

## On Ethnographic Confidence and the Politics of Knowledge in Lebanon

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### Abstract

Fieldworkers in politically sensitive spaces traditionally need to negotiate their presence in the field with local (in)formal authorities and epistemic power-holders. I illustrate how attempts at both holistic politicisation and neutralisation of the research space can question ethnographic knowledge production. Drawing upon the anthropology of silence and agnotology, I interrogate the *whats* and *hows* of ethnographic authority and local validation of ethnographic research when political and epistemic powers complexly and discontinuously overlap. By examining how knowledge is boasted about, concealed or questioned by political and humanitarian actors, I examine the ways in which a lack of political protection, as well as overt advocacy, shape different modalities of access – or lack of access - to the field. Against the backdrop of a growing body of literature on the ethics of research in settings affected by political transformations and emergency crises (such as today's Arab Levant), I try to upend ethnographic confidence as a self-centred process of knowledge production. I instead rethink it not only as an ethical but also an inter-subjective effort towards a more effective integration of the counter-epistemologies of field interlocutors into our own research.

### Keywords

Advocacy; Neutrality; Epistemic Power; Agnotology; Epistemological Invalidation; Political Protection

Discussing ethnographic confidence as the confidence to approach, interact with and theorise the research field, in this article I look at Lebanon's spaces, marked by political instability, that have turned into shelters for large numbers of internally displaced people and refugees. Ethnographers navigating such spaces often face processes of knowledge invalidation while having to negotiate their own presence in the field with local (in)formal authorities and 'epistemic' power-holders: the gatekeepers of local knowledge production and dissemination. Such processes mainly affect the ethnographer's confidence, which, unlike ethnographic authority, sheds particular light on the entanglement of the ethnographer's feelings, judgments, and emotions. In the Middle Eastern context, I endeavour to push further two existing debates with the purpose of upending ethnographic confidence as a self-centred process of knowledge production, while rethinking it as an inter-subjective effort to inform our research with counter-epistemologies coming from the field. In order to do so, the article develops through my own reflections on my ethnographic Self as well as on the process of fieldwork - and post-fieldwork - rather than on the understandings of research

validity as stemming from the field which, indeed, I did not enable myself to learn as a foreign researcher.

Most scholars engage with questions around fieldwork in the political authoritarian contexts which characterise the region (Clark and Cavatorta 2018, Glasius *et al.* 2018), and with how the post-2011 uprising in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) impacted different disciplines (Kohstall *et al.* 2018). I here emphasise the need to focus on epistemic rather than political power-holders, who (complexly) can either overlap or differ. In doing so, I undertake an analysis of the dynamics and relationships that fieldwork entails by beginning from the question of who gatekeeps local knowledge, and not exclusively focusing on who owns explicit political power. Indeed, epistemic power is nuancedly – not merely – political, and is of particular importance to ethnographers.

In addition, several scholars have by now questioned the over-research of certain populations and areas in the MENA region without contribution to actual change (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012, Nayel 2013), and reliance on the use of the same networks and contacts (Pascucci 2019). This article is a self-critical attempt to push this debate further: reflecting on the politics of ethnography *per se*, it questions how the afterlife of research can be made more scientifically valuable and not only ethically humane. To pursue this endeavour, no single theory manages to capture the slippery character of ethnographic confidence in spaces disciplined by epistemic power-holding, notably the power to decide what can be known. Instead, I build on several ethnographic theories and observations that help to establish a productive conversation between this article and pre-existing debates.

### **Defining the ‘politics of knowledge’ and ‘ethnographic confidence’ in Lebanon**

This article evolves from an initial period of fieldwork (September 2011–March 2012) in which, as an ethnographer, I benefited neither from official approval<sup>1</sup> to conduct research nor political protection<sup>2</sup> in the securitised area of Beirut’s Dahiye or southern suburbs, which is largely administered by the major Lebanese Shiite party Hezbollah and internationally considered its security and political stronghold. In Dahiye, I initially planned more than 100 in-depth interviews and participant observation with governmental and non-governmental humanitarian actors, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, who were victims of conflict and displacement, to explore the role of long-term and *ad hoc* humanitarian action. I was interested in researching the social effects of international crisis management in the aftermath of the July 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon. In a subsequent fieldwork period (September 2012–October 2013), I engaged with spontaneous and organised forms of assistance in the Akkar region of northern Lebanon, where a

large number of Syrian refugees had relocated due to the escalating violence in Syria in 2011. I made ethnographic work into an act of personal advocacy for the Syrian revolution and of witnessing Syrian displacement. I therefore shifted the focus of my research from postwar Dahiye to Akkar, which, during 2012, attracted a large amount of humanitarian aid funding due to the refugee presence.

I here depart, firstly, from my own research on the long-term effects of humanitarian aid provision in the aftermath of the 2006 war, which I conducted without benefiting from any explicit local consent or political approval. In Dahiye I developed mental ‘red flags’ marking boundaries that I believed I should not cross, being wary of committing any *faux pas* in an area mostly ruled by Hezbollah, which acquired institutional political power throughout the 1990s while benefiting from the power void left by the State (Harb 2010). Secondly, in the Akkar region, I intended to look at how social space turns into a humanitarian space. In this Lebanese region, also historically deprived of state services, political power is historically fragmented across a number of (in)formal local power holders (Gilsenan 1996). Most international humanitarian actors there are dealing with the flow of Syrian refugees and foster a depoliticisation rhetoric in compliance with the longstanding humanitarian values of neutrality and impartiality, and with the goal of enforcing a state of apolitical victimhood. The latter approach, as will be evident, tries to stifle any sort of political input from the refugees, the aid providers, and the researcher herself in an effort to preserve social order and the moral integrity of the humanitarian system in crisis-stricken settings.

