis-à-vis des réfugiés, théorie postcoloniale, Turquie

Introduction

Refugee humanitarianism is nowadays a highly institutionalized form of international response to alleviate human suffering caused by forced migration. International humanitarian action rests on an intertwined set of organizations, laws, agreements, techniques and technologies, norms and discourses that govern interventions in order to relieve the pain and improve the life conditions of displaced populations across the world (Pallister-Wilkins 2022). From search-and-rescue missions targeting distressed boats at sea to refugee camps as temporary shelters ad-

dressing urgent needs of aid and protection, refugee humanitarianism seems to be an ordinary fact of the contemporary world (Cuttitta 2018).

The evolution of refugee humanitarianism is commonly studied in terms of critical junctures. Michael Barnett (2011, 2014) divides this history into three distinct phases. The first period starts from the late eighteenth century until the end of World War I, when—Barnett argues—refugees were largely absent in international humanitarian efforts. Feelings and acts of compassion addressed the misery and suffering of distant strangers who were primarily slaves, aboriginals and soldiers rather than civilians and refugees. The second phase covers the Cold War period, during which refugees became a global concern for humanitarianism. This period is marked by a series of developments that would constitute the building blocks of the international refugee regime. A key event was the establishment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1950 to help displaced Europeans as a result of World War II and the 1951 Geneva Convention. The third phase begins with the end of the Cold War (Barnett 2011), which is marked by an expansion of refugee humanitarianism with the proliferation of actors, who have started to undertake a myriad of humanitarian activities on a much broader global scale (Gabiam 2016).

The three-phase periodization of the history of humanitarianism is widely accepted and has been reproduced in scholarly works on refugees and forced migration (e.g., Hyndman 2000; Davey et al. 2013; Gabiam 2015; Bradley et al. 2022). The critical junctures identified by the common narrative on refugee humanitarianism are accompanied by geographical parameters, which together posit a Western-centric account of history. Accordingly, the origins of refugee humanitarianism are argued to be rooted “both geographically and temporally...in the Western and especially European experience of war and natural disaster” (Davey, Borton and Foley 2013, 1). While societies outside the West have developed their own notions and acts of charity (Fassin 2011), it is Christian ideas of solidarity and compassion and their subsequent evolution into a universal humanity ideal that have underpinned the advent and rise of international refugee humanitarianism (Fassin 2011; Finnemore 2012). The role of the non-Western world along with its relationship with the West are conceptualized through the same geographical-temporal prism. In refugee studies, the non-West has limited—if any—historical agency. It features as either the recipient of Western humanitarianism by way of being the main geography of displacement and related human suffering or a latecomer to the humanitarian field through the emulation of Western ways of doing. The non-Western subject hardly appears as a source, let alone a precursor, in the making of international refugee humanitarianism.

Drawing on postcolonial/decolonial work, a rich scholarship within International Relations (IR) invites us to be attentive to the agential role of the non-West in the constitution of our modern world (e.g., Bhambra 2007; Sabaratnam 2011; Çapan 2020). The contention is that we need to move away from the view of the international as the making of a so-called Western ‘core’ on its own (Bilgin 2021). Instead, we need to acknowledge the contributions of the non-West in the formation of ideas, the exchange of skills and resources and the establishment of institutions having world-significance (Shilliam 2011a; Hobson and Sajed 2017). Notwithstanding these critiques, research on international refugee humanitarianism remains largely untouched by IR debates of Western/non-Western agencies. This is surprising considering that more recent postcolonial/decolonial scholarship has provided important new insights into the historical beginnings and colonial/imperial continuities in Western border and migration management policies and practices (e.g., Mongia 2018; El-Enany 2020; Vigneswaran 2020; Mayblin and Turner 2021).

This article aims to push existing debates within IR with regard to Western-centric conceptions of non-Western agency by expanding this line of critique to the study of international refugee humanitarianism. More specifically, it focuses on the United

Nations (UN) mission known as ‘Operation Provide Comfort’, which created a ‘safe zone’ for Iraqi Kurdish refugees above the 36th parallel of Northern Iraq during the Gulf War. The choice of the empirical case is informed by the scholarly conviction that the 1991 Iraq War was a critical juncture because it marked the beginning of international humanitarianism’s third phase (Barnett 2011; Gabiam 2016). Forming the basis for ‘Operation Provide Comfort’, the UN Resolution 688 departed from the international doctrine of non-intervention in “the domestic jurisdiction of any state” as clearly stated in Article 2 Paragraph 7 of the UN Charter (United Nations 1945). As such, ‘Operation Provide Comfort’ brought a “paradigm shift” in the management of displaced populations by international humanitarian agencies, particularly the UNHCR. This paradigm shift is the introduction of “preventive protection” as a novel approach to international refugee humanitarianism (Hyndman 2000).

The standard narrative underlines Western historical priority by attributing the preventive protection to a single source of ideas and processes stemming from the West (Malanczuk 1991; Harrington 1993; Koshy 1996; Finnemore 2012). What is invisible here is Turkey’s agency within processes that were conducive to UN Resolution 688 and ‘Operation Provide Comfort.’ Turkey hardly features in the dominant account of the humanitarian intervention in Northern Iraq and the birth of the preventive protection approach in the management of displaced populations (e.g., Malanczuk 1991; Koshy 1996).

This article argues that far from being a bystander, Turkey exerted significant agency in the formulation of the vision of a safe zone in Northern Iraq in 1991. The country pushed international debates and was involved in diplomatic action which would lead to the reconsideration of international legal principles regarding humanitarian action. At a time when Western governments were still hesitant about—and even opposed to—a humanitarian intervention in Iraq, Turkey played a pioneering role which would later be attributed to the Western-originated idea of the preventive approach. The article goes one step further and illustrates that context-specific domestic and regional factors and developments were at the heart of the Turkish state’s proposal for extra-territorial humanitarianism. The safe haven idea advocated by Turkey demonstrates that the third episode of humanitarianism is entangled with enduring questions of ethnicity in Turkey’s (still) unfinished project of nation-building on the one hand, and emerging geographies and practices of Kurdish (counter-)insurgency in post-Cold War Turkey and the wider Middle East on the other.

Non-Western Agency and the Making of the International

IR research has made significant attempts to address the discipline’s Eurocentrism by addressing the absence of and limited attention paid to the non-Western world. One way is through what Amitav Acharya terms a ‘Global IR’ research agenda, which aims to “transcend(s) the distinction between the West and non-West—or any similar binary and mutually exclusive categories” (Acharya 2014, 649). Acharya puts forward a set of strategies as part of Global IR, including a “pluralistic universalism” by “recognizing and respecting the diversity in us” (649) and by opening up IR to perspectives, viewpoints and intellectual traditions of non-Western societies. This shows parallels with the call to ‘decenter’ IR research by engaging with ideas, histories and experiences beyond the confines of the West/Europe (Fisher-Onar and Nicolaidis 2013). The goal is here to make visible what has remained absent by giving ‘voice’ to non-Westerners to make IR more plural, diverse and global.

