The politicisation of humanitarian aid and its effects on (in)security

A case study of the experiences by international aid workers of MSF, in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict

Sjoerd Visser

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Sjoerd Visser (s4156277)

Radboud University

Nijmegen School of Management

Médecins Sans Frontières – Operational Centre Amsterdam (MSF-OCA)

Supervisor Radboud University:	**dr. Willemijn Verkoren**
Supervisor Médecins Sans Frontières:	**Wouter Kok**
Second reader:	**dr. Romain Malejacq**

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Abstract

Classical humanitarian aid actors, provide emergency relief based on the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Nowadays, the field is getting increasingly politicised. The politicisation of humanitarian aid results in aid actors being perceived by others in a political way, instead of in a humanitarian way. Within the academic debate, this transition is seen as a risk factor for the security of aid workers (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygård, 2017; Meininghaus, 2016; Fast, 2010; Stoddard, Harmer, & DiDomenico, 2009). Although previous research has explored the relationship between the politicisation of aid and (in)security, it did not result in convincing evidence. As an increase in insecurity can have negative effects for both aid workers and the civilians that are depending on their help, the exploration of the possible effects of the politicisation of aid holds societal value.

By exploring the operations of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) within the Syrian conflict as a case study, this research project aims to contribute to this mostly quantitative debate, from a more qualitative perspective. Together with an analysis of the security policy of MSF and the statistics from the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD), this research mostly explores this case by interviewing international aid workers of MSF. This more phenomenological evidence focuses on the experiences of aid workers regarding security, in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict. As the Syrian conflict is highly insecure, according to the AWSD (2019), it is a relevant and extreme case to investigate. More so, because the perception of MSF by the Syrian government as siding with the opposition, already proved to have major operational consequences for the organisation in the form of being banned from accessing Syria (UN 2018; Whittall, 2018).

The results of this case study show that some of the activities of MSF and its interaction with other actors have resulted in being perceived politically, next to the dominant image of being perceived as a medical actor. This political perception mostly originates from the Western background of the organisation and its reputation of speaking out about what it witnesses in the field, in addition to the perception of being biased by the Syrian government. However, this politicised image barely had any consequences for how these aid workers experienced their security in the field, in contrast to what I had hypothesised. Only consequences of a possible return of the Syrian government and the unknown threat posed by IS affiliates resulted in feelings of anxiety. Due to the state of mind of aid workers and their trust in the security management system, the politicisation of aid did not result in any substantial feelings of insecurity.

Keywords: Humanitarian aid, Politicisation, (In)security, Syria, Médecins Sans Frontières, Conflict

Contents

1. Introduction

For decades, scholars have focussed on the role of humanitarianism in the dynamics of conflict. Humanitarian actors aim to provide emergency aid and try to relieve the suffering of those in need (Abu-Sada, 2012). This means providing critical human needs such as access to healthcare, shelter, sanitation and food (MSF, n.d.). Next to natural disasters, violent conflicts are the major cause of human suffering (Weiss, 2014). The majority of contemporary conflicts are intrastate (Richards, 2005). Whereas the name suggests this type of violence stays within the boundaries of a certain state, international actors play a role as well. Human rights activism has become a major discourse in international policy, therefore connecting humanitarianism with states. 'Ethical' foreign policies now try to address the root causes of human suffering (Chandler, 2001). Next to state support or supranational organisations, (international) non-governmental organisations, or (I)NGOs in short, provide humanitarian assistance as well. Following the human rights discourse, the humanitarian sector is growing rapidly, resulting in a ten-fold increase of the budget between 1988 and 2008, to a total of more than eleven billion US dollars (Magone, Neuman, & Weissman, 2011). Apart from being a growing industry, actors in the humanitarian sector are increasingly linked with political and military actors (Weiss, 2014).

Since the war on terror following 9/11, humanitarianism has become increasingly intertwined with political interests. This phenomenon is labelled as the politicisation of aid (Meininghaus, 2016; Duffield, 2012; Metcalfe et al., 2011). For instance, representatives of the US said humanitarian aid actors were an important source of information on terror groups in the Iraq war (Fast, 2010). The politicisation of aid has consequently changed the image of humanitarian actors, as pursuing the political interests of 'the West', instead of providing emergency relief according to the humanitarian principles (Metcalfe, Giffen, & Elhawary, 2011). In the past, humanitarian actors were viewed as outsiders who attempted to operate in a neutral manner, in a humanitarian space, while staying clear from the conflict (Barnett, 2005; Chandler, 2001). Whether this was true or not, it reflected the principles of humanitarianism, as being neutral, impartial and independent. Nowadays, scholars believe that these core principles of humanitarian aid are almost impossible to achieve in conflict situations (Meininghaus, 2016; Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010; Hilhorst & Serrano, 2010; Barnett, 2005). Within the humanitarian sector, 'Dunantist' organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) try to separate humanitarianism and politics. Contrastingly, 'Wilsonian' organisations such as the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) use the politicised environment and try to benefit from its opportunities (Barnett, 2005). MSF is a unique organisation in this sense, as it tries to provide aid in accordance with the three core 'Dunantist' principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality. Yet, the organisation

also enters the political domain to some extent, by speaking out (Abu-Sada & Crombé, 2016; Barnett, 2005). As MSF speaks out about what it witnesses in the field, which is called "témoignage" (MSF, n.d.). When it publicly denounces human rights abuses and obstruction of aid in certain areas, it tries to change that situation for the better by putting pressure on the actors responsible or raising awareness. However, it can produce a challenging working environment, by being perceived as belonging to a certain political 'side'. Being perceived as an affiliate to certain parties in a conflict, adds to an already complex environment for humanitarian actors.

The dynamics regarding humanitarian actors in today's conflicts can be observed, among others, in the Syrian conflict. Following the Arab Spring, protests erupted against president al-Assad in early 2011. The government responded with violence, eventually sending the country into a civil war (Van Dam, 2017). This is a recent example of an intrastate conflict, including both non-state, state and international actors (Richards, 2005). Working in a complex environment such as the Syrian conflict, humanitarian agencies have their own security policies and political approaches to best operate in these situations. MSF was present in the early stages of the conflict, but no agreement was reached in negotiations with the government. This is important, as humanitarian organisations rely on negotiated access, to provide emergency relief (Duffield, 2012). MSF was perceived by the Syrian government to be taking the side of the opposition, following its operations in opposition-controlled areas. As access was not granted by the Syrian government in 2011, MSF opened medical projects to treat patients in opposition-controlled areas, after negotiating access with its leaders (Whittall, 2018). Therefore, MSF provides aid in opposition-controlled areas only, which resulted in a representative of the Syrian government calling MSF "terrorists without borders" (UN, 2018). With this statement he compared the organisation to IS, which also entered Syria without permission of the government. Within MSF, the extreme comments by the government are said to have followed as a reaction to a specific advocacy activity of the organisation. MSF spoke out about treating patients in Syria with injuries caused by chemical weapons (Forgione, 2017), which was supposedly perceived by the government as a direct accusation. The relationship between the Syrian government and MSF has proven to be difficult ever since (W. Turner, personal communication, March 27, 2019). Contrastingly, the ICRC did not speak out against certain actions of the government, allowing them to work through the Arab Red Crescent in government-controlled areas. MSF adapted its approach and operates 'illegally' in opposition-controlled areas, according to the Syrian government. In practice, this is most of the north-east of Syria, which is currently controlled by Kurdish forces. The organisation does have approval of the Kurdish authorities to operate in the areas they control. In government-controlled areas of Syria, MSF was perceived by the government as having a political preference in favour of the opposition. As a consequence, it resulted in operational constraints for MSF. Hence, how other actors perceive the organisation can affect humanitarian operations. Apart from operational restrictions, does the

politicisation of aid have implications for the (in)security of humanitarian workers, who are providing aid in missions such as Syria?

Investigating the relationship between the politicisation of aid and its impact on the (in)security of humanitarian personnel holds important social relevance. It is a significant issue for both humanitarian agencies and citizens of a certain conflict area, as Meininghaus (2016) argues that well-balanced aid provision can create positive conditions for lasting peace. When humanitarian aid workers are targeted in certain areas, their aid programs can be discontinued. Next to the obvious health risks for the local population in need (Narang & Stanton, 2017; Carmichael & Karamouzian, 2014), the absence of aid in a selective space within a conflict area, could lead to a disturbance of the power balance between groups, leading to increased horizontal inequalities (Langer & Stewart, 2014; Stewart, 2010).

In previous research, the politicisation of aid is linked with the (in)security of their personnel (Hoelscher, Miklian, & Nygard, 2017; Fast, 2010; Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico, 2009; Harmer, 2008). Whereas these scholars suggest the politicisation is a risk factor threatening security in the field, this claim is missing empirical evidence (2010). The Aid Worker Security Database (2019), or AWSD, documents security incidents concerning humanitarian aid workers since 1997. The database shows an increase in the number of security incidents. However, proper documentation has only recently started to occur amongst organisations in the field. Moreover, it does not document the motives of these attacks. Therefore, by using the AWSD, the incidents cannot be traced back as being caused by a certain political image. This means it cannot connect the politicisation of aid to (in)security in the field.

Adding to the quantitative evidence that a lot of the previous research is based on, this research project focuses primarily on collecting qualitative evidence. It turns to the experiences of humanitarian workers themselves. How do humanitarian workers themselves experience their (in)security in providing emergency relief? Do the operations in the field reflect the academic debate surrounding the political change in the image of humanitarianism? And does this increased political image have an impact on their (in)security, as suggested by scholars? MSF and its employees that provide emergency relief within the Syrian conflict served as a case study within this research project. This is an extreme case (Clifford, Cope, Gillespie, & French, 2016) within the humanitarian security debate, as it shows how political perceptions can have major consequences for humanitarian operations in an environment that accounts for a large number of attacks against aid workers. These consequences show in the difficult relationship between the Syrian government and NGOs, in the ongoing conflict. As an organisation that speaks out, MSF has a higher exposure to the political context of a conflict. In Syria, this allegedly contributed to the failed negotiations for access with the government, therefore containing MSF operations to government-controlled areas (W. Turner,

personal communication, March 27, 2019; Forgione, 2017). Moreover, Syria accounts for a disproportionally high number of attacks against humanitarian aid workers (AWSD, 2019). Therefore, if the politicisation of aid has an impact on (in)security, it should show in this extreme case.