By examining the politics of my ethnography in these political and humanitarian settings, I show how, via the holistic politicisation or political neutralisation of the research field, local power-holders can challenge and invalidate the ethnographer’s production of knowledge. Resting on the belief that neither the holistic politicisation nor the neutralisation of public spaces can ever be ontologically possible, I employ them in this article as the ideal aspirations of epistemic powers. Against this backdrop, I also hope to open new avenues of inquiry into the field interlocutors’ validation of our ethnographic work (their ‘epistemological’ approval) and the question of whether particular actors *should* enable our research questions and presence in the field. Moreover, this work appeals to the ethnographic community in a bid to nourish conversations about how the desire to feel validated by all of our field companions can be made more realistic. With this purpose, I thus question the self-centred processes of academic knowledge production in what is called ‘critical ethnography’. Indeed, I inquire into uncomfortable epistemologies that can jeopardise ethnographic authority in the field: even though the idea of sharing texts and authorship with indigenous collaborators is as old as Clifford’s advocacy in this realm (1986), ethnographers mostly approach these as ethical matters rather than valid counter-epistemologies which actually question our research rationales. Even I, as a ‘critical ethnographer’, tend to abdicate the heuristic potential of

epistemological syncretism, built along with field interlocutors, or of counter-epistemologies advanced by the research participants which still inhabit the afterlife of fieldwork. Not only explicit ‘collaborative’ ethnographies should value the ‘responsibility to make a difference’; this is a principle which theoretically underlies the ethics of critical ethnography as well (Madison 2005, p.83).

In the generally distrustful environment of Dahiye, where there is a great deal of ‘anti-Western’ rhetoric, my approach to research underwent methodological transformations as I sought to discern what local ordinary people knew and did not know about humanitarian and political governance during crisis; what they pretended to know or not to know; and, therefore, what people preferred to keep publicly unsaid. The concept of the ‘unsaid’ that I propose – though do not intend to prescribe or eventually reveal – enables me to guess not only what in the field is either apparent silence – yet, ‘an integral part of speech’ (Mazzei 2007, p.641) and a ‘strategic response’ (Mazzei 2007, p.633) – or vague statements, but it also provides me with a human and professional role in the field; a role which this lack of local approvals had left unclear to me. In the Akkar villages, I instead embraced a ‘transformative’ approach to research (Mertens 2005), as my active engagement with the provision of assistance to Syrian refugees was intended to be a form of *témoignage* (Redfield 2006) of the Syrian revolution and the subsequent repression by Bashar al-Asad’s regime; that is, an act of witnessing derived from a moral obligation to denounce suffering (Fassin 2012; Guilhot 2012) which enabled me to shape a clearer role for myself in the field.

Having been prepared to be positioned as a political ‘unwanted’ in the space of Dahiye, which is often imbued with suspicion *vis-à-vis* outsiders, I resorted to auto-ethnography – in the sense of both an individual process and a final written product (Mendez 2013) – so that the analysis of intimate experience could lead to an understanding of shared lived experience. The Akkar experience turned my ethnography into advocacy, through which I intended to *transform* the public representation of Syrian humanitarian victims into political agents and rights-bearers in response to the widespread international mode of operating in compliance with the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. My experience in Dahiye will show how epistemic power-holders (here represented by local authorities) flaunt the possession of knowledge to assert an epistemological hierarchy separating me, the ethnographer, from local respondents. Rethinking McGoe’s concept of ‘professing ignorance’ (2012, p.554), I instead refer to the simulation tactics of the local epistemic power-holders as ‘professed knowledge’. My Akkar experience illustrates, first, the articulated sides of the humanitarian politics of knowledge and, second, the need for aid beneficiaries to conceal their own knowledge, guarantee a visible innocence, and resort to what I call the ‘politics of the unsaid’ in a bid to fit the profile of the ‘ideal’ refugee beneficiary (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014), who becomes able to access the assistance regime so long as they *exhibit*

neutrality. In this framework of professed knowledge on the one side and professed ignorance on the other, I thus look into conversational settings where ‘language does not convey about a body’s experience of the world in a particular space and time’ (Mazzei 2016, p. 155). I build on anthropologies of silence (Basso 1970, Tanner 1990, Jaworski 2011, Mazzei 2016), and agnotology theories (Proctor 2008, Smithson 2008, McGoey 2012, Stel 2017) to interrogate the interplay between the layered politics of knowledge in the humanitarian system,<sup>3</sup> my practical necessity of managing epistemic power-holders (specifically, the latter’s employment of professed knowledge to preserve the power to sanction what *can be known* and to validate *in loco* research), and the knowledge concealed by refugee beneficiaries in order to preserve their eligibility for humanitarian aid.

Resting on my understanding of the politics of knowledge in my research sites, how can we eventually approach the blurred lines of separation between feelings of epistemic powerlessness and a lack of research accomplishment? Research validity, at the core of evaluating ethnography, has historically been ascribed to ethnographers. Notably, the anthropological debates of the 1980s (Sanjek 1990, p.395) have cast validity as the product of the ethnographer’s path, theoretical candour, and fieldwork evidence: all canons that only academics themselves can assess, disfavour or approve. Scholars have seemingly ‘sorted out’ research invalidation by reasserting the academic power of knowing beyond the empirical evidence collected and beyond what *could actually be known* in the field. Likewise, scholars have seemingly addressed our hurt morals of seeing our research locally invalidated by proposing ‘acceptance of conflict’ (Gallo 2011) as the *normal* way of doing ethnography. Blurred frameworks of self-perception, understanding of the other, and field interlocutors’ invalidation *per se* are certainly inherent to ethnographic experience. Nonetheless, in this article I question my own tendency – and that of other ethnographers - to preserve epistemic hegemony in post-fieldwork knowledge production. I also emphasise our often-neglected ethnographic duty to not only unfold but tackle the tensions experienced in the field when faced with research invalidation by field interlocutors. In the afterlife of fieldwork, indeed, such tensions fade away in the process of emplacing knowledge production, often leaving the floor to the epistemic hegemony of the ethnographer even in processes called ‘collaborative ethnographies’, which employ the self-defensive tool of integrating participants’ voices.