Migration and border studies have joined IR’s call for pluralization and diversification by shifting research focus from Western actors, institutions and policies to those countries that are the West’s key interlocutors in the management of human mobility. Scholars have explored how the non-West debates, challenges, adopts

and resists externally promoted understandings, interests, policies and practices of migration control (e.g., [Cassarino 2014](#); [El Qadim 2018](#); [Frowd 2014](#); [Tsourapas 2019](#); [Ould Moctar 2023](#)). In a similar vein, studies on refugee humanitarianism have sought to recover the field from its West-centrism by juxtaposing the West's humanitarian discourse against its actual policy implementation, such as everyday border control ([Pallister-Wilkins 2015](#)). These works have pointed to hierarchies of knowledge production and power asymmetries in international organizations ([Frowd 2014](#); [Fine 2017](#)) and sought to amplify the agency of the migrants through an acknowledgment of the latter's autonomy in interactions, such as with border agents and asylum authorities ([Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013](#)).

These examples attest to the fact that far from being absent, the non-West has a defining presence in humanitarianism studies. That said, the literature still treats the West and the non-West as two separate categories to the extent that the non-Western world's impact on international humanitarianism is marginalized. Such marginalization is related to the wider issue within IR with regard to the West-centrism of the discipline in its attribution of historical centrality to Western agency in the making of the international (e. g. [Laffey and Weldes 2008](#); [Sabaratnam 2011](#); [Çapan 2020](#)). Scholars utilizing postcolonial insights contend that IR has long taken the West as the primary subject of history by taking the Western model as the origin of world-historical developments and an exceptional model to be diffused to geographies outside the West ([Bhambra 2007](#)). For [Hobson and Sajed \(2017\)](#), the historical primacy accorded to Europe within IR research—or to the Western world in general—is an example of “Euro-fetishization,” which works to constitute “the West as the hyper-agential actor in world politics” (552). One outcome of fetishizing Europe is that the international becomes something that is the “West's single-handed creation” (554) through factors, actors and processes immanent to Europe with the rest of the world having no meaningful contribution to its emergence ([Bhambra 2007](#)).

The hyper-agential role given to the West comes hand in hand with the treatment of the non-Western world as an ontologically separate entity. In line with the assumption about a distinct non-Western subjectivity existing independently and autonomously, IR scholars have looked at societies beyond Europe in search of ‘difference’ ([Hobson and Sajed 2017](#)). These efforts are connected with the IR's objective to remedy the Western-centrism of the discipline. The rationale behind this is that “the ‘non-West’ offers a ‘different’ take on politics—if only ‘we’ could find more about it” ([Bilgin 2008](#), 7). Here, the non-West is brought into the analysis as a material to illustrate difference revealing a sort of “authenticity” and/or representing “local(ized)” expressions of ideas, practices and institutions emanating from elsewhere; that is, the West ([Bilgin 2008](#); [Hobson and Sajed 2017](#)).

The emphasis on ‘difference’ can be found in academic studies on Turkish humanitarianism in the area of refugee governance. Turkish difference is related, for the most part, to its limited integration into the liberal refugee regime ([Natter 2021](#)). Despite being one of its first signatories, Turkey's continuing application of a geographical limitation to the Geneva Convention, combined with its still not fully developed and effectively functioning asylum system, places the country outside the ‘liberal’ refugee order established by the West after 1945. That said, Turkey is home to millions of refugees, while the country has recently taken a much more active role in international refugee relief efforts ([Korkut 2019](#); [Coşkun-Türkmen 2020](#)). What, then, explains the nature of Turkish humanitarianism, which is presumed to be distinct in the way that it is envisioned and manifested with respect to refugee reception?

Senay Özden unpacks the notion of ‘guest’, which is widely deployed by the Turkish state to make sense of and implement its humanitarian action towards displaced Syrians. Özden contends that the ‘guest’ idea is precisely what distances Turkey

from a liberal understanding of humanitarianism because it recognizes refugee status based on a “charitable approach” rather than a “rights-based approach” (2013, 5). Originating from feelings of grace and generosity, the refugee-as-guest framing is a unique form of humanitarianism, which, Karakaya-Polat argues, is used by the Turkish state to represent the ‘self’ as morally superior to its Western ‘other’, more specifically the European Union. This representation borrows from religious and historical narratives and comparisons to construct Turkish humanitarianism as something unique and exceptional. On the one hand, Turkey justifies a charitable approach to Syrians as a moral obligation towards persecuted “Muslim brothers and sisters” (Korkut 2016; Karakaya-Polat 2018, 505). On the other hand, selective events of the past, such as the fifteenth-century Jewish migration to the Ottoman Empire from the Iberian Peninsula, are used “as a source of pride and legitimating force” to accentuate Turkish historical distinctiveness (Karakaya-Polat 2018, 512). Similar religious-historical sources and references are observed to constitute Turkey’s contemporary international humanitarian action in distant geographies (e.g., Rohingya refugees) as “distinct from the West” (Korkut 2019, 678).

These studies offer rich insights into the multiple ways in which humanitarianism takes shape in non-Western geographies. That said, the search for a Turkish difference in refugee humanitarianism has had the consequence of reproducing the binary view of supposedly two separately existing entities we call as the West and the non-West. The valid and important criticism regarding refugees’ limited legal and political rights in Turkey notwithstanding, the recognition of a unique type of Turkish humanitarianism is a form of Western-centrism because it implies an “indigenous normative worldview” that is “self-generated” (Tolay 2021, 701). Looking for “alternatives” in the non-Western world still considers the West as the main point of reference against which “local traditions” and “cultural diversity” are compared, hierarchized and evaluated. Each entity—whether it is the West or the non-West—“is assumed to have an integrity on its own and to have existed independent of each other” (Bhambra 2007, 71; Sabaratnam 2013).

This article adopts a “relational approach” to the agency, where “West and non-West are *not* autonomous and separate but are mutually embedded and co-constitutive.” Conceiving the international in relational terms necessitates a shift from a substantialist view of the world towards one that underscores “global *inter-connectedness* and *co-constitutivities* between the Western and non-Western worlds” (Hobson and Sajed 2017, 551; emphases in original). As a result, the West is no longer a hyper-agential actor that brings the international “*all by itself*” (Hobson and Sajed 2017, 554, emphasis in original). Instead, the making of the international is one, where “non-Western agency has significantly constitutive and consequential outcomes” (Hobson and Sajed 2017, 567) to the extent that it “makes and remakes, shapes and reshapes” the West in fundamental ways (Hobson and Sajed 2017, 556).