Within this case study, I focused on the lived realities in the field of international staff of MSF. Following the politicisation of aid, what is their relationship with other actors? Is MSF perceived by other actors in the field as political? And if so, does this perceived political image of MSF affect how they experience their (in)security? As mentioned, this relation is suggested in previous sources, yet lacks empirical evidence (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard, 2017; Fast, 2010; Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico, 2009). In this study, I explored how these concepts are experienced in the field, and whether they affect each other. It is a type of research which "recognises that perceptions are real forces that can shape the popularity, reputation, safety and feasibility of humanitarian efforts" (Nouvet, Abu-Sada, de Laat, Wang, & Schwartz, 2016, p.373). This means that the politicisation and its effects on the perception of the political image of MSF, can shape the reality of aid workers and how secure they feel in providing aid within conflict environments.

1.1 Societal relevance

It has been suggested that the politicisation of aid has negatively affected the provision of aid, as warring parties are more suspicious of aid actors (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard, 2017; Fast, 2010). This suspicion of these actors originates from their perception of the political image of humanitarian actors. The politicisation changed their image, which has consequences for humanitarian operations. Next to denying access to humanitarian actors, this suspicion may lead to aid staff increasingly being targeted by armed actors, leading to insecurity (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygård, 2017; Meininghaus, 2016; Fast, 2010; Stoddard, Harmer, & DiDomenico, 2009). Therefore, the politicisation of aid and the corresponding change in the image of humanitarian actors could pose a dangerous development for the humanitarian sector. By exploring to what extent international workers of MSF perceive the organisational image to be political within the Syrian conflict, this research reveals how aid workers experience the politicisation of aid on its potential impact on (in)security.

Not surprisingly, security is critical for humanitarian aid workers in a conflict area. Next to the obvious risk of physical or mental harm to themselves in a dangerous environment, violence against aid workers has an indirect effect as well. If they get attacked on a regular basis, there is a strong chance that their organisation will leave a conflict for security reasons, or that aid workers themselves want to leave. Consequently, civilians relying on the help of these organisations will be the ones to suffer from their absence (Narang & Stanton, 2017). That is why it is important to know how the changes in the political image of humanitarianism (Meininghaus, 2016; Barnett, 2005; Chandler, 2001; Weiss, 1999; Baitenmann, 1990) are experienced in the field by international workers of MSF, and if

they have affected their (in)security. Individual aid workers who do not feel secure can request to leave, according to security policy of MSF (internal document, March 5, 2019). Hence, regardless of the statistics that show an increase in security incidents (AWSD, 2019), if workers perceive the politicised field as too dangerous nowadays, it could already lead to victims of conflict to receive less or no emergency relief (Narang & Stanton, 2017). Therefore, this research provides phenomenological evidence on how the relationship between the political image of an aid organisation and insecurity, manifests itself in the Syrian conflict. Do the experiences of international field staff of MSF support the claim of aid being politicised? And if so, do they perceive this as a dangerous trend? MSF is especially relevant for this case study because they speak out about what they witness in the field, which could alter how other actors perceive them politically. The example of advocating against the usage of chemical weapons is only one of the advocacy activities of MSF (Forgione, 2017). To understand what the effects of the politicisation of aid are on (in)security, it is necessary to investigate the other advocacy activities of MSF in Syria as well. How where these activities experienced by the international aid workers of MSF, and did they have consequences in interacting with other actors?

Moreover, this research project is important from a policy point of view as well. Humanitarian aid agencies are constantly trying to find the optimal balance between the security of its staff and being able to effectively operate in insecure environments, according to the field security advisor of MSF-OCA, the operational centre in Amsterdam, (W. Kok, personal communication, January 3, 2019). Humanitarian organisations have to try and base their security policies on the risks in the field. On the one hand, they do not want to impose too many security guidelines. If they are not justified, these guidelines would get in the way of effectively providing aid in conflict situations. On the other hand, if the security managers underestimate the risks, this can lead to recklessness in the field. More so, security management is especially important because some agencies are focussing their policy more on 'how to stay', instead of 'when to leave' which implies an increased risk tolerance level of these organisations (Hoelscher, Miklian, & Nygard, 2017). Following from the politicisation of aid, insight into how a political perception impacts (in)security in the field, would provide helpful information for future security policy and decision making.

1.2 Scientific relevance

Following from the politicisation of aid, there is no hard evidence on whether or not the change in the political image of humanitarian actors is leading to a decrease in security for humanitarian aid workers providing aid in conflict. Duffield (2012) thinks the concept of politicisation of aid is invented to justify the 'bunkerisation' of the sector. With this term, he refers to increasing security measures of aid agencies in response "as an unavoidable response to an exogenous decline in global security" (Ibid., p. 477). He argues that it is not the politicisation of aid that leads to insecurity, instead it is self-induced

fear that aims to control aid workers. This anxiety then justifies the resulting resilience measures. However, other scholars believe that the politicisation of aid and its resulting change in the image of aid actors, is a risk factor for humanitarian workers (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard, 2017; Meininghaus, 2016; Fast, 2010; Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico, 2009; Harmer, 2008). Therefore, this research project adds to the humanitarian security debate and provides valuable insight from a phenomenological perspective. This type of data consists of first-hand realities and includes detailed descriptions of the reality in a certain context (Nouvet, et al., 2016). Until now, this type of information is not yet utilised in humanitarian security research. The realities of those working in the Syrian conflict, provide insight into the extent of which a more politicised image of a humanitarian actor, translates into the field. Moreover, this perspective explores its effects on (in)security in an already difficult environment. Especially, being part of an organisation that speaks out about what they witness in the field, which can alter how other actors perceive and react to the humanitarian workers of MSF. As these workers directly experience the concept of humanitarian security, they can explain best what contributes to (in)security in the field.

Stoddard, Harmer, & DiDomenico (2009, p.5) argue "aid organisations may be attacked because they are perceived as collaborators with the 'enemy', be it a government, a rebel group or a foreign power". Their research states that attacks are increasingly politically motivated, and add that the total number of attacks has increased. However, these conclusions follow from an incomplete dataset and disregard other contextual factors in conflicts. Hoelscher, Miklian, & Nygard (2017), explain the increase in the total number of attacks by arguing the total number of workers in the field, and battle deaths in general, have also increased. Therefore, the relative number of attacks remain more or less the same. Furthermore, a disproportional part of the attacks can be accounted for in a few countries, including Syria and Afghanistan. This is also one of the reasons why the Syrian conflict is an extreme case (Clifford et al., 2016) to explore these relations in, as it illustrates an environment of high insecurity for humanitarian aid workers. Furthermore, the research of Stoddard, Harmer, & DiDomenico (2009) suggests that being perceived as favouring one side or having a political agenda, could be a risk factor. However, their statistical findings, partially based on the AWSD (2019), do not confirm this. In more than half of the cases, the motive is labelled as 'undetermined'. Moreover, the database only records motives if the source that reports the incidents includes this. As these sources remain anonymous and there is no argumentation provided for given motives, the database does not provide conclusive evidence for this claim.

At the moment, most research regarding humanitarian security focuses on quantitative methods. The current evidence is insufficient to prove the claim that the politicisation of aid leads to (in)security. Also, conclusions vary throughout these research projects. Differences in results can be traced back to different definitions of humanitarian workers and security incidents. For example,

Stoddard, Harmer, & DiDomenico (2009) exclude peacekeeping and human rights personnel from the studied population if they are not employed by UN aid agencies. Yet, they do include people who are hired by an aid agency, such as drivers or guards. Moreover, security incidents are only included if they result in death, abduction or 'serious injury'. Contrastingly, Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard focus solely on peacekeeping operations as their independent variable. They do use the same definition as the AWSD to define a security incident. Differences in proxies and their consequences for the results are explained more extensively in the next chapter, when (in)security is discussed.

By focussing on the perception of the people who actually provide the aid, this qualitative research project provides a different angle on this matter than previous quantitative studies. It focuses more on the experiences of these people, which adds to the statistical research mentioned above. Especially, because the main source of data, the AWSD (2019), is still incomplete, and therefore not completely valid. Next to its statistics about an increased number of attacks, the perceptions of workers in the field add another perspective to the security debate in the humanitarian sector. Do humanitarian workers actually perceive an increased politicised image of a humanitarian organisation and to what extent is this affected by advocacy activities or interaction with other actors, following the politicisation of aid? And if so, does it impact how they experience their (in)security?

1.3 Research objective

The objective of this project is to examine if humanitarian aid workers of MSF experience the perception of them as a humanitarian actor to be politicised, following the politicisation of aid. Moreover, does it impact how they experience their (in)security in providing emergency relief in the Syrian conflict? Is the (in)security of aid workers affected by a political perception following from advocacy activities of MSF and its interaction with others, or is it impacted by other factors? The former would reflect the theoretical debate surrounding the politicisation of aid. As an example of the impact of political perception in Syria, the perception of MSF by the government has proven to have major operational consequences. Yet, to what extent does a politicised perception have consequences for how international workers experience their (in)security? This research provides qualitative data about lived experiences within the case study, which adds a missing perspective to the highly quantitative debate surrounding humanitarian security.

1.4 Research questions

In order to be able to guide this research project towards the objective in a structured way, multiple research questions are formulated below.

Main question

To what extent do international aid workers of MSF perceive the organisation to be politicised following their advocacy policy and interaction with others, and how does this affect their experience of (in)security in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict?

Sub questions

1. How do international aid workers of MSF interact with other actors and what are the advocacy activities of the organisation, in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict?

2. To what extent do international aid workers of MSF experience being perceived in a political way by other actors in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict, following the politicisation of aid?

3. How do international aid workers of MSF experience their (in)security, in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict?