The questions tackled by this article significantly inform the longstanding relationship between ethnographers and NGO practitioners, which is well known for being complicated on several fronts. Ethnographers and NGOs are used to competing for epistemic power and discursive spaces in order to determine the legitimacy of the material and symbolic values of humanitarianism (Mosse 2006). Some segments of the ethnographic literature particularly focus on the power inherent in the ethnographer’s positionality in the field and the uneven living conditions between

them and their interlocutors (Bott 2010, Jourdan 2013). Instead, by tackling what ethnographic confidence means and how it shifts in the research space, I aim to unravel how problematic it is to classify our ethnographic selves as *a priori* power-holders. As such, I align with other scholarship (Glasius *et al.* 2018) which emphasises the relevance of the ethnographer's feelings of disenfranchisement. In the light of the 'ego-politics of knowledge' in academia (Grosfoguel 2008), the assumption that power in the field is predominantly owned by the ethnographer is based on the academic belief that research authoritativeness – or 'ethnographic authority' (Enguix 2014; Varisco 2018) – is primarily built on successful academic knowledge production and dissemination rather than public impact (i.e. socio-political transformation) in the field. In this sense, self-reflexive literature has often reiterated power discourses and, therefore, relationships, which from my perspective dangerously reproduce a self-centred epistemic approach to critical ethnography. This article instead shows how the disenfranchisement triggered by my interaction with local epistemic power-holders can cause an ethnographer to lose epistemic confidence. Such a loss invites us to decentre the ethnographer's authority in knowledge production processes. This decentring guides us to face epistemic invalidation beyond ethnographic self-entitlement to knowledge production, calling instead for *actual* critical ethnographies. Against this backdrop, ethnographic confidence is here rethought as an active and intersubjective effort towards the counter-epistemologies I have dealt with in the field.

### **Pursuing research under multiple epistemological invalidations**

Diverse epistemic power-holders either explicitly or implicitly aim to dictate the rules of knowledge production in the space they gatekeep and control, while ethnographers try to pursue 'validated' research. I will show how political power does not always coincide with epistemic power, or may do so only in a muddled and discontinuous way. Indeed, I call into question the validity of research, which is at times presumed, lacked, or enjoyed in the field in relation to our interlocutors. For the sake of clarity, I do not refer to the bureaucratic processes meant to obtain ethics clearance, which are nowadays imposed by academic institutions and primarily aimed at building institutional consent.

When I was conducting fieldwork in the highly securitised space of Dahiye – which is equipped with cameras and surveillance devices – local people seemed to assume that I enjoyed 'political protection' granted by local authorities, which would enable me to move and research freely in the suburbs. This led local residents to accept me more easily. However, I was never actually granted this formal approval, which can be obtained from Hezbollah's Communication Relations Office (*maktab al-'alaqat al-i'lamiyye*) in Bi'r al-'Abed, even though I had previously

filled out a series of forms there. Despite the fact that I did not benefit from any political protection or approval, I never experienced overt hostility. Instead, I was confronted with the experience of embodying an ephemeral, somehow voyeuristic approach to people's predicaments (and everyday lives). At the same time, I was not being subjected to what was locally depicted as the ontological determinism of war and uncertainty, a phenomenon that most people do not have the option of escaping. Dahiye seemed to contain opposing categories: on the one side, intellectually curious 'tourists' and, on the other, people who had become displaced as a result of the war.

When progressing from one research plan to the other, I developed the feeling of being intimately torn between two moral polities: on the one hand, volunteering for Syrian refugees in northern Lebanon to actively support the Syrian revolutionary cause; on the other, empathising with the people in Dahiye who recounted Hezbollah's struggles against Israel on their land, at the same time as the party was involved in the Syrian conflict supporting the Syrian regime. Indeed, as often happens in processes of identity-building in the framework of rival polities (Veljanovska 2012; Wilkinson 2015), the Dahiye and Akkar communities were depicted in my interlocutors' external representations as internally homogenous and polarised as antithetical. They also polarised their own moral allegiances to different epistemic powers in order to make their suffering publicly known and recognised (Zenker and Kumoll 2010). Rethinking my moral concerns during the 'public afterlife' (Fassin 2017, p.2) of my ethnography enabled me to re-evaluate my dilemmas as 'a genuine research tool, which enables us to understand how our particular system of morals helps us to grasp or, sometimes, prevents us from grasping, moralities governing the life of the social groups we are observing' (Stoczkowski 2008, p.352).

The worsening safety conditions in Dahiye from September 2011 to February 2013,<sup>4</sup> which came about as a result of Hezbollah's military intervention in the Syrian conflict and led to enhanced control within the suburbs, induced in me an increasing level of self-reflexivity and highlighted the importance of guessing what people did not know or what they wanted to leave unsaid in our conversations. By 'guessing' I mean a form of sensing human experience and thinking on the grounds of previous fine-grained knowledge, therefore implying an 'educated' act of guessing, or guided intuition. Intuition, in other words, began to play a greater role than people's verbal accounts. Data collection and analysis in Dahiye became a sort of intersubjective dialogue between my intuition and my interpretations, as well as people's 'emotion management' (Hochschild 1979) – their attempt to inhibit or express their emotions in public spaces in compliance with their cultural (and political) code. This enabled me to bear 'witness to people's cultural scene' (Foley 2002, p.475).

In order to guess the 'unsaid' – the need for which was generated by Dahiye's surveillance habitat – one needs to assume what is known and what unknown. I propose that the unsaid is a

collective conscious response to control and the will to preserve *ad hoc* patterns of social order, and that different individuals may have diverse motivations for engaging in this behaviour. During my fieldwork in Dahiye, in the capacity of an ethnographic spectator of the ways social spaces turn into humanitarian spaces, I felt that my self-confidence – the confidence that the ethnographic knowledge I produced was valid to locals – was being depleted in response to people’s right to the unsaid. This self-perception of epistemic powerlessness in the field points to an under-discussed crisis of cooperation and mutual trust between the atria of critical thinking (for which academic institutions tend to see themselves as pioneers) and the operational agencies that implement humanitarian projects on the ground. By this token, in the partial truth of my ethnographic narrative (Clifford 1986), I developed the idea that the institutional actors I interviewed in Dahiye professed greater knowledge of what I was doing there than they actually knew, making of ‘professing knowledge’ a weapon against my participation in local epistemic power (i.e. collecting ethnographic data and having access to international dissemination channels). In this framework, even when we as researchers seemingly value ignorance, we still search for its theoretical meanings and practical implications. These meta-research reflections now form my key strategy for building knowledge capital and complying with the academic imperative to which I was subjected: that of turning ignorance into knowledge.

### **Lack of ‘political protection’ in a securitised field: a spurious issue?**

In research fields deemed by scholars to be authoritarian (Clark and Cavatorta 2018, Glasius *et al.* 2018), research itself is primarily perceived as a political inquiry. Even obtaining the authorities’ approval requires winking at local powers and not necessarily obtaining greater access to the researched. What, therefore, are the possibilities of scientific knowledge that we are left with when the ethnographer is unlikely to obtain epistemological validation at a local level, and when political power overlaps with epistemic power?