A rich and ever-growing number of IR studies demonstrate how ideas, events and social formations in non-Western geographies have brought the modern world and the international into being (e.g., Gruffydd Jones 2006; Bilgin 2008; Sabaratnam 2011; Hobson 2012; Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015). Their objective is to counter IR discipline’s production and reproduction of “the narcissism of Europe”—or the West in general—, which is tied to “the assumption that the European self is so richly contradictory that there is no need to look anywhere else” (Shilliam 2011b). In this respect, scholars have uncovered non-Western sources and beginnings of ideas that are almost exclusively ascribed to the West due to their assumed universal importance, such as historical revolutions (Bhambra 2016) or political philosophy (Shilliam 2011a). Nevertheless, far from positing a dichotomous understanding of the world by means of recovering an indigenous, untainted, authentic non-West, these studies situate non-Western agencies and contributions in “connected histories of the international” (Çapan 2020). Writing non-Western roots of cosmopolitanism, for example, not only disturbs the commonly held assumption that this

philosophical debate emerged first in Europe and later became global through diffusion. But it also demonstrates how non-Western cosmopolitan thinking developed in the context of wider regional and international developments, such as African liberation struggles and Pan-African anti-colonial movements (Gruffydd Jones 2010). At times, non-Western contributions to the international rested on ideas, practices and institutions that were far more ahead than their Western contemporaries (Shilliam 2011a; Anievas and Nişancıoğlu 2015; Bhambra 2016).

In the following, I will revisit the history of the “preventive protection” approach taken as the third episode of refugee humanitarianism. This section will first discuss the dominant narrative on the 1991 establishment of a ‘safe zone’ in Iraq through the UN mission ‘Operation Provide Comfort’. I will then reconstruct this narrative by bringing Turkish agency into our analyses while simultaneously arguing for placing this milestone of humanitarianism’s historical evolution in Turkey’s long-lasting issues of nation-building and regional dynamics of (counter-)insurgency of the time.

This research is a single case study following an “*exploratory* mode of research” (Gerring 2001). The “exploratory case study” (Swedberg 2020, 28) is a suitable “strategy of research” (Gerring 2004, 349) when the researcher is faced by one of the two issues: Either a topic on an important political phenomenon has not been researched at all or there is some research on the said topic but the facts are incomplete and even “fragmentary and contradictory” urging the research to dig deep into the matter (Swedberg 2020, 24). As stated earlier ‘Operation Provide Comfort’ signifies a historical moment as this UN mission is argued to have instigated the third phase of international refugee humanitarianism. However, existing knowledge on the beginnings of ‘Operation Provide Conform’ pays little, if any, attention to regional actors. This is astonishing given that the neighboring countries of Iraq were directly affected by the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Kurds at the time, especially Turkey which received almost half a million refugees.

This lack of knowledge, coupled with the historical primacy accorded to the 1991 UN mission, constitutes this article’s primary motivation behind the selection of an “exploratory case study.” An exploratory research is “inductivist” in the sense that “knowledge arises in interaction with the data” (Gerring 2001, 232). Data sources in exploratory case studies vary from surveys to interviews and participant observation (Swedberg 2020). In this article, the first source of data comes from document analysis comprising official texts, including but not limited to written and verbal documentation of international conventions (such as UN proceedings and debates) as well as Turkish parliamentary debates, official speeches and interviews. This data has been complemented by academic works written in English and Turkish, including those studies that have been published outside the “mainstream” (IR) journals. Taken together, the data corpus is apt for exploratory research because “non-Western insecurities are more difficult to capture in intellectual history-writing owing to the meagre records found in the top or bottom drawers of security studies archives” (Bilgin 2010, 617).

‘Operation Provide Comfort’ and the Birth of Extra-Territorial Humanitarianism

On April 5, 1991, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 688 calling for the provision of humanitarian assistance in Northern Iraq to the Iraqi, primarily Kurdish, population displaced due to the Gulf War. The Resolution identified civilian repression and the resulting human displacement as a threat to “international peace and security in the region” and expressed concerns about “the magnitude of the human suffering involved.” The 688 Resolution involved several provisions outlining the Security Council’s vision of a ‘humanitarian’ intervention in Northern Iraq to secure the safe return of displaced population groups to their towns and villages. More specially, Resolution 688 urged the Iraqi government to “allow

immediate access by international humanitarian organizations to all those in need of assistance in all parts of Iraq and make available all necessary facilities for their operations.” It called on the UN Secretary-General to take immediate action and utilize all available means “to address urgently the critical needs of the refugees and displaced Iraqi population.” It requested the Iraqi government to cooperate towards these humanitarian goals and asked other Member States and humanitarian organizations to join these humanitarian efforts (United Nations 1991b).

UN Resolution 688 constitutes the basis for the deployment of the mission known as ‘Operation Provide Comfort’, which resulted in the formation of a ‘safe zone’ above the 36th parallel of Northern Iraq. Launched by the United States (US) President Bush and supported initially by the military aircraft by the United Kingdom (UK) and France, Operation Provide Comfort patrolled the return of Iraqi refugees from Turkey and Iran and created a corridor for humanitarian aid led by the UNHCR (Latif 2002). Lasting for three months, the operation was later aided by other allied forces contributing to the logistics of the operation, including the Netherlands, Spain and Italy (Malanczuk 1991). Despite denouncing the military intervention, the Iraqi government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the UN and declared its support and willingness to cooperate in the return of the Kurdish population groups. The Memorandum paved the way for the growing presence of UN personnel, units and activities in Iraq to deliver humanitarian assistance (Koshy 1996). With Operation Provide Comfort, around 460.000 Kurdish refugees were returned from Turkey to the security zone protected by the allied forces, where they were provided with basic needs such as shelter and subsistence in designated areas. Of the 14.000 who remained in Turkey, only 5.000 were still in the country by October 1991 (Altok and Tosun 2020). The displacement caused the loss of 13.000 lives in the mountains making up the Iraqi–Turkish border (Malanczuk 1991).