2. Framework

2.1 Theoretical concepts

The politicisation of aid and the humanitarian principles

To be able to understand the debate around the politicisation of aid, an introduction about the humanitarian principles is necessary first. Originally, the principles of humanitarianism were formed to separate aid actors from anything other than providing emergency relief. The principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence are at the core of classic humanitarianism (Barnett, 2005). Impartiality means to provide emergency relief on the basis of need, without discrimination. Next, neutrality means an aid actor should refrain from taking part in any activity that affects the power balance between the conflicting parties. The principle of independence involved that aid actors should not be linked with a party that has an interest in the conflict (Ibid.). Whereas impartiality, neutrality and independence were perceived as necessary values for humanitarian actors in the traditional humanitarian debate, today this image is more contested (Meininghaus, 2016; Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010; Hilhorst & Serrano, 2010). Scholars have described a change in humanitarianism, wherein aid and politics are increasingly linked (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard, 2017; Meininghaus, 2016; Weiss, 2014; Fast, 2010; Weiss, 1999). The state and opposition groups obviously have stakes in a conflict, and aid actors have to interact with these parties to be able to provide emergency relief. By interacting with these actors on an operational level, true neutrality and independence are already almost impossible to achieve for humanitarian organisations (Weiss, 1999). For example, to enter a conflict area and distribute aid as a humanitarian agency, consent is needed from the state or any ruling party in a particular area. If they operate through a government, they might be perceived by opposing parties as siding with them, and vice versa. Another example applies to the way an organisation receives its funding. Do states provide it, or is it private funding? Moreover, is it free to spend or is it earmarked? The type of funding can affect the image of a humanitarian actor, as working for the interests of its donor, instead of being independent.

Classical humanitarianism dictated that aid actors should always aspire to adhere to the principles mentioned above. Yet, nowadays there are more types of aid actors. Whereas 'Dunantist' organisations such as MSF and the ICRC try to separate humanitarianism from politics, 'Wilsonian' organisations such as CARE go along with the politicised environment and try to benefit from its opportunities (Barnett, 2005; Stoddard, 2003). This means the first type of organisations still tries to adhere to the 'classic' principles, whereas the latter accepts that they are impossible to achieve. MSF is unique as a Dunantist organisation because they speak out about what they witness in the field if the organisation deems it to be necessary (MSF, n.d.). These activities enter the domain of politics to some extent, yet the organisation still aims to provide aid according to the humanitarian principles.

Therefore it can still be classified as a Dunantist organisation, as mentioned by Barnett (2005). Despite these large humanitarian organisations that aim to provide emergency relief in a way separated from politics, scholars still argue that aid is becoming increasingly politicised.

Weiss (2014) states four factors that have contributed to this politicisation of aid. The first is the change in the nature of wars, to dynamic intrastate conflicts. This includes a change in the actors of war, wherein an increased number of non-state actors is active and global powers also have a stake. It can be questioned if these are new dynamics because civil or proxy wars are not new phenomena. Nevertheless, these types of conflicts play a significant role in the politicisation of aid, as they determine the current political dynamics in which these organisations have to operate. Second, the funding structure has changed. Whereas donors used to invest in untied disbursements through the UN, nowadays funding is usually earmarked or has a specific purpose, which decreases the flexibility of humanitarian agencies in determining their expenditures. Furthermore, even if a humanitarian agency is careful with political statements, donor agencies or governments might not be afraid to speak up about their agendas, which could be harmful to the image of neutrality of humanitarian organisations. Third, he argues there is a shift in the agendas of the humanitarian agencies themselves, which include development goals as well. It shifted from providing emergency relief only, towards also striving to decrease the root causes of human rights violations and to help in post-conflict peacebuilding. This focus on development is even harder to combine with the principles of neutrality and impartiality. Yet, a purely medical humanitarian organisation such as MSF focuses on providing aid in times of distress only, and will not assist in post-conflict peacebuilding. Finally, the last factor is the change that happened post 9/11, which intensified the politicisation of aid. The counterterrorism discourse and humanitarian aid can be closely related, as terrorist groups can often be found in areas that are prone to conflicts, such as the Middle East or the Caucasus. Humanitarian aid can be used by a state to convince the local population of their good intentions, which can be beneficial if an intervention is needed (Ibid.). These type of operations were designed to win over the hearts and minds within the Iraq war (Meininghaus, 2016; Duffield, 2012; Metcalfe et al., 2011; Fast, 2010; Lischer, 2007). Furthermore, the US even called humanitarian actors 'force multipliers' within the Iraq war, and stated that they provided most of the information about terrorist groups (Fast, 2010). Thus, humanitarian actors are sometimes included in the foreign policy of states nowadays. And even if they are not, events such as the one above, cause a change in their general image. An image that that differs from being perceived as neutral, independent and impartial, as these actors set out. An organisation can try to construct its identity by deciding on its organisational values. However, this does not imply that others perceive the organisational identity this way. Other attributes of the organisation might mean more to them. Sen (2006) discusses the plurality of identity and argues that contextual choices

affect which identity takes priority over another. How other parties perceive an entity can limit these choices, as their perception of its image belongs to the identity.

Whether aid agencies have an actual political agenda besides providing emergency relief or are only *perceived* as taking sides in a conflict, the results are the same. Humanitarian agencies have lost part of their image as being neutral, and are instead connected to political agendas. As humanitarian actors rely on negotiations with the warring parties to access affected areas, to recruit local workers, or to distribute their aid, this trend can be troublesome (Meininghaus, 2016). Regarding the general humanitarian image, Abu-Sada (2012, p.45) states that the perception of aid, "is largely considered a Western product provided by whites". This can affect the trust that local governments or rebels place in these agencies, ultimately not allowing them access to an area. Being viewed as being part of the West hurts their operations, as aid actors are not being viewed as independent anymore (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard, 2016). Furthermore, this relates to the argument of Weiss (2014) that this change in perception leads to an expansion in humanitarian agendas, towards development portfolios. This is the case, when local actors perceive external humanitarian actors as spreading Western beliefs of development, instead of providing emergency relief. Hence, the politicisation of aid and its effects on the principle of independence, are said to have impacted the ability of humanitarian actors to act in many conflict settings (Neuman & Weismann, 2016; Nouvet et al., 2016). So what does this mean for the (in)security of humanitarian workers in the field?

(In)security in the field

When discussing humanitarian (in)security, the term 'humanitarian space' is important to mention, as it originates from the early days of humanitarian assistance and is still widely used. The concept refers to a symbolic space where humanitarian agencies can provide help, in a secure and neutral manner (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010). An environment where humanitarian workers can provide emergency relief without being hindered by actors taking part in the conflict. Whereas the practical applicability of this concept is contested by scholars, it is still widely used (Ibid.). If all actors involved in a conflict would respect humanitarian space, there would not be any violence against aid workers. The reality on the ground shows that even while trying to adhere to the humanitarian principles, it is not self-evident that humanitarian workers can provide emergency relief, without risking becoming a target themselves (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygård, 2017; Fast, 2010; Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010). Insecure environments have a lower amount of humanitarian actors responding to them compared to stable environments, according to a study conducted by Stoddard & Jillani (2016). Security management has been a growing department within humanitarian organisations, and 'duty of care' became an important matter within the sector (T. Dunderovic, personal communication, March 29, 2019; Neuman & Weissman, 2016). This is the lawful responsibility of an employer towards its employees, in providing

a secure work environment (Neuman & Weissman, 2016). What can explain this increased attention for the security of aid workers? The risks of working in insecure contexts such as conflict situations are numerous for aid workers, but have they increased? Or are the risks exaggerated, to justify the changing humanitarian discourse towards security, as Duffield (2012) argued? He views these increased security policies as part of the aid industry and argues that these security risk policies create anxiety, which he calls the 'bunkerisation' of aid. The sector then tries to combat these fears through 'therapeutic' resilience training. He argues that increased security measures are implemented as a response to a change in the discourse of aid actors, instead of a decline in external security. A discourse that focuses on how to stay, instead of when to leave. Therefore, he concludes that risk acceptance has changed, not the dangers of working in conflict areas. Moreover, he argues that these security measures actually create distance between international aid workers and the local population that is in need of emergency relief.

However, most scholars do view the politicisation of aid as a security risk, yet the exact relationship is unclear. Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard (2017) argue that working closely with military or political actors can increase the risk of being targeted as an aid worker. However, they find no correlation in general between the politicisation of aid and violence against humanitarian workers. Contrastingly, Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico (2009), do believe there is an increased security risk for humanitarian aid workers, following the politicisation of aid. Their research paper is partially based on the Aid Worker Security Database (AWSD, 2019), to substantiate these claims on. This database started documenting attacks against aid workers in 1997 and has collected over two thousand incident reports worldwide (Ibid.). The Y-axle on the right in figure 1 below shows the trends surrounding these incidents, revealing a strong increase since its beginning in 1997. However, it is too simplistic to suggest that this means an increase of insecurity among humanitarian workers in conflict areas, as other variables have to be taken into account as well.
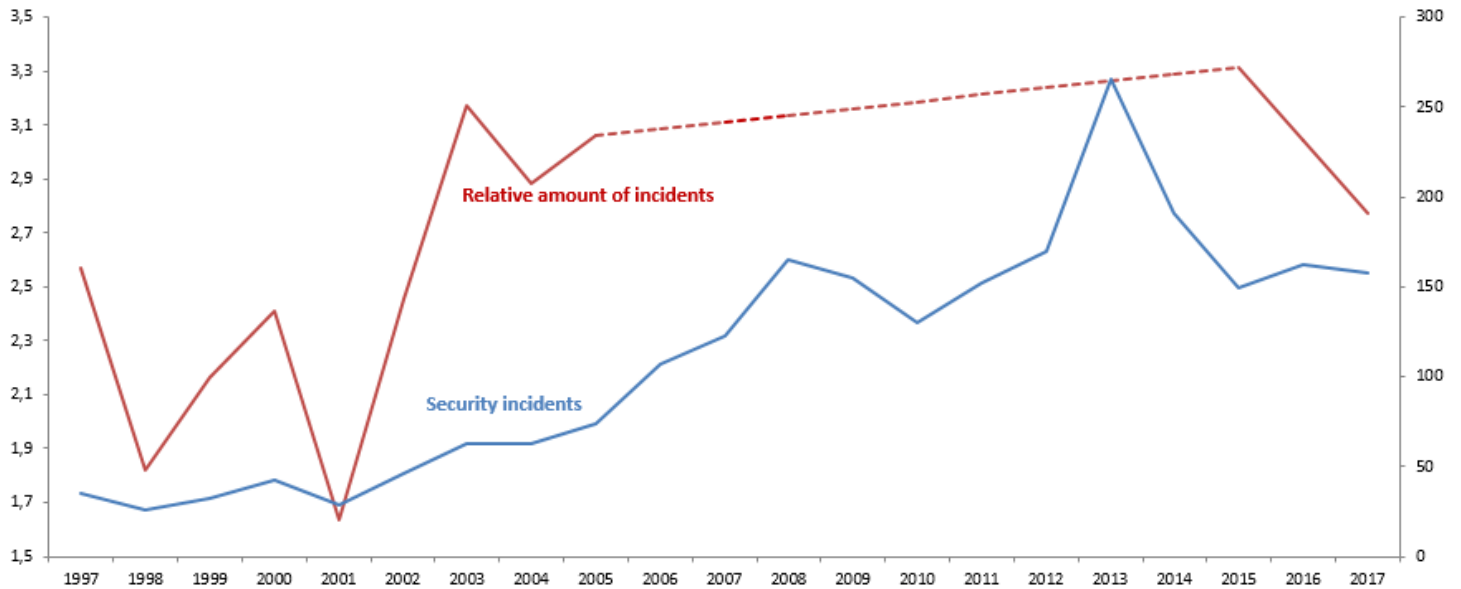
Figure 1. Security incidents of humanitarian workers in conflicts (AWSD, 2019; Clarke, Stoddard, & Tuchel, 2018; Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006)