During my Dahiye fieldwork, some residents did suspect at first glance that I was a journalist working undercover, or even a spy. However, the highest degree of suspicion and mistrust I perceived emerged in my dealings with formal institutions. In this context, I developed a sense of lacking awareness of my own positionality in the field, not being fully convinced myself that the fact that I was *allowed* in the area was a deliberate choice made by the ruling party rather than a product of contingency in the large and variegated urban space of Dahiye. Indeed, often embedded as we are in the representations of others and the frequent focus on the ethnic, social, or political privilege of the ethnographer herself (Bott 2010, DeLuca and Batts Maddox 2016), we eventually pay less attention to what *others* know about *us* (Hayden 2009, p.82).



Owing to this securitisation of the Dahiye environment, I often experienced what I would call the ‘theatricalisation’ of the field. Facing the widespread tendency to glamorise narratives and romanticise respondents’ accounts (Barbour 2001), I often felt like I was part of a research participant-led ‘Truman Show’ (a 1998 film where director Peter Weir stages life as a massive TV set) where things happen and people speak and behave only as an outflow of my presence and movements. For instance, the first time I went to the headquarters of the Hezbollah-affiliated NGO *Jihad al-Binaa* in Haret Hreik (September 2011) – a pioneering organisation in Lebanon’s reconstruction after the Lebanon-Israel war of 2006 – the building’s caretaker was already waiting for me in the doorway and was clearly knowledgeable about the topic of my research and nationality. The organisation’s staff welcomed me in a similar way once I reached the upper levels. This happened because the interview had already been scheduled with the NGO, and my professional and personal profile had probably been considered before they accepted my proposal to interview them in the first place. This awareness, however, would not protect me from the Truman Show effect. The emergence of mental red flags at times led me to self-censor when approaching people and making my research purposes explicit. Even in a retroactive effort of critical reflexivity (Turner 2013, p.398), these old mental red flags now do not allow me to retrieve the words or attitudes I had previously redacted. In Dahiye, the ‘security society’ that Hezbollah is said to have built throughout the years – and, presumably, the lack of political consent from Hezbollah to conduct my research in *their* area – therefore included communication scripts between myself and my interlocutors that gradually became predictable to me. For example, when I stepped into a music shop, the owner asked me *Amrika?* (by which he meant ‘are you American?’), as he had never seen me around the suburb of al-Ghobeiry before.<sup>5</sup> I understood his question to be a way of ascertaining my nationality and, consequently, assessing whether I had been well received at a local level, considering the strong anti-Americanism of Dahiye’s official moral sphere. In another occurrence, an engineer from *Jihad el-Binaa* grabbed the list of questions from my hands while I was interviewing him in what I interpreted as an attempt to know all of the questions before having to answer them, thereby trying to assert his epistemic power over me, an outsider whose knowledge depended on his answers.

Decisions about the kind of knowledge one supports are also decisions about ‘what kinds of ignorance should remain in place’ (Proctor 2008, p.26). If everything was already set up to receive me in the field, and if the local knowledge of my background and studies was inevitably greater than my knowledge of the field on the whole, what was the use of my mental red flags? The absence of political brokers, which the universities supporting my research mentioned as a primary issue, caused me to establish imaginary boundaries that I believed I should not cross, even though the research space was pan-political, and although no one was concretely preventing me from

conducting my research in Dahiye. Was Hezbollah-granted political protection the only way to escape my feeling of being immersed in a Truman Show atmosphere in the Dahiye context? It was unclear to me what it was that I *lacked* – or, maybe, what nationality I should have held - that would otherwise make it possible for me to experience spontaneous communication scripts. This missing political protection pragmatically resulted in an abstract state of mind, capable of triggering high levels of aprioristic wariness rather than becoming a useful safety tool in the field.<sup>6</sup> In this context, the helplessness engendered by my self-imposed mental red flags enhanced my sense of being epistemologically disenfranchised, which has been identified as a form of insecurity and sense of inferiority (Bergman Blix and Wettergren 2015, p.701; Kingston 2018). In this way, for me, the alleged lack of political protection became a flawed mental safe haven, which was apparently necessary if I was to enjoy free mobility in the field. Was I not already experiencing, to some extent, such freedom, despite my wariness in approaching people and verbalising my thoughts to them? ‘Political protection’ also became an ethical *passe-partout* that I was believed to carry when dealing with ordinary people, who often exhibit the suspicion inscribed in Dahiye’s public ethics (Deeb 2006). For instance, NGO workers believed at times that I was interviewing them with Hezbollah’s consent. Moreover, some people seemed to be eager to show me where Hezbollah-led NGOs were located and, in general, demonstrate their own knowledge of the territory; some even told me to mention their names to the party, as though I could have reported people’s engagement with their institutions and strengthened their interrelation, enabling them to build their own ‘political protection’.

As a further example of the epistemic powerlessness I experienced, Hezbollah’s security guards often patrol in plain clothes. In the suburb of ar-Ruwess, passing by the headquarters of the martyrs (*mujamma‘ ash-shuhada’*) where the head of the party, as-Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, normally delivers his public addresses, two men approached me when they noticed that I was hesitantly making my way toward the building, like someone keen to explore but uncertain which direction to take. I experienced here the subtle line between people who are officially in charge of local security and everyday surveillance by ordinary local people who are not professionally supposed to cooperate with them (Bhatt 2012, p.821) but do so nonetheless, perhaps spontaneously. The invisibility, to me, of their knowing or not knowing who I was and what I was doing there – along with my ignorance of their knowledge-holding status within an overall space of epistemological hegemony, which has powerfully been baptised as ‘epistemological dictatorship’ (Hastrup 2003) – ignited my generalised feeling of disenfranchisement. My feeling of being epistemologically vulnerable in *their* space and of observing people’s lives in a limited way *because* I lacked political protection– as though other field research circumstances could ever allow ethnographers to access people’s lives in their entirety – dominated my everyday experience in the

field. Nonetheless, sometimes, in response to my wariness, I would sense people's instinct to trust me and share with me their stories and views, which introduced nuance into their general politics of the unsaid and eventually taught me about the infinite diversity of Beirut's southern suburbs.