There is a widespread agreement that UN Resolution 688 is unprecedented (Malanczuk 1991; Scheffer 1992; Harrington 1993; Koshy 1996). It is because the Resolution departed from the international doctrine of non-intervention in the domestic jurisdiction of any state as clearly stated in Article 2 Paragraph 7 of the UN Charter. While the humanitarian dimension was present in existing UN activities of disaster management, it was with Resolution 688 that humanitarian concerns became part of the UN law. “The hitherto sacrosanct principle of nonintervention was put aside because of the magnitude and urgent nature of the Kurdish problem” (Harrington 1993, 644). The Resolution and the ‘safe-haven’ military operation in Northern Iraq “established an unprecedented set of rights and obligations for aid agencies and the host government” (Scheffer 1992, 267). They “triggered a fresh appraisal of the political and legal merits of humanitarian intervention, the circumstances that should warrant it, and how it should be authorized and carried out” (Scheffer 1992, 274).

Operation Provide Comfort marked a beginning in the management of displaced populations by international humanitarian aid agencies, particularly the UNHCR. With the intervention in Northern Iraq, a paradigm shift occurred in the definition of who a refugee is and the kind of humanitarian assistance to be provided to displaced populations. This paradigm shift is termed “preventive protection,” which, as UNHCR defines, involves:

“the establishment or undertaking of specific activities inside the country of origin so that people no longer feel compelled to cross borders in search of protection and assistance. In this sense, for instance, action on behalf of the internally displaced can be defined as preventive protection, although the primary motive may be to address a genuine gap in protection rather than to avert outflow. Preventive protection in this sense may also include the establishment of “safety zones” or “safe areas” inside the country of origin where protection may be sought. It relates therefore to the protection of nationals in their own country” (UNHCR quoted in Hyndman 2000, 17–8).

In other words, the preventive protection approach promotes refugee protection through containment. Though the prevention of irregular border crossings is said to be of secondary importance when compared to the protection aspect of the new approach, the paradigm change serves the goal of stopping the mobility of would-be refugees to those countries, that are traditional destinations for people escaping persecution, war and violence. The language of “the right to remain in one’s home country” replaced “the former dominant discourse of the right to leave” (Hyndman 2000, 17) with important consequences for geographies and subjects of refugee care. State governments have also transferred their responsibilities to non-state actors—be these international and multilateral organizations (Hyndman 2000). As such, ‘Operation Provide Comfort’ was a turning point with regard to the extra-territoriality of refugee humanitarianism. The operation provided for humanitarian intervention in non-Western spaces through an approach combining protection with refugee containment. The safe haven concept is an example of extra-territoriality because the rationale is to keep the refugees away from receiving countries through the creation of new spaces of protection and control. Similar logics of containment and care were also at play in UNHCR activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Somalia in the 1990s following the intervention in Northern Iraq (Scheffer 1992; Finnemore 2012). In Somalia, the zone established in 1992 by the UNHCR was driven by the idea of preventive protection. It aimed to decrease the number of border crossings by displaced Somalian people into Kenya while simultaneously returning those who had already entered Kenya. UNHCR activities were backed up by the US-led ‘Operation Restore Hope’ in the same year, whose mission was to make humanitarian assistance available to the Somalian civilian population within the borders of Somalia, thereby reducing the incentives for outward mobility (Hyndman 2000).

Current geographies of preventive protection are much broader than initially envisioned. The Mediterranean Sea is one example where practices of protection and control in refugee governance are deeply intertwined. Pallister-Wilkins (2022) puts forward the concept of “humanitarian borderwork” to capture these co-existing logics, while Paolo Cuttitta calls the Mediterranean a “humanitarianized border-space” (2018, 651). Here, state and non-state actors carry out operations to alleviate human suffering that the borders themselves create and provide relief to those in need through search-and-rescue efforts that reach as far as the high seas and the territorial waters of Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries. Similar scenes of humanitarian border control materialize on a daily basis at the Mexico–US border and within Australia’s off-shore practices on Indonesian islands (Pallister-Wilkins 2022).

The continuing prominence of preventive protection lends further support to the historical importance of the safe haven concept in Northern Iraq. The standard account of the UN Resolution 688 and ‘Operation Provide Comfort’ underlines Western historical priority by attributing the preventive protection to ideas, developments and processes stemming from the West. A key debate here is one of liberalism-versus-illiberalism. On the one hand, the April 1991 intervention by the Western allied forces is said to rest on the evolution of humanitarian norms in the justification of military action in non-Western geographies. The argument is that while international norms of humanitarian intervention have existed for more than a century, actions were limited to the protection of European Christians. Needless to say, it is the West that is the origin of norms and the subject of history in promoting intervention on humanitarian grounds. It was only with widening the subjects of humanitarian protection that Western interventions were extended to non-Christian people and non-Western geographies by such countries as the United States, Britain and France, which brought the suffering of the Kurds in Iraq to the UN and sought UN authority (Finnemore 2012). Another explanation offered is the role of domestic public opinion in Western countries pushing their governments to open a hu-

humanitarian corridor for the displaced Kurdish groups to return from neighboring countries and stay in protected zones where care is delivered by donor groups. Public opinion is said to have been decisive also in the launch of the 1992 US humanitarian intervention in Somalia, which “was a response to sentiments of compassion on the part of US citizens” (Bellamy and Wheeler 2008, 519).

On the other hand, an alternative view is that the change that occurred with the 1991 Iraq War proves the West’s abandonment of its earlier liberal approach to refugees toward a policy that connects protection and containment (Hyndman 2000; Hyndman and Mountz 2013). Being the *modus operandi* of contemporary humanitarianism with its intertwining logics of care and control (Pallister-Wilkins 2015), the preventive protection paradigm is seen as an instance of Western disengagement from a liberal refugee regime whose origins lie in Cold War politics (Hyndman 2000; see, however, Chimni 1998).

The adherence to West-as-origin is evident in the chronological framing of events preceding and following April 5, 1991. Accordingly, the beginning of April 1991 was characterized by a lack of international coordination in the pursuit of a determined, multilateral humanitarian action. France is the country to thank for bringing the human suffering of the Kurdish displaced population to the attention of the UN Security Council. After a failed effort on April 2, France is said to have persuaded the UN Security Council members to adopt the Resolution. ‘Operation Provide Comfort’ was started on April 6 with relief airdrops by US cargo aircraft departing from the Turkey’s Incirlik Air Base. Other Western allied forces joined the United States in the days following (Malanczuk 1991; Koshy 1996).