First, the increase in the number of incidents can be explained by looking at the rise of humanitarian workers in conflict. If the number of workers grows in the same pace as the incidents, the number of incidents per fixed number of workers relatively remains the same, which is referred to as a denominator issue (Fast, 2010). Figure 1 shows this by displaying the relative number of security incidents per ten thousand humanitarian workers, on the Y-axle on the left. Based on the total estimated number of humanitarian workers by Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver (2006), it shows a fluctuating relative number of incidents. Unfortunately, the estimates of the number of humanitarian workers are missing for 2006 until 2014, but the numbers are available before 2006 and between 2015 until 2017 (Clarke, Stoddard, & Tuchel, 2018). These estimates are from the latest 'State of the Humanitarian System' and were calculated in cooperation with numerous (I)NGOs (Ibid.). The numbers for the missing years will be available in late 2020, as the algorithm to calculate them is not completed yet (A. Stoddard, personal communication, June 7, 2019). A steep increase in humanitarian workers causes the relative number of incidents to decrease slightly in the last three years. However, due to the missing values in between, a trend cannot be identified with certainty. Next, because the documentation of security incidents has improved since the AWSD was founded, the numbers in the early years are less reliable (Neuman & Weismann, 2016). As security management became more important for aid actors, the documentation of the incidents improved significantly. The same increase applies to the number of sources contributing to in the AWSD, in providing them with information about their incidents. Another explanation for the steep increase in incidents is the trend of conflicts in general. It makes sense that aid workers are more exposed when conflicts are more intense. Figure 2 shows this by comparing the data of the AWSD to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP, 2019),

which follow similar trajectories in the last two decades. The Y-axle on the left shows the number of battle deaths, while the Y-axle on the right shows the number of security incidents, according to the definition of the AWSD (2019).
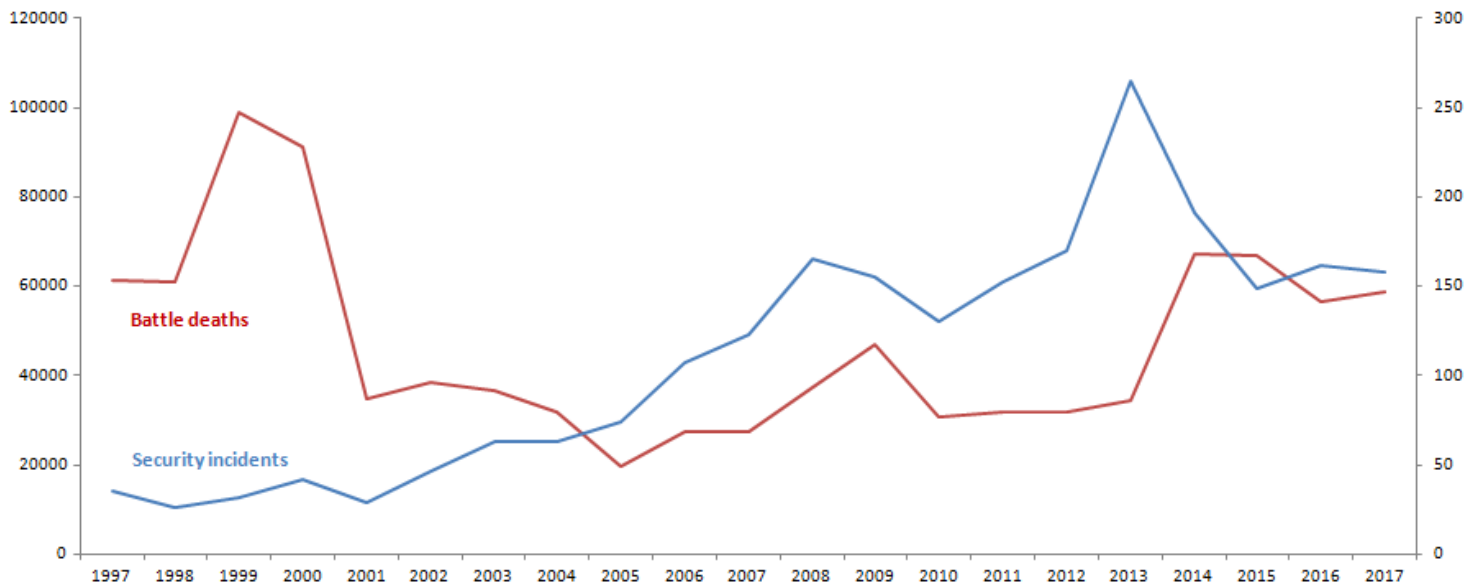
Figure 2. Security incidents compared to battle deaths (AWSD, 2019; UCDP, 2019)

Apart from the reasons mentioned above, these contrasting results of (in)security research can be accounted for by the definition of security incidents. Which organisations does it include? Who qualifies as a humanitarian worker? And what type of violence qualifies as an incident? For example, the AWSD (2019) only reports on major security incidents, such as killings, kidnappings and incidents that cause 'serious' injury. It defines aid workers as "the employees and associated personnel of not-for-profit aid agencies (both national and international) that provide material and technical assistance in humanitarian relief contexts" (Ibid.). They do not take peacekeeping operations into consideration, in contrast to Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygård (2017). I do not want to discredit this type of quantitative research on (in)security or give a value judgement on which definition is better, but want to emphasize the impact that proxies have on the results.

Next to quantitative research, scholars have emphasized the importance of contextual factors in explaining humanitarian security. Fast (2010) states there is a gap between documenting violence against aid workers and explaining it. She argues that attacks are often wrongly described as being caused by global trends, such as the politicisation of aid or terrorism, thereby neglecting the internal dynamics of a conflict. Moreover, by explaining this type of violence with global trends, an environment of acceptance is created. Rather than critically analysing the causes of these incidents in their context, they are portrayed as part of a particular trend. Therefore, potential mitigation measures can be overlooked or wrongfully implemented. Attacks against aid workers can either be a side effect

of warfare, or a form of violence deliberately aimed at humanitarian aid workers. However, usually very little empirical evidence exists for the latter, as it is difficult to uncover the motivations of perpetrators. Wille & Fast (2013) state the frequency of security incidents can be explained by four components within conflicts. The first one is the 'presence' of an agency, which means the more active it is on the ground, the higher its exposure is to risks. Second, 'vulnerability' encompasses the security measures of an organisation, including risk acceptance and individual behaviour. In theory, security management focuses mostly on reducing vulnerability in the field. Three important elements within security frameworks are "a consideration of ethical risks, the balancing of risk with programme impact or programme criticality, and the ability to acknowledge that a certain level of residual risk must be accepted, and to communicate effectively about this" (Haver, 2016, p.15). Next, the perpetrator's 'capability', determines how much power it has to create a dangerous scenario for aid actors (Wille & Fast, 2013). Finally, 'intention' refers to the extent of deliberate targeting of aid workers. If an organisation is present on the ground and vulnerable, and the perpetrator is capable and has an intention to target aid workers, security risks are the biggest. So how does this connect to managing humanitarian security in the field?

In practice, security managers try to find a balance between the security of their employees, and being able to provide aid effectively in conflict areas (W. Kok, personal communication, March 27, 2019; Harmer, 2008; MSF, n.d.). The first notion that is important to state here, is the difference between safety and security. Whereas the former describes the harm caused by accidents, the latter focuses on the risk of intentional harm (Young & Leveson, 2014). There is a difference between deliberate violence against humanitarian aid workers, collateral damage of warfare and accidents (Neuman & Weismann, 2016). Whereas the first two categories are affiliated with security policy, the latter is general safety. Security management encompasses the protection of aid personnel, agency assets, programmes and reputation from harm (Neuman & Weismann, 2016). Tools to accomplish this range from "context analysis and threat and risk assessment, to security strategy choice and security planning" (Neuman & Weismann, 2016, p.72). More about security management follows, in the description of the approach of MSF and in the results.

As a result of security management, the risks for those providing aid should be decreased to an acceptable level. Previous research on humanitarian security has primarily focussed on quantitative ways of measuring (in)security, and qualitative ways of explaining this (in)security. However, experiences by aid workers themselves are often overlooked as a source of data. Their experiences consist of first-hand realities of what contributes to humanitarian (in)security (Nouvet, et al., 2016). Therefore it can be useful in explaining (in)security. More so, as aid workers can determine themselves if they think an environment is too insecure to work in, which could result in them leaving a particular

conflict area (T. Dunderovic, personal communication, March 29, 2019; internal document, March 8, 2019).

2.2 Context

To be able to understand how the theoretical concepts translate to the field, a description of the context of the case study is provided below. It explains the approach of MSF in providing emergency relief and describes the dynamics of the Syrian conflict and MSF its role within it.