The elusive line of separation between ignorance and knowledge, evident in the events I have narrated, preserves a knowledge-loaded value in its unresolvability. Would the official granting of political protection by the governing actors have helped me to gain trust and collect people's stories more easily and, consequently, even out the epistemological imbalance characterising the ethnographic scene? Furthermore, had Hezbollah granted me *de facto* political protection despite ignoring my attempts to get myself and my research approved and, thereby, somehow, ethically legitimised me in the local social sphere?

### **Ethnography as a personal form of advocacy and witnessing in northern Lebanon**

At the time of my fieldwork I was worried about whether, as an ethnographer, I should have become politically involved in the research environment. While, until a few decades ago, the question of whether we were 'close enough was never an issue' (Passaro 1997, p.152-153) – leading to an impulse to refrain from intervening (Pandolfi 2008) – proximity has now become paramount in ethnographic research. The parallels between ethnographic work and political advocacy have however shown how these forms of knowledge seek and yet fail to represent 'refugee voices' (Cabot 2016). More recent work (Fassin in Stoczkowski 2008, p.352) has introduced the important conception that the observer's moral stances are *normal*. As I write, I in fact feel more concerned about what kind of difference my research could possibly make in the places I studied.

Having my research focus shifted from Dahiye - at that time hosting a relatively small number of Syrians and home to longer-term refugees - to the most recent forced migration from Syria in Akkar, I reproduced the same 'tyranny of emergency' (Minear 2002, p. 52) as the humanitarian apparatus. Among my reasons for engaging in humanitarian assistance was the belief of the aid recipients I met that the humanitarian apparatus' discourse of political neutrality and impartiality was 'dangerous' *vis-à-vis* their own life conditions. The neutrality rhetoric of humanitarian agencies on the ground also seemed to me to have a negative impact on the lives of Syrian refugees and their relationships with other social groups, by giving rise to widespread social frustration and new frictions. My initial lack of direct engagement caused me to feel like an academic parasite, as I was reproducing the structures of power that I contested in my writing. Moreover, while refugee interviewees in Akkar expected me to advocate for their cause, I realised

that humanitarian providers sometimes look at researchers as inactive individuals ready to pass judgment on crisis responses about which they have no first-hand knowledge.

Activism in ethnography, particularly in times of crisis, is not new. The issue is mostly one of how ethnography can be configured as activism (Hermez 2011, p.42), and how it is possible to do that if we accept that socio-political engagement is the product of a legitimate personal choice.<sup>7</sup> Doing ethnographic work is in itself a form of advocacy, given that, as a practice, it still entails a sense of entitlement to represent other people and, in some way, speak on their behalf. As Touraine conceptualised his ‘sociological intervention’, ‘reflection and expression meet up in order to generate analysis and to produce action’ (Touraine 1981, p.221). In this sense, making myself an activist in the North, in a first instance, enhanced my ethnographic confidence and redeemed my sense of epistemic powerlessness in Dahiye. My act of volunteering in Akkar was motivated by a personal response to the way in which crisis was conceived on the local level and to my personal frustration with not doing advocacy while producing academic research. As Myrna Mack, who was later assassinated in Guatemala, wrote, ‘I feel my role reduced to one of extraction’ (Oglesby 1995, p.256): extracting stories without doing anything for the people who tell them, and without necessarily trying to ‘right wrongs’.

I therefore aligned myself with Hermez’s ‘radical posture for solidarity’ (2011) in the effort to advocate for Syrian refugees who had repeatedly expressed to me their feeling of being depoliticised bodies in a space of survival. Such an approach tends to preserve solidarity with the participants when fieldwork is over (Hermez 2011). The ‘deep-seated affinities’ between research and humanitarianism (Guilhot 2012, p.87) resonate with the way I experienced the ‘doing’ of ethnography and the desire to witness (Behar 1997). I felt I had found a particularly efficacious form of witnessing the Syrian predicament in northern Lebanon when I decided to volunteer in the Tripoli-based Syrian Committee for Refugees in Lebanon (financed by the Syrian National Council based in Istanbul), which allowed me to enter the assistance regime as a provider and step into ‘Plato’s cave to witness reality from the inside’ (Fassin 2012, p.245). After I had finished my work with the committee, which shut down shortly afterwards, I began to collect food and kitchen and toilet items in Italy and Beirut and distribute them to refugees I had met in Akkar who had expressed particular needs. I therefore deliberately tried to create a strong ground for research validation with aid beneficiaries.

My engagement in providing aid to Syrian refugees, however, was interpreted by some local and international institutional actors I interviewed as being antithetical to the people I had shared life with in Dahiye during my first fieldwork period. This was due to the general tendency to politicise relief in Lebanon – and, indeed, anywhere else – and to the alignment of the former March 14 coalition in Lebanon,<sup>8</sup> which was an early and particularly generous provider of

assistance to Syrian nationals, with some groups from the Syrian opposition. I tried to transcend this institutional imaginary, in which helping Syrians would mean becoming partial and dangerously anti-objective. However, the way in which this category of field ‘companions’ (Beatty 2005, p.30) were experiencing my involvement in emergency-driven humanitarian assistance took me back to my initial perplexity about being enmeshed not in facts, but in emotional biases risking dehistoricisation (Guilhot 2012, p.95) and, consequently, the descientification of my research.

A series of inputs from the field mitigated my emotional perplexity. By speaking of ‘betrayal’ (*khiane*), refugees in Akkar vented their frustration with the political disengagement of the international community from the Syrian revolution and, more generally, the neutrality and impartiality politics of most international NGOs. This encouraged me to engage socially and to join the Committee, one of the least neutral aid providers I had come across.<sup>9</sup> For example, in early 2012, Syrian refugees voiced their discontent with the Halba municipality in Akkar, as it had denied a group of refugee men space in which to gather and discuss the events unfolding in Syria. The municipality’s acknowledgment that the refugee presence in host countries was not merely *biological* but inherently *political* would have generated instability.