It was only on April 10, as the prevalent narrative continues, that the United States took concrete steps to create a no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel in Iraq (Malanczuk 1991). The UK Prime Minister of the time, John Major, is named as the brainchild of the UN idea of a safe haven (Hardie-Forsyth 1999) and its mobilization at the level of the European Communities (EC). It is argued that while EC leaders expressed their concern about the situation of the Kurdish civilian population on April 3 (EPC Bulletin 1994, 171), the extraordinary European Council Meeting on April 8, 1991, in Luxembourg provided the occasion for Major to announce the proposal of a safe haven in Northern Iraq (EPC Bulletin 1994, 174). At the Luxembourg European Council Meeting, the EC members called on the UN to assist these efforts by addressing the immediate protection needs of the Kurdish population (EPC Bulletin 1994, 172).

Following this, Jacques Santer as President-in-Office of the Council of Ministers made a statement on a visit by EU officials to the UN Headquarters on April 6, which “was something without precedent or parallel in the history of the Community. It involved making plans...for creating one or more safe havens to enable the Kurdish and other Iraqi refugees to return to their country and protecting them from attack by Saddam Hussein’s army.” Santer continued by welcoming “Resolution 688 which, in endorsing the principle of a duty to step in on humanitarian grounds, open up unprecedented prospects for action by the United Nations.” The Security Council’s “diplomatic breakthrough” was seen to be ground-breaking by encouraging EC “talks on the basis of the proposals made by the British Prime Minister, John Major, for the establishment of safe havens on Iraqi territory” (EPC Bulletin 1994, 174). Santer continued his statement as follows:

“As you see, the tragedy that is being acted out at the moment has potential—and this, unfortunately, is perhaps the only positive aspect—for generating new thinking that can enhance the quality of international law by making breakthroughs into areas that have hitherto been barred to it in the name of the sacrosanct principle of total respect for the territorial integrity of a state” (EPC Bulletin 1994, 175).

What has been made invisible in the standard narrative is Turkey's agential role within processes that were conducive to Resolution 688 as the basis for 'Operation Provide Comfort.' Turkey hardly features in the dominant account of the humanitarian intervention in Northern Iraq and the birth of the preventive protection approach in the management of displaced populations (see, for example, [Scheffer 1992](#); [Hyndman 2000](#)). Even when there are references to the country, it occupies a secondary position as the recipient of great power decisions by, for example, opening its lands for use by Western aircraft delivering humanitarian aid to Iraq. Or the Turkish side is merely one of the many attendees of meetings convened by Europe/West as the primary source of ideas and decisions leading to an internationally coordinated mission that has opened a new era in the intersecting practices of human mobility control and refugee protection ([Malanczuk 1991](#)). Drawing on a variety of primary and secondary sources, the following section unsettles this narrative that has silenced non-Western agencies regarding humanitarianism's historical evolution.

Recovering Turkey's Agency in Refugee Humanitarianism

Turkey exerted significant agency in laying the foundation of the extra-territorial management of the Kurdish displaced population. The country actively pressured Western countries for diplomatic action and the eventual creation of a safe haven in Northern Iraq, which complicates the West-centric, unilinear account of the 1991 events. The UN Security Council meeting resulting in Resolution 688 was convened upon the request of Turkey followed by France, both of which sent letters addressed to the President of the Security Council dated 2 and April 4, 1991 respectively as the Resolution 688 itself explicitly affirms.

The background for Turkey's letter is the summoning of the Turkish National Security Council on April 2, where it was estimated that at least 200,000 Iraqi Kurds were waiting on the other side of the border and hundreds of thousands would likely to join them in the coming days ([Oran 1996](#)). The letter to the UN was sent on the same day and signed by Mustafa Akşın, Turkey's Ambassador on the Permanent Mission to the UN. In the letter, Turkey drew attention to the human suffering and mass displacement caused by the military actions of the Iraqi Government posing "a threat to the region's peace and security." The letter referred to Turkey's past and present provision of humanitarian aid and protection to the civilian population of Iraq, including by allowing them into the Turkish territory. Turkey called for increased involvement by international organizations to share responsibility and the economic burden. Akşın completes the letter by saying:

"I request that a meeting of the Security Council be convened immediately to consider this alarming situation and to adopt the necessary measures to put an end to this inhuman repression being carried out on a massive scale" ([United Nations 1991a](#)).

Two days later, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Ahmet Kurtcebe Alptemoçin, made a statement saying that the Iraqi Government's military action had exceeded the acceptable threshold of a state's sovereign right to restore domestic order and security within its borders. The minister stated that the events have turned into the punishment of the civilian population and the latter's resulting expulsion from the country. The statement defined these military activities as unacceptable according to human rights norms and the source of internal displacement and resulting human mobility to Turkey's borders. The Foreign Minister's statement expressed Turkey's expectation from all countries to undertake immediate action and take on responsibility within the UN legal framework ([Alptemoçin 1991](#)).

It is with this statement that Turkey shared its vision for the extra-territorial management of refugees, which would take concrete shape through the country's

proposal for a safe haven in the following days. While acknowledging Iraq's territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence, Turkey's Foreign Minister described the civilian situation as exceptional and of utmost priority in ways that went beyond the general framework of international legal provisions; that is, the principle of non-interference into a third country's internal affairs.

The timing of this statement is important because it was a response to Turkey's dissatisfaction with UN Security Council Resolution 687 on April 3, 1991, which called for a ceasefire between the conflict parties but did not offer any solution to human displacement in Iraq (Oran 1996). In fact, around that time, there was a clear objection to intervention by those Western governments which are posited as primary drivers for the humanitarian approach to refugee management in Northern Iraq. The same day as Turkey sent its letter to the UN Security Council (2 April), the United Kingdom was still insisting on a policy of non-intervention, and Prime Minister John Major, to whom the origin of the safe haven concept is commonly attributed, was "commenting sarcastically that he could not 'recall asking the Kurds to mount this particular insurrection'" (Major quoted in Wheeler 2000, 148). Likewise, the United States initially rejected any proposal for a forcible intervention that would violate the legal principle of non-intervention (Wheeler 2000). At this point, Turkey's diplomatic agency was decisive in mobilizing Western governments for action (Kayhan Pusane 2017).

During the few days preceding Resolution 688, Turkey's President Turgut Özal made multiple telephone conversations with the United States to convince the US President Bush of the necessity of international involvement in humanitarian assistance to the refugee populations (Oran 1996). These 'extra-Western' forms of agency and contribution have been rendered invisible through the Eurocentric narrative, which locates sources of ideas in the norm-driven proposals and efforts of the West, primarily France and the United Kingdom (Malanczuk 1991; Finnemore 2006). Another example is the historical omission of Turkey from processes in the preparation of the content of Resolution 688. As noted above, France is argued to have put an end to the indecision of the UN Security Council after several attempts resulting in Resolution 688 (Malanczuk 1991). The historical absence here concerns the meeting which took place in Ankara on the morning of April 5, 1991. Thanks to the intensive efforts by the Turkish President Özal, Turkish diplomats and their Western European counterparts came together to discuss a draft document of Resolution 688. An agreed version was forwarded by France to the UN Security Council on the same day (Oran 1996).