The approach of MSF

According to traditional humanitarianism, agencies have to operate according to the humanitarian Code of Conduct. In compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL), it states that every human being should have the right to receive humanitarian assistance. The international community is obligated to help if the state fails to do so (Slim, 2002). Core principles in following this are neutrality, impartiality and independence. Whereas the politicisation of aid suggests that adhering to these principles in conflict situations is harder than ever, agencies such as MSF still work according to them. To further distance themselves from political objectives and coalitions, MSF left a clustering program led by the UN. As this clustering program contained a development agenda as well (Brauman & Neuman, 2014). This does not mean MSF wants to exclude itself from the 'aid system', but it does want to operate as independently as possible. International aid programs can contain development aid agencies as well, which have other priorities than agencies providing emergency relief.

As mentioned earlier on, being perceived as choosing sides can have consequences, including becoming a target as a humanitarian aid worker (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygård, 2017; Fast, 2010; Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010). Yet, MSF does speak out about certain conflicts, to raise awareness about certain human rights abuses, or to call out restrictive policies that limit their access to areas or capabilities to deliver aid (MSF, n.d.). Speaking out about what they witness is called 'témoignage', and is remarkable for a 'Dunantist' organisation. This type of organisation usually tries to separate politics and humanitarian work altogether, as for example, does the ICRC. Speaking out, or advocating, to some degree, enters the domain of politics, which is why it is controversial in light of the principle of neutrality. Whereas, in theory, delivering aid in a neutral manner can be completely separated from an advocacy policy, it can still be perceived by other actors in the field as related matters. Moreover, there are multiple ways of speaking out. For instance, MSF can speak out privately within a negotiation, but can also speak out publicly in the media (personal communication, May 6, 2019). The latter can put more pressure on the parties involved, but can also change the way other actors perceive MSF. Investigating an organisation that enters the political domain is extremely relevant for this research project, as it explores the effects of the politicisation of aid. The advocacy policy of MSF and interaction

with others can be used to operationalise this trend, which is discussed extensively in the chapter on methodology.

Within MSF, there are five operational centres which operate independently, yet all adhere to the MSF Charter (MSF, n.d.). This increases the flexibility of operations but can make it more complicated when talking about MSF as a whole (Brauman & Neuman, 2014). It is important to note that there is no 'one' standardised approach to conflicts. As conflicts are continuously changing, it leads to "fluidity of contexts" (Abu-Sada & Crombé, 2016, p.155). This means a constant adaptation to the environment and its risks, which in Syria resulted in a time of absence and then redeployment. The approach of MSF to conflict is based on negotiated access with local actors in a certain area and focuses on quick response to an emergency. For instance, MSF uses pre-packed aid kits to provide emergency relief as quickly as possible (MSF, n.d.). However, this has no added value if they cannot access a certain area. Therefore, they need permission of a government or another party that is in power, to be able to operate. Before a mission starts, a security analysis should determine if an environment is secure enough to work in. By striving for neutrality, impartiality and independence, MSF is trying to get the best chance at negotiating access to areas when needed. This is part of MSF its overall approach, regarding the security of its personnel. Security is especially important for MSF, as they are usually one of the first external actors to enter a conflict zone and one of the last ones to leave (T. Dunderovic, personal communication, March 29, 2019). Moreover, the organisation has a legal obligation towards its employees, which is called 'duty of care' (Neuman & Weissman, 2016).

Next to promises of the actors in a conflict, MSF developed a security framework that allows its staff to implement security mitigation measures. Apart from general guidelines and operating procedures, there are location-specific plans. The aim of this security management system is to reduce the risks to acceptable levels. The security incidents that do occur are recorded within an internal database (W. Kok, personal communication, March 27, 2019). Furthermore, the general security framework consists of a general security policy, an incident reporting system, critical incident protocols, security management manuals, checklists and documents. Moreover, next to general guidelines, it holds practical guidelines for diseases, incidents, finance, human resources and technology. For each of the missions including the one in Syria, there is a country security plan, as well as local security plans and a duty of care policy focussed on specific regions (internal document, March 8, 2019). These plans originate from the general security guidelines but have been adjusted to a specific context. Whereas the risks can vary depending on which context MSF operates in, the same applies to the mitigation measures. Mostly they account for changing levels of risks and their impact, regarding threats such as assault, detainment, abduction, crossfire, or the presence of IEDs (Ibid.). The specifics regarding the risks and their mitigation measures are not mentioned, due to the confidential nature of these policies. Country and local security plans explain the structure of security management within

the team, as well as describe the security context for that particular area. Moreover, the duty of care policy should ensure that the security policy reflects the concerns of the staff working in a certain context. These documents are partially based on previous incidents that have occurred, in order to prevent them in the future (W. Kok, personal communication, March 27, 2019).

Before entering a conflict area, the situation is analysed. According to the applied security manager (T. Dunderovic, personal communication, March 29, 2019), this starts with mapping all actors involved, together with their stake in the conflict and their significance in that specific political context. After that, a risk analysis is made. This is a model-based process, in which the impact and likelihood of the analysed threats, determine the expected risk. Moreover, the impact is determined for the staff, the program, and the organisation. These threats range from being arrested by a government, to being kidnapped or falling victim to crossfire (internal document, March 8, 2019). Next, mitigation measures should make sure these security threats are reduced. These mitigation measures can be a set of rules for how to travel, how to behave in a certain environment, and even how to dress properly. The risk that remains, is the residual risk. Last, it should be determined if this residual risk is acceptable, by comparing it to the urgency of that mission. The latter is similar to the mission criticality, which Haver (2016) suggested in her framework. Within daily decision making, a lot of responsibility lies in the hand of senior members, to be able to respond quickly to incidents. This is a vertical way of decision making, wherein a decision made by those in charge has to be followed. However, if team members feel unsafe, they can always decide to quit the mission and return home (T. Dunderovic, personal communication, March 29, 2019; internal document, March 8, 2019). In practice, the dynamics of conflict can pose challenges to the approach which MSF wants to implement. The Syrian conflict is no exception to this.

The Syrian civil war

The Syrian conflict started in 2011, following a series of protests labelled as the Arab Spring. In the case of Syria, these protests were fuelled by resentment against the al-Assad government. Failed economic liberalisation, mismanagement of resources, and the authoritarian way of ruling, were the main causes behind the uprising (S. Qasem, personal communication, April 24, 2019; Van Dam, 2017; Wimmen, 2016; Gleick, 2014). Furthermore, deep-rooted tensions and inequality between different identity groups exist, mostly between the Sunni majority and the Alawite population. Al-Assad belongs to the latter, and nepotism is fairly common (Van Dam, 2017). These tensions became even more relevant, in explaining why the protesters did not succeed in overthrowing al-Assad. Whereas the mobilisation of people was very successful, the most powerful parts of the military apparatus remained loyal to al-Assad, because he had made sure the tank and air force regiments were predominantly Alawite.

At first, when the conflict started to become more violent and turned into a civil war, the international community was hesitant to interfere, except for humanitarian agencies such as the ICRC

and MSF. This hesitance of the international community to interfere may have prolonged the conflict, as the Syrian opposition counted on the support of the international community (Van Dam, 2017). However, only when the presence of IS started to increase, the international attitude changed. The international community mainly assisted in the conflict by contributing financially and through bombings, in the name of counterterrorism. IS had conquered major parts of Syria, and used brutality instrumentally, to spread fear (Lister, 2014). Attacks on humanitarian aid workers were part of this strategy. Al-Assad used the presence of IS to further emphasize the attention on terrorism and by portraying the opposition as being part of it, saying "it's me or the terrorists" (Van Dam, 2017). Eventually, the influence of IS decreased, due to a successful international counterterrorism campaign, and because of internal unrest within IS. Al-Assad remained in power, due to its powerful alliance with Iran and Russia (Ibid.).

Emergency relief was necessary as the conflict caused over thirteen million people to be displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance (Meininghaus, 2016). These agencies provided aid from the beginning of the conflict, yet had different approaches in doing so. In Syria, there is no balanced provision of aid, with all officially accepted aid being distributed through the Syrian government. It has a major stake in the conflict and used aid instrumentally to change the balance and weaken the opposition. This meant aid was only provided within government-controlled areas, excluding huge parts of the country from receiving emergency relief (Van Dam, 2017; Meininghaus, 2016). The Syrian government perceived MSF as siding with the opposition, consequently denying them access (W. Turner, personal communication, March 27, 2019; Whittall, 2018). However, MSF did provide aid in areas controlled by the opposition. This meant they had to enter and get their supplies into Syria through neighbouring countries, such as Turkey and Iraq. Sometimes with the help of 'non-traditional' actors, including armed opposition groups. Consequently, this resulted in a more balanced provision of aid within the Syrian conflict, but also resulted in internal criticism as this way of working could be harmful to the public image of MSF (Meinighaus, 2016; Whittall, 2014). Moreover, this approach meant that they could not provide aid in government-controlled areas, due to the risk of being detained. Hence, they only provided aid in opposition-controlled areas, without consent of the Al-Assad government. Later on, a Syrian government official added that they perceived MSF as part of the French intelligence and even compared MSF to ISIS, as they both entered Syria without approval. This reflects the difficult relationship between both actors. Moreover, because ISIS started targeting humanitarian aid workers as a strategy, it was too dangerous to work in areas controlled by them. As IS started to lose territory to both the Kurdish opposition and the Syrian government, MSF provided aid in areas controlled by the former. In practice, this contained their operations to north-east Syria (Ibid.). A possible return of the Syrian government could jeopardise the operations of MSF in the future.