In this way, many refugees I personally knew had initially refused to be seen as ‘refugees’ and ‘victims’ (*laji’un* and *dahaiya*), terms with a passive and depoliticising connotation; instead they opted for the term ‘displaced’ (*nazihun*)<sup>10</sup> in order to highlight the fact that they would be able to return to Syria soon, or ‘revolutionaries’ (*thuwar*), which, like ‘survivors’, better connotes political agency (Feldman 2004, p.179) and the historical nature of their recent forced migration. Refugees became warier when expressing their political stance regarding the Syrian conflict in the presence of foreign aid workers. Refugees’ wariness, more specifically, steadily increased with the escalation of violence in Syria. For example, while Amal, a Syrian refugee woman, had previously spoken out against the regime in public spaces and supported the Free Syrian Army (FSA), in which her husband had fought before becoming disabled, she limited herself to saying that ‘the regime was difficult’ (*sa’b*) when I accompanied her to visit humanitarian providers a few months later, and was evidently hiding the fact that her husband had previously joined the FSA. In this sense, refugees began to conceal knowledge and personal political stances and to gradually embrace the politics of the unsaid. My final days of doctoral fieldwork in Akkar in the autumn of 2013 raised feelings similar to those I had in Dahiye. As I was questioning myself at that time, should I resort to guessing the unsaid amongst the refugees as well, if I returned to Akkar years later?

As my interviews with international aid providers suggested, the standards of neutrality and impartiality that humanitarian operators are expected to adhere to, and even to promote at an interpersonal level, have ended up dramatically widening the power divide between beneficiaries and providers, whom the refugees considered responsible for making their predicament a chronic

one. Moreover, Syrian refugees viewed neutrality-driven humanitarianism as an act of unacceptance of the existing situation, embedding aid provision in a framework of how things *should* work rather than how they *are*. In this framework, my act of volunteering in the Tripoli-based Committee epitomised the ‘maximalist’ or ‘solidarist’ position of humanitarianism (Weiss 1998), according to which aid providers are encouraged to work in politically oriented structures, viewing neutrality and impartiality as counterproductive and rather identifying fully with the victims, or with a segment of the victims.

As a result, on the one hand, Syrian aid recipients among the research participants in Akkar seemed to feel more comfortable with me in my new role as volunteer and advocate. On the other, when I told Dahiye’s local residents about my having volunteered in northern Lebanon, some of them made it clear that they felt I had betrayed them in light of my *previous* empathy with their predicament, which had created common ground and resulted in them somehow attributing ‘insiderness’ to me (Ergun and Erdermir 2010, p.34). At that point, resonating with other research based on what are generally approached as ‘opposite sides’ (Ben Shitrit 2018, p.260), my feeling of being torn between two suffering communities reached its apex. My empathy for the Syrian refugees and revolutionaries<sup>11</sup> in Akkar and my emotional empathy for people struck by Israeli attacks in the southern suburbs of Beirut rendered me emotionally split, because the way in which I was expected to learn people’s suffering in these Lebanese regions was contextually connoted. Indeed, human suffering in the two settings became antagonistic, since people could publicly express it through Manichean political spheres of conflict. The March 8 and 14 coalitions, which had politically polarised the country in 2005, co-opted the July war and the ongoing Syrian conflict, respectively, to show accountability through aid distribution in order to demonstrate the humanitarian rationales behind their politics. As a result, people suffering from the conflict became public victims insofar as their victimhood was socially recognised (Summerfield 1995) and dealt with as such by the political community that governs their area more broadly.

According to some institutional advice I received while in the field, due to the politically polarised environment, it would be better if people in Dahiye did not know about my research in northern Lebanon and (above all) the fact that I had volunteered with the Syrian opposition, in the interests of my own safety. As I largely familiarised myself with both of my field sites, I sometimes distanced myself from the institutional policy of self-censorship, *de facto* breaking a tacitly negotiated deontological code between myself and the universities involved in my research project. Indeed, a sizeable number of my interlocutors did not identify with the mainstream ideology dominating their polity. Also, the suggested ethnographic political strategies – such as, for example, not making people aware of where my research had taken place – seemed to me not only to be unnecessary at times, but even to suggest a biased approach to the researched.

## **The unintentional ‘war of intentions’: ethnographic activism facing epistemological invalidation**

Not only some of the Dahiye residents I interviewed, but also some of the humanitarian practitioners I met in Akkar, viewed my engagement in the Syrian Committee for Refugees in Lebanon as an epistemological failure, as I was expected to live up to research neutrality in order to maintain *the* validation of my research; they did not recognise, however, that what they actually meant was *their* validation. While in the field, I began to question the extent to which my research epistemology would be legitimate if my ethical principles of political advocacy and my mere *being there* to observe humanitarian practices were antithetical to the international humanitarian apparatus. During 2012-13, this apparatus was becoming a fundamental actor in local governance and an emerging epistemic power in the Akkar region, which had historically been neglected by the central state (Gilsenan 1996, Makhoul and Harrison 2002, Abi-Habib Khoury 2012). This process was gradually merging political power with epistemic power.

While the refugees were seemingly used to sharing words and experiences with practitioners and researchers, the humanitarian actors looked on ethnographic methods as appropriation. Humanitarian agencies showed me a phobic aspect of their organisational culture; as Hezbollah’s Truman Show, seeking to predict and tackle my acts and questions, had unearthed in Dahiye, they feared and questioned research on their work. From their perspective, this sort of ‘exiphobia’<sup>12</sup> (the fear of explanation) threatened their credibility and deprived the practitioners of their humanity. In this sense, inquiring about humanitarian action beyond individual intentions was deemed unethical. They therefore tended to reclaim and reify the virtuous intentionality behind emergency relief programs regardless of actual consequences. This reveals how the humanitarian apparatus may wish to maintain control over the ways in which their actions are publicly represented and their projects valued. In this realm, knowledge is largely produced according to bureaucratic criteria, which justify their work and their funding. In the humanitarian environment of Akkar, I experienced a climate of suspicion that was different from but just as intense as that in Dahiye. Due to Hezbollah’s longstanding political power, Dahiye’s epistemic power-holders would rather not engage with me as a ‘feared’ arbiter of their local politics, but preferred to see me as an epistemologically disenfranchised inquirer, even though I did not intend to undertake a political inquiry regarding local support for the party. Likewise, in Akkar, my research did not intend to aprioristically unmask the dirty sides of aid work. I felt as though I was engaging in an unintentional war of presumed and mutually accused intentions between me and the humanitarian actors: my intention was to produce valid ethnographic knowledge while supporting the Syrian political cause, while theirs was to protect and alleviate the suffering of refugees in a highly

sensitive political context, therefore ensuring that the knowledge produced from these dynamics would echo the success of their hopeful practices. But what could ‘valid ethnographic knowledge’ mean in such a tension?