Moreover, Turkey participated, though without the right to vote, in the Security Council discussions on April 5. Turkey was the first country to be given the floor to make a statement, when Ambassador Mustafa Akşın started by thanking the Council for replying positively to Turkey's request for the Security Council meeting: "Turkey has asked for this meeting of the Security Council in view of the grave threat to the peace and security of the region posed by the tragic events taking place in Iraq. I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this meeting" (UN Security Council 1991, 5). Pointing to the Iraqi army's excessive use of force against the civilian population, Akşın invited the Council to act in the following manner:

"There is no way in which what is going on in northern Iraq can be justified as an internal affair of that country. Given the scale of the human tragedy and its international implications, this Council cannot allow itself to be relegated to the role of a mere spectator as these calamitous events unfold" (UN Security Council 1991, 7).

Turkey was thus not a passive bystander or a follower of immanent developments happening in the West. The country's role was decisive in pushing international debates and collective action leading to the reconsideration of the legal provisions with respect to humanitarian intervention. Relatedly, Akşın noted that "The

Security-General should be requested to send a humanitarian mission, urgently, to this region to assess the situation, to report on the magnitude of the requirements in terms of humanitarian assistance and to propose arrangements for distributing assistance to the displaced persons” (UN Security Council 1991, 7).

The definition of what these “arrangements” would entail was already taking shape, which reaffirms Turkey’s importance in envisaging extra-territorial spaces of refugee humanitarianism. Already on April 4, 1991, Turkey’s Foreign Minister suggested that the provision of humanitarian aid to the Iraqi people should be “in their own countries” in line with which Turkey is said to have undertaken the necessary measures in line with the physical conditions of the mountainous border region. This statement was followed by a more concrete proposal combining principles of protection with an idea of human mobility containment, which are regarded as intertwined logics of the preventive approach. As Akşın put it at the UN Security Council Meeting on 4 April:

“we are duty bound to take whatever measures we deem necessary to prevent the anarchy and chaos reigning on the Iraqi side of the border from spilling over into our country. This does not mean that we are insensitive to the tragedy taking place in Iraq next door. We have the greatest sympathy and compassion for the plight of the victims of this man-made disaster” (UN Security Council 1991, 7).

The idea of a safe haven became much more concrete on April 7, 1991, when Turkey’s President Özal spoke to the ABC Television and proposed his solution to the displaced Iraqis as follows: “We have to get [the Kurds] better land under UN control and to put those people in the Iraqi territory and take care of them” (quoted in Wheeler 2000, 148).

Turkey’s President had for quite a while been advocating for humanitarian assistance to the displaced people within the borders of Iraq (Oran 1996; Wheeler 2000; Kayhan Pusane 2017; Altok and Tosun 2020). Özal’s television statement came at a time when the United States—and other Western countries—were still hesitant about foreign intervention (Oran 1996; Wheeler 2000, 147). The option of safe haven was far from self-evident for those actors who are taken as representing a historical priority in the extra-territorial management of refugee populations. It is therefore not surprising that there was no explicit mentioning of the safe haven idea in the UN Resolution 688.

These histories, taken together, refute the proposition that the birth of extra-territorial humanitarianism comes from a single origin of ideas, dynamics and action immanent to the West. In the early 1990s, Turkey was facing human mobility dynamics which it sought to contain through solutions similar to preventive approaches that were emerging around the same time within the EC and beyond (Hyndman 2000; Boswell 2003). During the Edinburgh Council (1992), EC members discussed among others the proposal of “‘reception in the region’, namely, support for refugee protection in countries or regions of origin, so that they would not be obliged to seek asylum in Europe.” No concrete decisions on the content or the timetable of policy development at the EC level were made during that meeting. It was not until the late 1990s that the EU seriously discussed the preventive approach “as a more benign alternative to migration control measures” (Boswell 2003, 625). ‘Operation Provide Comfort’ thereby disturbs the diffusionist narrative and its related temporal boundaries through which transformations in third countries are regarded as derivatives of the Western system becoming international.

If the history of extra-territorial human mobility management has not been solo-authored by the West, the factors that are taken to be underpinning the transition from the second to the third episode of humanitarianism also require reconsideration. Rather than a story of a break away from a liberal approach to a more restrictive, securitized one, Turkey’s refugee policy is marked by continuity, the re-

luctance to lift the geographical limitation to the Geneva Convention being only one example. The question, therefore, remains: What lies behind Turkey's idea of a preventive approach in 1991? The next section turns to this particular question.

Human Mobility, (Counter)-Insurgency, and Ethnic (Non-)Belonging

Refugee movements prompting the safe haven process were not unprecedented. They were the third major displacement experienced by Turkey from Northern Iraq followed by mass mobility in 1988 and 1990/91 respectively. In the two earlier cases, Turkey reluctantly and partially opened its borders despite domestic opposition. Decisions were justified on humanitarian grounds, and the country offered temporary protection, while working at the same time to facilitate refugee resettlement in Western countries (Latif 2002; Gökalp-Aras and Mencütek 2018). When thousands of Iraqi Kurds gathered at the border for the third time in April 1991, the initial Turkish response was to close the border and adopt measures, including the involvement of the military, to stop unwanted crossings. In the words of the then state minister Kamran İnan, “the Turkish state decided not to repeat what they saw as their mistake in 1988” and would resort to every means to prevent the entries (quoted in Latif 2002, 13). Although the country has softened this attitude later and let thousands to enter the country, the rapid return of refugees to Northern Iraq was the Turkish state's priority at that time.

Turkey's agency in refugee humanitarianism through the safe-haven idea is embedded in long-standing questions of ethnic (non-)belonging and nation-building on the one hand, and shifting geographies and dynamics of (counter-)insurgency with domestic and regional dimensions on the other. The Turkish–Iraqi border emerged as the result of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent formation of Turkey as a nation-state within a bounded territory in the early twentieth century. However, similar to other examples of post-imperial state formation where nations (understood as ethnic communities) and territory do not fully correspond (Smith 1981), Turkey's border with Iraq, along with Iran and Syria, has been a matter of the modern state's ‘imposition’ of a national border dividing national communities (Kurdish populations) and lands (Kurdish-populated areas) across several states (Bozçalı 2020). Inhabiting this particular geography for centuries, Kurds have long contested the idea and material practices of territoriality by sustaining, for example, their trade networks that preexist the Turkish nation-state. They do so by rejecting notions of legality/illegality, by means of which their activities are criminalized by the state as smuggling (Bozçalı 2020; 2021). Feelings of national kinship with Kurds on the other side of the border have shaped the ways in which the Kurdish citizens of Turkey have responded to historical events happening in Iraq, such as massacres and refugee movements during the Gulf War (Latif 2002; Bozer 2022) and more recent refugee arrivals in Turkey from the Kurdish-populated Syrian town of Kobane (Korkut 2016).