As humanitarian actors rely on negotiations with warring parties to guarantee access to an area and the security of their staff during missions, the same applies to the Syrian conflict. Due to the multitude of actors and their goals, this proved to be difficult. If a humanitarian agency is unable to reach an agreement with an actor that governs a certain area, this limits the possibilities for operations. At the beginning of the conflict, the Syrian government and the opposition were the two main actors. As the Syrian government has only provided legal access for a couple of agencies within the humanitarian community, aid was mostly provided in opposition-controlled areas (Ibid.). Whenever the government regained control over territory previously under the authority of the opposition, local operations had to be put on hold or managed from abroad. For example, aid could still be provided from neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Jordan or Iraq. In 2014, IS became the common enemy within the conflict, as their extremist thoughts turned all other parties into enemies. Humanitarian actors were deliberately attacked, which meant that agencies retrieved their staff from IS-controlled areas. Only specific areas remained secure enough to operate in for actors such as MSF. This, in turn, affected the perception of neutrality and impartiality (W. Turner, personal communication, March 27, 2019; Whittall, 2018).
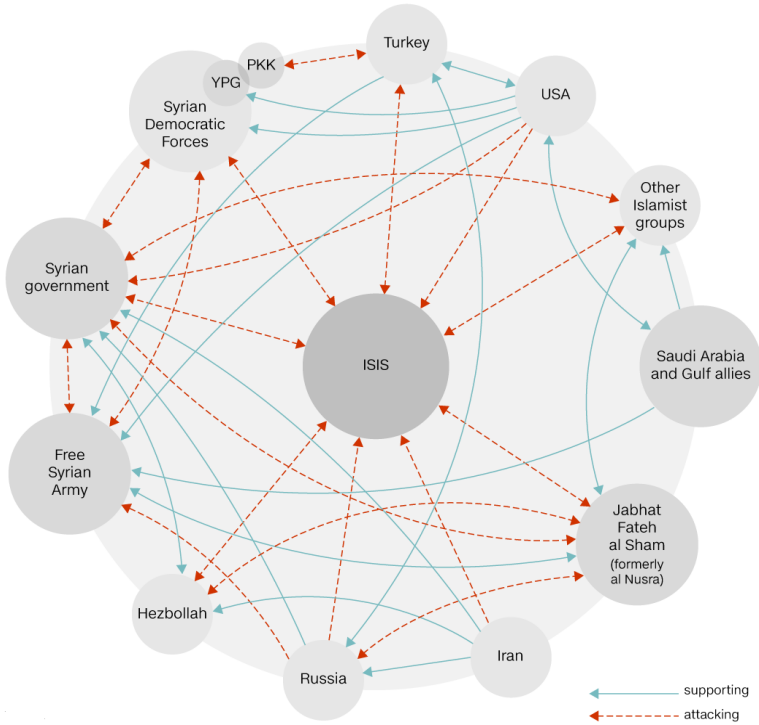
Figure 3. Actors within the Syrian conflict (internal document, March 8, 2019)

Figure 3 above, shows an overview of the actors within the Syrian conflict, to illustrate the complex dynamics humanitarian actors work in. Now IS has lost most of its power, will the government quickly take back that territory or will the north-eastern part of the country and the Idlib area remain under the control of the opposition? This impacts MSF operations as well, as they do not operate

directly in government-controlled areas and are confined mostly to the north-east of Syria. Therefore, their area of operations is getting smaller when the government regains control of certain parts of the country. Still, MSF managed to set up multiple projects in the north-east of Syria, with missions in Kobane, Raqqa, Tal Abyad, Manbij, Qamishli and Al-Hol (internal document, March 8, 2019). In figure 4 below, the geographical location of Syria is shown, together with a visual representation of the different missions of MSF in north-east Syria. Currently, most services are provided in Al-Hol, to the internally displaced population that live in camps. Furthermore, most of the fighting within the conflict shifted to just south of the Idlib area. This is where FSA groups backed by Turkey, are clashing with the Syrian army that is backed by Russia and Iran (S. Qasem, personal communication, April 30, 2019).

Figure 4. Syria and the missions of MSF in the North East (Google Maps, 2019)

2.3 Conceptual framework

To bring together the theoretical concepts of the humanitarian security debate with the context of this case study, figure 5 shows how they relate to each other within this research project. The starting point of this thesis originates from the politicisation of aid. As the majority of scholars suggest the politicisation of aid is a risk factor for the security of humanitarian aid workers (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard, 2017; Meininghaus, 2016; Fast, 2010; Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico, 2009; Harmer, 2008), I explored how international aid workers of MSF experience this relationship, in providing aid within the Syrian conflict. As the politicisation of aid suggests a change over time, it is hard to measure within the parameters of this project. Due to its limitations, this project explores only the mission of MSF in Syria. Ideally, experiences of aid workers from before the politicisation of aid would be included as well. To be able to explore the relationship between the politicisation of aid and (in)security, I focused on how the politicisation of aid manifests itself in the field. Weiss (2014) argues that humanitarian activities have become political, which contributes to a political perception. That is why I focused on interaction with other actors, together with the advocacy policy of MSF, as it enters the political domain. I interviewed international staff of MSF about their interaction with others, their advocacy policy and how they are perceived as an organisation, in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict. This way, I can still explore the possible security implications of the politicisation of aid, without having to conduct longitudinal research. More about the operationalisation of my research question follows in the methodological chapter.

By interviewing international staff members of MSF that have been to Syria, I tried to capture their experienced realities (Nouvet, et al., 2016). First, regarding the extent to which they perceive the image of MSF to be political, resulting from their interaction with other actors and their advocacy activities. The link between these two components and the image of MSF is depicted with a dotted arrow, as it is not certain if they do believe the image to be political and is caused by these activities. Next, I explored how aid workers experienced their (in)security. What factors affect this according to the international staff of MSF? And can an increase in insecurity be traced back to a politicised image of MSF? As the latter is uncertain, this connection is also depicted with a dotted arrow. The results of the research are based on the experiences of aid workers regarding how these concepts relate to each other.
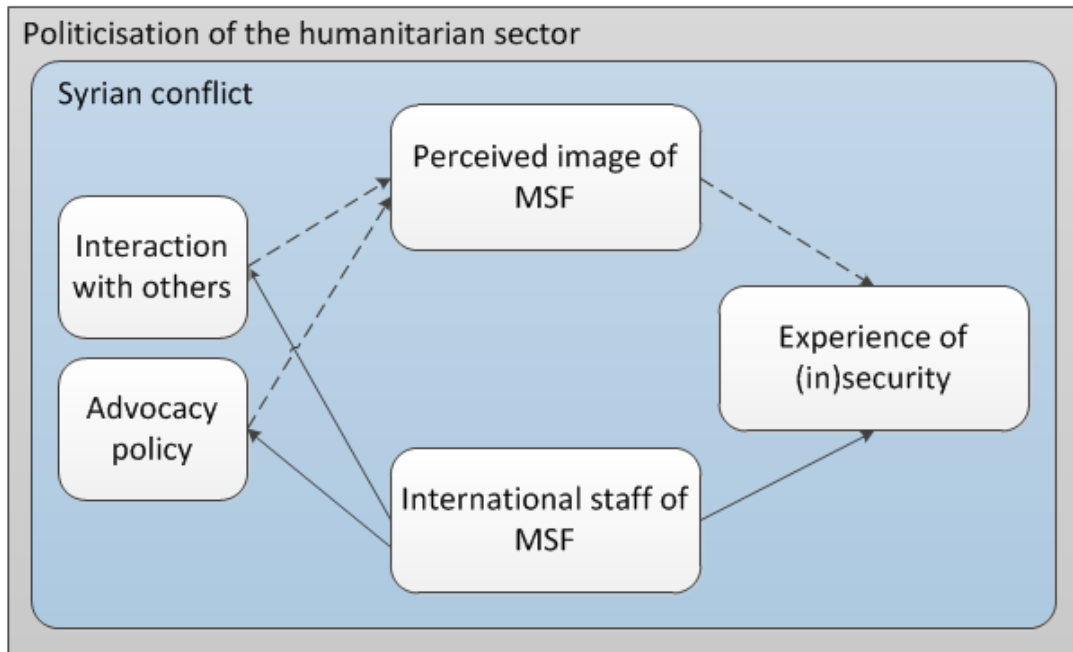
Figure 5. Conceptual framework

To what extent do international humanitarian workers of MSF believe the organisation is perceived politically, in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict? And how do they experience their (in)security in this context? Moreover, to what extent does the politicisation of aid affect how these workers experience their (in)security in Syria? If the perception of MSF is political and it has a negative effect on the experiences of security in providing emergency relief in Syria, the empirical data would reflect the debate of scholars surrounding security (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard, 2017; Meininghaus, 2016; Duffield, 2012; Fast, 2010; Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico, 2009; Harmer, 2008). My hypothesis is that aid workers perceive the organisational image to be politicised in the field to such an extent, that it has a negative effect on their experiences regarding security, in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This research project starts from an interpretative position, meaning a focus on how meaning is constructed by people, instead of looking for causality and the objective truth. This type of science acknowledges that all knowledge is interpreted. Perceptions shape reality, which means reality does not exist without them (Demmers, 2012). This research emphasizes on personal experiences of people in the field of humanitarianism. Whether people are (in)secure or not, if they feel that way, then it will impact how they act. Moreover, how meaning is constructed within research is also dependent on the design of the project. Therefore, the results should be seen within the framework of this research. It focuses on experiences of international aid workers of MSF in Syria to explore the relationship between the politicisation of aid and (in)security. Although the information about this case study mostly comes from interviewing these aid workers, the interpretation of it is made by the researcher. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for the collection and analysis of data (Merriam, 2009). This means that despite carefully designing this study, another researcher could interpret the data differently, which would alter the results.

I chose a case study as my method of research because it is suitable for generating in-depth information about *how* mechanisms can be explained in a certain context (Clifford et al., 2016). In my case, the politicisation of aid and (in)security, regarding the operations of MSF in the Syrian conflict. A case study is a methodological form of research that can be used in an *intensive* research design, as it focuses explaining links within a limited social group. An *extensive* research design and corresponding methods of research such as surveys or questionnaires aim to discover a certain pattern and therefore require large number of data (Ibid.). Whereas it would be interesting to investigate politicisation of aid and its effects on (in)security on a larger scale, the limitations of this project do not allow it. Therefore, I chose to investigate their relation on a smaller scale, to see how the effects of the politicisation of aid manifest itself in the field of the Syrian conflict. Moreover, the detailed and phenomenological type of information that I gathered in order to answer my main question, cannot be obtained by opting for an extensive research design which focuses on *breadth* rather than *depth* (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010). Instead, a case study design is best suited for this project, with qualitative methods of data collection. By using more than one method of collecting qualitative data, the examination of the case becomes more thorough (Ibid.). When collecting data for a case study, Creswell & Poth (2018) suggest qualitative forms of data such as documents, interviews or observations. I did not include observations as I could not actually go to Syria. More on data collection follows later on in this chapter.

Starting from the literature about the politicisation of humanitarian aid and (in)security of humanitarian aid workers, I wanted to focus on the experiences of humanitarian aid workers

themselves regarding these concepts. This means this is a qualitative perception study, about realities in the field that shape the humanitarian efforts in Syria (Nouvet, et al., 2016). It provides qualitative evidence for the suggested relationship between the politicisation of aid and (in)security. If humanitarian workers feel less secure because of the politicisation of aid, they will act accordingly. Furthermore, by collecting qualitative data about the experiences of humanitarian workers within the Syrian conflict, I could test if the theoretical trend of the politicisation is experienced at all in the field.