Ethnographic work in NGO settings has often been seen as a judgment against the professional competence of practitioners, their efforts, their emotional intentionality, and their enthusiasm (Mosse 2006). The wariness of international aid workers and the epistemological invalidation of research focusing on their work have unearthed the outcome-oriented logic of an enterprise culture in which understanding humanitarian settings means assessing whether or not projects are successful. Some practitioners interpreted my ethnographic choice to focus on aid (non-)recipients in particular as a strategy to tarnish their reputation, as though I was deliberately looking for evidence of wrongdoing. Thus, gaining their research validation was approached as a *sine qua non* condition for me to become a local knowledge power holder in the humanitarian space, and emerging alternative epistemologies had to be quashed by the organisations. Their implicit message on approval was used to reassert the need to obtain their consensus – and, therefore, a subtle form of epistemological validation – before accessing beneficiaries and producing knowledge on the humanitarian experience in Akkar.

On formal and informal occasions, people working in Akkar-based organisations avoided talking openly about their work. From the perspective of some, a critical analysis of humanitarianism without first-hand experience of being a practitioner was an ethically illegitimate and epistemologically faulty evaluation of their work and an appropriation of their lived experience, which was made up of successes and failures (Mosse 2006, Mercer and Green 2013). In fact, some of the humanitarian providers I interviewed tended to associate ethnographic research with the technical assessment of aid provision, meaning that they were sceptical about the academic ability to ‘criticise’ their projects without having the same professional background. These factors, to their minds, invalidated my ability to construct knowledge around the humanitarian impact on society and the latter’s response to emergency relief provision, particularly by ethnographic means.

Even though my fieldwork was happening in a space where political power is generally scattered in terms of implementation, security maintenance and service provision, I was eventually haunted by the same feeling that had arisen during my Dahiye experience: a lack of epistemological confidence, which is a vital component of successful research. My experience in Dahiye - where I encountered the professed knowledge of a local ruler that pursues pan-politicisation - and Akkar - where I instead experienced professed ignorance of tentatively apolitical beneficiaries - induced me to question myself as the knowledge arbiter in the multi-epistemological space, where ‘guessing the unsaid’ in either aspiringly pan-political or neutral spaces is allowed as a tool of knowledge production. Intimate confidence in conducting fieldwork needs to imply neither the ethnographers’



dismissal of their own political perspectives nor a political intervention, especially in contexts of repression where the risks of public ethnography are tangible (Hamdy 2017). But this epistemological polyphony needs to inform our theory as well as our methods. More importantly, ethnographic confidence should be about a constantly intersubjective effort toward counter-epistemologies; an effort to produce an afterlife for my research, which I have not undertaken.

## Conclusion

As mentioned (Paerregaard 2002, p.331), ‘sharedness’ does not mean that ethnographic data produced from our field experiences represent a uniform body of information authenticated and validated by both the researcher and the informant. Although the once-and-for-all validation of research does not exist for ethnographers, it may do to interlocutors, and this was the case in my field-sites. I therefore refer to this tension when I discuss the ‘validation’ of my research and my epistemology. In this vein, I have tried to explore the way in which the politics of knowledge in my research sites is entangled with the knowledge power-holders *in loco*. In Dahiye, a pan-political space, no one materially impeded or hampered my research but myself, due to the mental wariness that previous accounts of this securitised area had fostered in me. Moreover, the local governors’ politics of ‘professed knowledge’ triggered a process of self-censorship. In Akkar, an allegedly neutral humanitarian space, where my ethnographic presence became overtly public, epistemic power-holders sought to discipline and weaken my knowledge production efforts. By disentangling the knowledge economy of ethnographic-political-humanitarian interactions, I have therefore shown how both mental and material hurdles can shape and diversify our access – or lack of access - to the field, which needs to be continuously negotiated in a never-ending process.

While I had overall experienced a spurious need for political protection in Dahiye to counter local ‘professed knowledge’, in Akkar, the Syrian refugees seemed to require my active engagement, while humanitarian organisations wanted to maintain control over the local production of knowledge and rewarded ‘professed ignorance’. The epistemological questions stemming from such diverse field experiences relate to how I create knowledge between, on the one hand, guessing the unsaid in a securitised field where a public ethics of suspicion is effectively enacted and, on the other, advocating for the refugees’ right to maintain their political dimension *vis-à-vis* ‘bare life’ humanitarianism (Agamben 1998) and its Dunantist neutrality principle.<sup>13</sup> By causing Syrian refugees to depoliticise their own language and deeds in the public sphere, the neutrality imperatives of the international humanitarian apparatus increasingly required me to guess what was left unsaid in Akkar – exactly as I had done months earlier in Dahiye, where negotiating the

research epistemology with the local rulers would have effectively meant legitimising their public politics.

These two experiences show how ethnography politics is configured differently in response to the way knowledge power-holders (local authorities in Dahiye and humanitarian actors in Akkar) diversely demand the validation of our epistemology, while leading ethnographers to a feeling of disenfranchisement. Should writing about these theoretical and practical difficulties be the compensatory asset of the afterlife of ethnography, I wonder how we researchers, once weakened by knowledge power-holders, can ever deal with the desire to re-validate the knowledge produced in the eyes of all our field companions. It seems to remain a desire that is laden down with morality and that, when left unfulfilled, leaves us with a sense of unaccomplishment, which this article has sought to analyse in the attempt to pursue more significant ways of tackling it. Ultimately, research 'validity' was not endangered by the need to 'guess the unsaid' in the field, as I worried throughout my fieldwork, but by the fact that I began to approach ethnographic confidence as a collective process at a later stage, intent as I was on battling epistemic power.