Under these circumstances, Turkey's strategy since the foundation of the republic has concentrated on the realization of the congruence between the national aspect and territorial aspect of statehood. One way to achieve this was through assimilating everyone inside state boundaries into the Turkish national identity. Besides linguistic homogenization, the republican project of ‘social engineering’ had an important territorial component with the goal to establish strong state control over Kurdish-populated areas. These efforts have delivered limited results. “The state elite's intention to remake the Kurds” (Aslan 2015, 76) did not translate into effective state control—let alone domination—over Turkey's south-eastern periphery. Despite “a highly ambitious ‘makeover’ project... (t)he Turkish state encountered problems of autonomy, coherence, and implementation and mostly remained ineffective in the face of Kurdish resistance against its nationalizing, modernizing, and assimilationist

project” (Aslan 2015, 90). One significant enabling factor has to do with geography. Kurdish-populated areas of Turkey are highly mountainous enabling easy and undetected crossings by rebels, outlaws and displaced people in either direction of the Turkish–Iraqi border (Aslan 2015).

Turkey’s historical efforts towards the “spatial binding of polity and culture” in its (still) unfinished project of nation-building (Jongerden 2007, 2) were significantly challenged in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. In the same year as Iraqi Kurds arrived at the Turkish border for the third time, the Turkish armed forces adopted a new doctrine to revise its counter-insurgency action against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Having started as an urban student movement in the 1970s, the PKK adopted in the early 1980s a guerilla strategy by moving its military development and armed activities to the rural areas of the southeast part of Turkey. In this “villagers-rural environment” of guerrilla war (Jongerden 2007, 40), the PKK achieved a high degree of power by the 1990s and gained (temporary) control over large areas populated by the Kurds, including towns right at Turkey’s border with Iraq in 1991. During this period, the performance of the Turkish army was far from being effective in response to which the armed forces adopted a new counter-insurgency strategy whose “rationale was spatial contraction leading to environment deprivation.” For the Turkish army, the rural settlements where the PKK had been gaining a stronger foothold were a “negative environment” (Jongerden 2007, 44). Certain villages/villagers were suspected of providing shelter and food to the PKK. In connection with the rendering of the villager-rural environment into problematic peripheral territory, the Turkish state pursued a policy of resettlement throughout the 1990s by depopulating rural settlements through evacuation and destruction and settling the displaced Kurds in and close to urban centers. The army then infiltrated into PKK-controlled spaces and sought to gain field domination. Turkish armed operations as part of its new counter-insurgency doctrine expanded into neighboring territories, including the first conventional war with PKK bases in Northern Iraq in August 1991 (Jongerden 2007), which is only a few months after the launch of ‘Operation Provide Comfort.’

It is therefore of little wonder that the Turkish state’s framing of refugees in 1991 rested on a policy of securitization. In his letter dated April 2, 1991, which called on the UN to summon, Mustafa Akşın, Turkey’s UN Ambassador, stated that Iraqi displacement poses “a threat to the region’s peace and security.” (United Nations 1991a). The Foreign Minister of Turkey, Ahmet Kurtcebe Alptemoçin, specified these threats by saying that the cross-border mobility of refugees carried serious societal and economic consequences for the region and the individual countries affected by this mass movement (Alptemoçin 1991). Questions of ethnic (non-)belonging and security considerations at the regional frontiers of the state heavily influenced Turkey’s unwillingness to open the borders (Altok and Tosun 2020). On the one hand, Turkish leaders feared the transformation of refugee camps into permanent residency or their potential development into breeding grounds for the PKK (Oran 1996). These scenarios were formulations arising out of Turkey’s long-standing securitization of Kurdish identity that run against the state’s nation-building project based on ethnic assimilation (Danış and Parla 2009).

On the other hand, and relatedly, the framing of Iraqi refugees as a matter of national security had a direct geographical dimension. Already in 1988 when the first significant mass movement from Northern Iraq to Turkey occurred, the latter followed an interlinked refugee governance strategy of temporariness and distancing. The residency offered to the Iraqi Kurds was on a temporary basis and camps were placed outside Kurdish-populated areas to minimize exchanges with citizens (Bozer 2002). The state’s response to the third major event of Iraqi displacement as part of the Gulf War was a continuation and reinforcement of its existing exclusionary and segregationist policies. The lack of uniformity in Turkey’s approaches to refugee arrivals of other groups around the same time confirms the essentiality of ethnic

(non-)belonging. When thousands arrived from Bulgaria in 1989, Turkey showed a welcoming attitude and offered, using the language of kinship, citizenship and assistance in the form of housing and more. Similarly, while representing only 1/25 of the refugee population on the other side of the Turkish border in 1991, Iraqi Kurds were received with better conditions and permitted, very quickly, to live outside the camps (Danış and Parla 2009). Against the backdrop of the recently introduced military strategy of governing and domesticating the country's southeastern periphery through depopulation and resettlement, this differential treatment is not astonishing along with Turkish decision-makers' efforts at inhibiting the large presence of the newly arrived Kurdish population within the country's borders.

Meanwhile, Turkey's counter-insurgency activities were going on during the refugee crisis both inside the country and beyond (Ihlamur-Öner 2013). The first conventional warfare between the Turkish army and the PKK took place in August 1991 when Turkey attacked PKK bases (Jongerden 2007), which were located in the vicinity of Zakho and Dohuk refugee camps established through 'Operation Provide Comfort' in Northern Iraq (Ihlamur-Öner 2013). Turkey's international diplomatic push for extra-territorial refugee reception developed under those circumstances where a 'national emergency' triggered a response that would become a key event in the history of humanitarianism.

Before concluding, one incident is worth mentioning. Before leaving his office, Turgut Özal—the person who was a strong advocate and active promoter of the safe haven idea—sent a letter to Süleyman Demirel who became Turkey's 9th President in 1993. In this 1993 letter, Özal outlined what he considered essential elements of an effective counter-insurgency against the PKK. The solutions proposed in the letter were, among others, the evacuation of the Kurdish villages as "negative environments" so as to stop citizens' logistical support to the PKK and the forced migration of villagers from these rural settlements to urban areas and the western part of the country. These measures were to be complemented with the further militarization of this "troubled" region by means of increased border enforcement and accompanying control of domestic circulation through checkpoints and other surveillance methods. Most of Özal's proposals were implemented in the coming years while the Turkish army's cross-border operations in Northern Iraq continue to this day (Jongerden 2007).