The politicisation of aid implies a change over time, yet my research focuses on only one mission. Therefore, I chose to operationalise the politicisation of aid by focussing on its manifestations in practice. A high-level and broad concept can be translated into operational lower-level concepts, to address it in a detailed way (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). By designing the research this way, this project can still explore the effects of the politicisation of aid on (in)security in the field. Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard (2017), argue that the politicisation of aid changed the humanitarian image. The image changed from humanitarian actors being perceived as adhering to the humanitarian principles, to being perceived as having political interests. Moreover, Weiss (2014) argues the humanitarian agenda is increasingly linked with political activities, causing this political change of image. As MSF is an organisation that can be linked with the political domain because of its advocacy policy, it is possible to investigate how their political image affected their (in)security within the Syrian conflict. Especially, as there was the belief in the organisation that their advocacy activities regarding chemical weapon usage changed the perception by the Syrian government (W. Turner, personal communication, March 27, 2019; Forgione, 2017). Apart from the advocacy policy, the general nature of the interaction of MSF with other actors in Syria is explored. This interaction with others is relevant as it provides an explanation for how MSF is perceived, in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict. Thus, the extent to which the image of MSF is politicised is used to operationalise the politicisation of aid, with the advocacy policy and interaction with other actors as its indicators (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard, 2017; Weiss, 2014). Ultimately, data was collected about the activities of international aid workers of MSF during their missions in Syria, how they interacted with others, what they advocated for, and how the aid workers experienced this, to account for how the politicisation of aid translates to this case study. By focusing on these indicators, the phenomenon can still be explored (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010). Hence, by operationalising the concept of the politicisation of aid, its relationship to (in)security in the field could be explored.

I am aware that my research cannot prove for certain that a political image of humanitarian actors lead to (in)security, as this would require substantially more data to generalise the results. And even then, predictive theories have to be applied with caution in this field of science. In social sciences, it is difficult to produce theories independent from its unique historical and socio-cultural context (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2003). Case studies are extremely useful to provide in-depth and context-

dependent knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). I am not looking for hard evidence in this project, but want to explore if, and how, the politicisation of aid and (in)security relate to each other. The results reveal how aid workers experience this relationship within the case study, which helps to understand how this relationship manifests itself under extreme circumstances. Phenomenological research focuses on an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of people that have experienced certain phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the political image of humanitarian actors and a corresponding sense of (in)security in the field. This type of empirical data consists of lived realities of aid workers, that shape the corresponding humanitarian efforts (Nouvet, et al., 2016). Apart from actual incidents of attacks from the database about violence against humanitarian workers, humanitarian security is a complex phenomenon to capture (AWSD, 2019). Therefore, experiences of aid workers can prove to be useful as an alternative in measuring (in)security, as it describes how (in)security manifests itself in the humanitarian practice. Research conducted by Abu-Sada (2012), has already shown how this type of data can explain how humanitarian actors are perceived in a particular context.

As respondents gave vivid examples of situations that made them feel insecure during their time in Syria, I was able to explore if (in)security is affected by being perceived in a political way as an aid actor. The key concepts of this research are understood through the perceptions of these individuals. By triangulating different types of data sources, the validity of the results is increased (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Clifford et al., 2016). Moreover, it provides an in-depth description of the case.

Choice of case study

To be able to answer the main question, international aid workers of MSF that have provided aid within the Syrian conflict, are the subject of this case study. I chose for a holistic single-case study (Yin, 2003), because the Syrian conflict shows the changing dynamics of humanitarianism in conflicts, as described by scholars (Meininghaus, 2016; Barnett, 2005; Chandler, 2001; Weiss, 1999; Baitenmann, 1990). Two of the biggest humanitarian aid agencies are active within the conflict, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). Both have their own political approaches when providing aid, which results in them providing emergency relief in different areas of the conflict (Meininghaus, 2016). MSF has an operational centre in Amsterdam, which is directly involved with missions in Syria. MSF-OCA is the organisation of my research internship, making it a feasible case study in terms of collecting data. The organisation provided the resources to be able to study these phenomena in the Syrian conflict, and is interested in the results. As the scope of the case study is focused on international staff of MSF-OCA, aid workers that went to Syria are my selective sample of providing primary data (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010). This creates a scope for the results, which is further discussed in the limitations of this research, in the last chapter. Experiences of humanitarian workers of the ICRC could be different for example, as their approach is different and they are working

in different areas. An example of this could be that they are perceived to a lesser extent as being political, as the organisation does not speak out as explicitly as MSF. As it is an extreme case, the extent to which the results translate to a 'normal' case is questionable. Therefore, generalisation of the results can only be done with caution. An extreme case gives more information than an average case, as the studied mechanisms are present in a more extensive manner (Flyvbjerg, 2006). A high number of attacks against aid workers (AWSD, 2019) and a politicised image of MSF by the government, make this an extreme case. As the Syrian government is only one of the actors involved, it is worthwhile to explore the perception by other actors. For the generalisation of the results, this means that if international workers of MSF do not experience the politicisation of aid to affect their sense of security in Syria, the same could apply for an average case. In other words, if no evidence is found to indicate a link between the politicisation of aid and insecurity, the results "shed light on the everyday" (Clifford et al., 2016, p.584) by failing to confirm this link under extreme circumstances. Yet, if the results of this extreme case do provide evidence for this relationship, it does not mean that this applies to an average case.

MSF is a relevant organisation to include in the case study, as it already demonstrates the operational effects of being perceived politically. Being perceived by the Syrian government as siding with the opposition (UN, 2018; Whittall, 2018), resulted in being banned from operating in government-controlled areas. Yet, the effects on (in)security are still unclear. It is an extreme case (Clifford et al., 2016; Flyvbjerg, 2006), because of the high degree of politicisation and insecurity. Security concerns are present in a major way, as described by scholars (Hoelscher, Miklian, & Nygard, 2017; van Dam, 2017; Meininghaus, 2016) and the AWSD (2019). The Syrian conflict is responsible for a disproportionally high percentage of the attacks against humanitarian workers. Moreover, the perception by the government of MSF had major operational consequences, in the highly insecure environment of the Syrian conflict. As only the consequences of the interaction between the government and MSF are clear (UN, 2018; Whittall, 2018), perception by other actors and its outcomes are explored within this research. The perception by the Syrian government is an example of how a politicised image can affect a humanitarian organisation in its operations, but this does not necessarily mean it affects the experiences surrounding (in)security. The perception by the Syrian government is a clear indication that aid is politicised within the Syrian conflict, which makes it a relevant case. To be able to answer the main question, investigating the interaction with other actors is necessary. Especially in north-east Syria, as this is where the missions of MSF take place. Are these interactions politicised, and to what extent do they affect (in)security?

Thus, as the theoretical concepts are present in an extensive way, the experiences of international MSF staff in Syria are relevant to explore. When the political perception has no impact on the (in)security in the Syrian conflict, this would suggest the same for more common cases of

humanitarian operations. "If the thesis could be proved false in the favourable case, then it would most likely be false for intermediate cases", as Flyvbjerg (2006) recognizes. On the other hand, if a politicised image of MSF does have an impact on how international workers of MSF experience their (in)security in Syria, the results can help to understand how this relationship manifests itself in practice. In these two ways, this case is appropriate in answering my main question, and in generating relevant knowledge.

Data collection

Desk research was conducted to explore the concepts of the politicisation of aid and humanitarian (in)security, and to form a general description of the current debate. Together with expert interviews with professionals in the field, this information was used to translate these concepts to interview questions later on. Expert interviews in this research project mean interviews with humanitarian professionals with extensive knowledge of the case study and inside policy information (Dorussen, Lenz, & Blavoukos, 2005). Moreover, this type of interviews is used to gain a better understanding of the context of the case study and its implications in the field, to eventually improve the interview guide for the semi-structured interviews. A list of all the expert interviews is added as Appendix I. However, not all names are shown, due to personal preferences to remain anonymous.

Furthermore, I looked at the AWSD (2019), to discover the current trends of quantitative documentation of violence against humanitarian aid workers in conflict situations. Next, to be able to understand the context of the case study, I conducted desk research on the Syrian conflict, in relation to humanitarianism. Also, internal policy documents and the expert interviews provided enough information, regarding the approach of MSF in Syria. These internal documents are not included as an appendix due to their confidential nature, which is discussed in more detail in chapter 3.2. Instead, they are handed in at the end of the research together with all the other raw data, only for the reviewers to see, in order to ensure the reliability of the research project.

The primary data for the sub-questions were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews. In this way, I had the same structure for each respondent to ensure reliability of the results, yet still leaving room for follow up questions. When exploring a phenomenon, it is important to let the respondents answer in an expansive manner, as an in-depth understanding is needed (Chenail, 2011). This is also why I chose semi-structured interviews over, for example, focus groups. I wanted each individual to be able to express themselves in an expansive manner, without being overshadowed by certain individuals or affected by the general discourse that might exist within the group. I interviewed international humanitarian aid workers of MSF, who have experienced the Syrian conflict. This is a way of purposive sampling, as these respondents have experience with the research topic (Clifford, p.148).

The structure of the interview guide was based on the key themes from the literature, personal communication and the security policy of MSF. It is included as Appendix II. By creating a set of questions about their experiences while providing aid, how they were perceived, who they worked with, what the surrounding security and advocacy policies were, and how they perceived their security, I could gather enough data to be able to answer the main question. The literature, together with policies and expert interviews, provided the information to base the questions on. I broke down the concept of politicisation into smaller practical questions, to avoid vague theoretical questions. This way, I could operationalise the concept of the politicisation of aid. These practical questions are aimed towards the daily activities, the actors who they have worked with, and how they were perceived by them. If there is a perception of being part of the West or having a political humanitarian agenda, for example, this could impact how other actors interact with MSF. Therefore, they can be factors contributing to feelings of insecurity within the field, which should show in the answers of the respondents. I discussed the interview guide with more experienced researchers and experts on the subject, to ensure the validity of the questions. During the interviews, I started off with comfortable questions to build trust. Moreover, the questions were designed to include different angles to be most effective in collecting the data (Ibid.). For instance, I asked questions about emotions and their descriptions of events, yet also about their position and activities within the MSF mission.