The aspiring pan-politicisation of Dahiye's space by Hezbollah and the attempted neutralisation of Akkar's research spaces by international humanitarian practices both established an epistemological hegemony, albeit in different ways. Both epistemic powers demanded that I constantly negotiate my presence in the field and the meanings of my research. The ethnographic challenge lies in producing knowledge while tackling the apparent incompatibility between the researcher's epistemological and ethical points of departure, those of local (political and/or epistemic) power-holders, and the research participants' expectations – in Akkar, this was particularly evident, meaning on the one hand positively assessing international humanitarian programs for the INGOs and, on the other, turning my research into refugee-friendly policy-making for the Syrian refugee interviewees. Dahiye and Akkar here emerge as spaces where different politics of knowledge intertwine: spaces which, considering the importance that advocacy gradually acquired in my research pathway, left me with the desire to conciliate diverse epistemologies around what my research should have been about and aimed at. In spaces gate-kept by different forms of epistemological hegemony, this desire of mine is as politico-moral as epistemological, as was my practice to eliminate the divide between my performative self and my real self in 'unprotected' fields. However, this dissonance between the performative and the real selves was promoted as an institutional need when my politics were not in line with those of my field companions, therefore when I had to deal with 'political others' (Shitrit 2018, p.261). It is in this confused realm, where I no longer distinguish epistemic powerlessness from an actual lack of research accomplishment, that I have sought to identify a meaningful interspace between the expected production of academic knowledge (the professional reason for my presence there), my

feeling of ethnographic disenfranchisement, and my personal effort to guess the unsaid, on the basis of my belief that some research interlocutors *knew* but did not want to voice their knowledge in Dahiye and Akkar for multiple reasons.

Although challenging epistemological hegemony is political – a challenge that several ethnographers have already considered in viewing the production of knowledge as inevitable acceptance of competition, conflict and ‘troubles’ (Gallo 2011, p.70) - our subsequent desire to have our knowledge production validated by all of our field companions stems from our hurt morals. Nonetheless, as mentioned, our concern cannot only be limited to ensuring ethical and humane research in the MENA region. Through an awareness of this tension, with this article I aim to foster further critical dialogues about knowledge, action and ethics to rethink ethnographic confidence as an active effort toward participants’ counter-epistemologies, rather than as mere ‘acceptance’ of polyphony (often revolving around how ethnographies are written rather than how actual social transformations can be triggered) and of conflict that eventually leave ethnographic authority unquestioned. Ethnographic confidence and research validation cannot only come either from the scholarly community or from those powerful segments of field interlocutors who would validate our epistemology. Ethnographic confidence needs to come from the field as well as from the afterlife of fieldwork, uncomfortably shaping our theories and methods on an intersubjective ground. No research can ever be valid without restitution.

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of clarity, in Lebanon there is no institutional committee that provides ethical approval to conduct research in the country. However, some permissions to work in specific places may be requested implicitly or explicitly.

<sup>2</sup> By 'political protection' I mean connections that would facilitate the access to Hezbollah's offices, hospitals, any sort of buildings and commercial spaces, associations and public spaces. The political protection local academics mentioned was an implicit one: namely the active support and protection of a local influential individual either a member of or at least close to the party, who could guarantee that I was not a suspicious presence in the suburbs. This sort of access is known to be very restricted even for local people, such as those among the Dahiye residents who are not well-connected with the party.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, the internal diversity of international humanitarianism remains unaddressed. However, the terms 'system' and 'apparatus' used throughout the paper are meant to refer to the various Western-born humanitarian agencies that embrace the impartiality and neutrality principles.

<sup>4</sup> On 27 May 2013, two rockets were fired in Dahiye next to Mar Mikhael Church, causing neither injury nor deaths. On 8 July 2013, a car bomb exploded in the mall parking of Bi'r al-'Abed, a district of Dahiye, causing dozens of injuries but no fatalities. On 15 August 2013, a car bomb exploded between ar-Ruwess and Bi'r al-'Abed, killing 27 and injuring more than 200. The latter was the biggest bombing after the killing of Rafiq al-Hariri on 14 February 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Ghobeiry is a suburb in which Lebanese and foreign outsiders rarely set foot unless for specific reasons.

<sup>6</sup> Here I am more describing others' feelings about me having no protection – and my own feelings in response to this supposedly 'absolute need' – rather than my actual need for (or spontaneous feeling of needing) political protection.

<sup>7</sup> Sami Hermez, for instance, explains his engagement in *hamlat al-muqawama al-madaniyya* – the 'campaign of civil resistance' – in Lebanon during the 2006 war, when aid provision to his compatriots shaped activism as a broader form of resistance against Israel and a struggle for social justice, unlike the declared neutrality of other emergency relief organisations. He explained his action as an effort to foster togetherness in a time of war and the need to perform rather than observe in order to avoid war tourism (2011). Likewise, Sukarieh (2007: 31) highlighted the traps of activism deployed as 'reactivism': 'perennially reacting to crises and never addressing their roots'. Conducting research is portrayed as a core part of doing activism.

<sup>8</sup> The March 14 coalition is a group of parties that coalesced after the death of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri to call for independence from Syrian 'protection' (*al-wikala as-suriyye*), strengthened by the Ta'if Agreement after the Lebanese civil war. The coalition has been led by Rafiq's son, Sa'd al-Hariri, who supported the Syrian opposition in the wake of the Syrian turmoil. The March 8 coalition is led by Lebanon's main Shiite party Hezbollah, and strongly



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supports the Syrian regime by waging combat in Syria to defend it. Although the two coalitions no longer officially exist in today's Lebanon, the party groups are still commonly referred to in such terms.

<sup>9</sup> The Committee was funded by the Syrian National Council (*al-Majlis al-Watani as-Suri*), the Istanbul-based Syrian opposition. This funder ceased to exist in November 2012 and turned into the Doha-created National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which redesigned its funding policies and political priorities.

<sup>10</sup> The Lebanese government uses the term 'displaced' in order to deny official status to Syrian refugees. The government is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention for Refugees and aims to avoid the 'Palestinisation' of Syrian displacement in Lebanon.

<sup>11</sup> What initially happened in Syria is not universally considered to be a 'revolution' – not even from a politico-scientific and technical perspective – since, to date, the Asad regime's institutions have not been dismantled and the regime (as I write) has practically won this war. However, I employ this term to emphasise the personal way in which I conceived Syrian and foreign activism and engaged with assistance to the refugees; as well as to point to the inevitable social transformations that the uprising has brought about in Syria.

<sup>12</sup> The fear of explaining uncomfortable social phenomena or stigmatised images is called 'exigho-phobia': in the Ancient Greek *exigho* means explanation and *phobia* fear (Hage 2003, p. 87).

<sup>13</sup> Henry Dunant is the founder of the International Committee of the Red Cross, a movement marked by neutrality and independence from governments.