Conclusion

Narratives of the international rely on Western-centric periodizations entailing critical junctures. Refugee displacement in Northern Iraq in 1991 exemplifies one such crucial historical moment culminating in the third episode of international humanitarianism. Using insights from postcolonial/decolonial scholarship, especially on the question of non-Western agency in the co-constitution of the international, this article revisited the UN-led 'Operation Provide Comfort', which intervened in Northern Iraq to establish a safe haven for Iraqi Kurds in 1991. Different from the standard account tracing 'Operation Provide Comfort' exclusively to Western ideas, actors and events, the findings here brought Turkey's historical agency in so as to understand the sources and processes leading to the instigation of extra-territorial humanitarianism.

Turkey's efforts in the context of 'Operation Provide Comfort' reflect historical continuities of post-imperial border issues, nation-building and ethnic (non-)belonging. The country's long-standing strategy of governing and taming Kurdish-populated lands in its south-eastern periphery acquired a new dimension with the shifting geographies of (counter-)insurgency in the 1990s. This strategy consisted of policies and practices of depopulation and resettlement to tackle what the Turkish state regarded as Kurdish citizens' logistical support for the PKK. The new military

counter-insurgency doctrine was already in practice when refugees from Northern Iraq arrived on the Turkish soil in hundreds of thousands in April 1991. Turkey's previous experiences of mass displacement due to the Gulf War were equally decisive for the country's reluctance to permit Iraqi Kurds. In short, questions of ethnicity and national security, rather than the changing importance of liberalism, underpinned the process of bringing about extra-territorial humanitarianism as a new paradigm to address refugees through international action.

Two decades later in 2012, Turkey came up with the idea of safe haven again—this time to garner international support for addressing the humanitarian situation of Syrian refugees. Similar to 1991, the proposal by Turkish officials entailed a vision of humanitarianism resting on preventive protection. Security and care logics co-existed with the former concerned with non-state military activity to be enabled and fostered through the power vacuum emerging in the Middle East. While organizations like al-Qaida were regarded as threats to domestic and regional stability, security considerations and calculations regarding Kurdish military groups were far more determining for Turkish diplomatic action (Altok and Tosun 2020). Although it eventually failed to materialize, Turkey's 2012 international effort to replicate the safe haven strategy in Syria was not new but part of a historical pattern where domestic and regional questions about borders, ethnic (non-)belonging and (counter-)insurgency play a pivotal role.

One common argument is that single case studies offer little in terms of generalization. Helen Simons challenges this argument by positing that case study research allows for generalization. It is, however, not by revealing "regularities" and "cause-and-effect" relations pertaining to more traditional modes of social scientific inquiry. Generalization by case studies is achieved as "the context and experience of the case is richly described so the reader can recognize and connect with events and experiences portrayed" (Simons 2014, 465).

It is through such recognition and connection that this article carries the potential to push IR debates. In adding further empirical weight to postcolonial/decolonial IR problematization of the West/non-Western divide in prevalent conceptions of agency, the findings invite us to revisit current explanations of the evolution of international humanitarian norms and institutions. The paradigm shift caused by 'Operation Provide Comfort' is understood through the prism of liberalism/illiberalism. The contention is that with the safe haven concept, humanitarianism deviated from its previous liberal approach to a more restrictive, exclusionary refugee policy (e.g., Hyndman 2000). The empirical findings on Turkey's agential role in the establishment of the humanitarian aid corridor in Northern Iraq in 1991 challenge the analytical importance attached to liberalism's fundamental role (or diminishing importance) in defining humanitarianism's critical junctures. It is because Turkey has long represented an anomaly in the global liberal regime of refugee protection due to its status as one of the four remaining countries which maintain a geographical limitation to the 1951 Geneva Convention.

This article's problematization of the liberal/illiberal binary has parallels with evidence offered by recent research on the history of refugee humanitarianism. In a study on the beginnings of the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, Lucy Mayblin (2014) criticizes the celebration of the Convention as laying the foundation for "the idea of a universalized rights-bearing human being" (Mayblin 2014, 423). The standard account is that "Western governments are assumed to have willingly signed up to universal human rights commitments in the middle of the twentieth century, only changing their policy approach—backtracking on commitments made previously - at that point at which flows of asylum seekers changed fundamentally." Archival research on national and UN debates on the Convention text before its adoption "shows that exclusions are not recent deviations from earlier moral standards, they were there from the start" (Mayblin 2014, 428). This concerns discussions at the founding conference (July 2–25, 1951) on the refugee definition

to be included in the Convention and the ‘colonial clause’, which would allow a contracting state to determine the territorial scope for the applicability of the provisions, thereby opening the way for evading their responsibilities for those geographies which were still under their control. In this respect, a comparison of individual countries’ stance on a universal refugee definition is telling. While countries such as France, Italy, the United States, and Columbia were vocally against and pushed for limiting it to Europe, delegates from Egypt, Iraq and Pakistan, for example, demanded a universal definition (Krause 2021). Britain belonged to the former group of countries insisting on such clauses in order to ensure that “the British were under no obligation to apply them in the colonies” (Mayblin 2014, 432–3). The objections notwithstanding, “an alternative, less emotive in title—yet identical in principle—“territorial application clause” was brought forward and adopted to become Article 40, paragraph 1 of the final Refugee Convention text (Mayblin 2014, 433).

These findings call for further investigation into the constitutive role of il/liberalism in the emergence and evolution of international norms and institutions in and beyond the field of refugee humanitarianism. Such a research agenda is highly timely with a great public and academic relevance. In January 2024, a large group of Western states, including the United States and many members of the EU, announced that they suspended their funding to the UN Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), which was established in 1949. The decision was taken following Israeli allegations that several UNRWA staff members were involved in the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Considering UNRWA’s life-saving position for almost two million people entrapped in Gaza, the aid suspension comes with high humanitarian costs for Palestinians at a time when Israeli military attacks have killed thousands and displaced the majority of the Gazan population. The central mandate of the UNRWA since its inception has been humanitarian aid provision to Palestinian refugees who were displaced during the founding of Israel. This mandate is currently hampered by diminishing funds by Western countries, which urges us to reconsider the idea of rupture with respect to liberalism’s analytical centrality in the predominant periodization of humanitarianism’s evolution. Future studies can explore the validity of this article’s findings on Turkey for other key moments in the history of international norms and institutions, including the establishment of the UNRWA.

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