Regarding the number of interviewees, the sample size of ten respondents was enough for saturation of responses to occur, as no new significant statements were produced in the final stage (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Saturation of information is what I aimed for, as there is no consensus on sample size, regarding qualitative research (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). I tried to get a wide range of respondents from different levels of seniority and positions in the field and included respondents from both sexes. This way, the answers would not be biased due to the demographic characteristics of a group (Clifford et al., 2016). By guaranteeing the anonymity of the interviewees and asking follow up questions, I was able to avoid socially desirable answers. For example, I can imagine some resistance against revealing feelings of (in)security in the field, within a research project that is conducted in collaboration with their employer. Moreover, because the research is in the interest of the organisation as well, this should mitigate any residual hesitancy to share their experiences. When contacting possible candidates, I explained the research goal as an interview about their experiences regarding security in the field, not mentioning the politicisation beforehand. This might already suggest it has an impact on security, therefore altering their answers.

It was not possible to perform fieldwork in Syria, because it is a restrictive environment where my security cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, I did not interview local aid workers, only international staff, which means this type of data collection resembles elite interviews (Loyle, Smith, & Swedlund, 2019). This is important to note this, as experiences of international workers can be different from

local staff, because they come from different cultural backgrounds. By not interviewing national workers, the research population would not be represented correctly. However, this misrepresentation is avoided, by focussing the main question specifically on international aid workers. Furthermore, I interviewed these respondents through Skype, as most of them were working abroad. This was no obstacle for collecting the data, other than repeating a question once in a while. I recorded everything, with consent, so I did not have to worry about writing along, and could focus on the conversation. Moreover, some respondents preferred to speak in Dutch, whereas others preferred English. This has little impact on the results, as significant statements are translated back to English in the results chapter.

Analysis

When analysing the primary data, I first transcribed the interviews so all data gathered was taken into account when analysing it. The analysis started with the process of coding, which is a practice to understand the meaning of this type of qualitative data, and helps in organising it (Clifford et al., 2016). I coded the interview transcriptions using Atlas.ti as a tool to eventually capture its essence in multiple steps (Saldaña, 2009). Atlas.ti is a tool that allows the researcher to effectively code the data (Friese, 2012). Important to note is that the coding is still being done by the researcher, and this process is therefore exposed to my interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I started with open coding, to code all relevant information of the interviews. After this initial coding of the interview transcripts, I categorized the codes according to the theoretical concepts and context of the framework, as described in chapter 2. This is a more deductive way of coding, as it follows the high-level structure of this project (Friese, 2012). By structuring it this way, I already aligned the codes with my research questions. Next, by performing 'horizontalisation', I removed all overlapping or similar codes for a clearer overview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The analysis was performed in a more phenomenological way, as I studied the experiences of, and perceptions by individuals (Ibid.). Consequently, these codes represented 'significant statements' of my respondents, that were relevant for the 'what' was experienced. Next, I clustered them into 'meaning units' which represent 'how' something is experienced. This more inductive approach of coding provided a detailed explanation of the experiences surrounding these theoretical concepts from the data, within the boundaries of the case study (Friese, 2012). Finally, after the saturation process set in, the most important clusters of meaning represented the essence of the studied concepts (Moustakas, 1994). The coding structure is added as Appendix III.

In the end, a comparison was made between the experiences of workers of MSF, the security policy of MSF, and the data collected in the literature review. This links previous research of scholars with quantitative data from the AWSD, and the practice of humanitarian aid workers of MSF in the

context of the Syrian conflict. These various forms of data are a way of triangulating the results within this case study, so the validity of the data is stronger (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Clifford et al., 2016).

3.2 Research process

Reflection on personal assumptions

It is important to note that the interpretation of the researcher has a big impact on the outcomes. His or her ideas and background influence the results and should, therefore, be reflected upon. As much as I would like to 'objectively' analyse the data gathered and write up the results, I am always influenced by my own values and cultural background. Moreover, as I interviewed non-Syrians about experiences in Syria, their background differs from Syrians themselves. This does not make the results less valid, as I designed my research questions and scope of my case study accordingly. The main question only involves experiences of international workers, not national workers. Thus, I am still able to get valid data to answer my main question. Whereas the experiences of national aid workers would be interesting to include, it is not feasible to do within the parameters of this project.

Next, it is important to reflect upon the 'researcher bias' (Chenail, 2011). It can be related to the notions of Said (1978), about the 'Occident' and 'Orient'. I am aware of the fact that I am an outsider from the 'Occident', who conducted research on how a phenomenon manifests itself in the 'Orient'. How I interpreted the data of this case study, is most likely different from the interpretations of someone with a different cultural background.

Ethical considerations

When the data was collected, there were two ethical issues that had to be addressed (Clifford et al., 2016). First, the internal documents that describe the security policy are confidential and are not to be published outside of the organisation. I read these documents to get a better understanding of the concept of humanitarian (in)security and to understand the context. Furthermore, I used the security policy to help develop my interview guide. Instead of publishing these documents in the appendices, they are submitted to a secured database. This way, my first and second reader can access these documents to ensure the reliability of the research project, but the documents cannot be viewed by others. Moreover, I have not mentioned specific policy guidelines as this breaches the confidentiality agreement.

Next to the confidential documents, the anonymity of the respondents had to be taken into account. At the beginning of every interview, I asked if the respondent wished to remain anonymous. A large part of the respondents wanted to remain anonymous, due to the sensitive nature of both the information and their work. By removing their names in the text and on the list of interviews in Appendix I, the anonymity of the respondents is ensured. This means that their participation in this

research cannot harm their career in any way. Again, the transcripts of the interviews are submitted to the secured database of the university and not published in the appendices.

4. Political perception and (in)security in the Syrian conflict

4.1 Context

A discussion of the context is provided in the theoretical framework to connect and understand the different theoretical concepts. In this chapter, an elaboration on the context follows, by describing how the respondents experienced it. This in-depth discussion of the context is necessary to understand how the humanitarian workers experienced their security, as they are affected by its dynamics. Different circumstances in the areas in north-east Syria resulted in a different security setting for each of the missions. A description of the operations, together with the responsibilities and the motivations of both MSF and individual workers, are provided. Moreover, an in-depth explanation of what the conflict setting looks like is provided for each of the areas. Next, the threats and incidents for the areas are discussed. These components capture differences in the context, as experienced by the interviewees. After analysing the interviews, these themes reflected the significant statements of the aid workers, as depicted in Appendix III. Despite being mentioned in section 2.2 and depicted in figure 4, the context of Qamishli is not discussed any further, as none of my respondents worked here.

North-east Syria

Before going into the specific contexts of the different missions, Syria itself is discussed. The conflict was the starting point of the emergency response, from which smaller operations followed. Whereas the state had a relatively well-developed health sector, this changed immediately as the conflict started. A big part of the population lost access to its healthcare system, which is why the medical necessity is the primary reason of MSF for going to Syria (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019; Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019). Other reasons for going are because it is a challenging context, has a personal appeal, or because the emergency desk in Amsterdam simply allocates their team members to a certain area (Interviewee 2, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). The challenging context presents itself fully at the beginning of an intervention, when the local community still has to get used to the MSF presence. As MSF has quite a specific approach within their operations, the process of being accepted by the local community takes a while, with Syria being no exception (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). Their approach is based on an independent way of working, in which MSF wants to operate according to their own principles. When this is achieved, the most challenging part comes from being ready to respond to emergency situations, such as a high flow of patients coming into the health facilities at once (Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019). Interviewee 2 (May 15, 2019) stated that working in north-east Syria is quite stressful, resulting in a relatively high turnover rate among MSF staff.

As for the security context, the first thing that influenced operations was the increasing control of IS. There was a lot of fighting in the area and when IS grew stronger, its impact on society could be noticed. Strict rules were enforced by the group, which affected MSF as well. The dress code for women became stricter and religious rules had to be followed in public. For example, eating during Ramadan could result in prison time (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). The lack of communication with IS and the people affiliated to them, made this environment even more challenging (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). Eventually, MSF paused its operations in the region altogether, due to the threats posed by IS. After the Kurdish authorities took over, rules were less strict. However, the lack of experience in governing a region made interacting with the self-appointed administration challenging (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). During periods of intense fighting there was no way to operate for MSF in the area, as the dynamics in the area resembled a "full-scale war, in which a secure way to operate is impossible to establish" (Ibid.[1]). When a clash between different military groups was expected in 2014, MSF paused its operations and left Syria (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). Whereas Interviewee 5 (May 20, 2019) stated that the Syrian conflict causes people to act irrational, Interviewee 6 (May 24, 2019) pointed out that it is a fairly predictable environment in terms of warfare. In north-east Syria, the front lines and dangerous areas are known. By limiting the time of the staff there, the exposure to threats is limited. In contrast, conflict areas such as Yemen or Iraq, are more unpredictable and accidents or acts of violence happen a lot. Next to the predictability of warfare itself, the Syrian culture helps restrict crime and violence away from the frontline. Criminality is heavily condemned, with civilians mostly refraining from it to adhere to the social norm. However, this does not mean the society is one homogeneous group. Based on differences in identity, fragmentation in the society provides challenges. Understanding and navigating the relationship between the Kurdish community and Arab communities is difficult, yet essential to be able to operate in these areas as an outsider (Ibid.).

As the front lines are mostly avoided, the large scale threats are mostly passive for MSF staff, such as IEDs or mines. The threat of large scale attacks, aerial bombardments or crossfire is not that high. However, spontaneous acts of violence can always take place (Ibid.). Next, it is difficult to trust information from local sources at times. When people have been exposed to conflict for a long time, and have lived under the rule of different actors, they adapt to whoever is in charge. As such, they often make it seem as if the organisation is accepted and the area is secure, when this is not the case (Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019). In general, trustworthy information is scarce. Whereas there is a lot of international media coverage of the war in Syria, the same does not apply to the coverage of local events. The lack of information makes for an uncertain environment (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). The uncertainty decreased as more NGOs started up operations and communication with each other

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[1] Translated from Dutch, as this was the language of the interview with this respondent

was possible (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). The threat that is currently expressed the most, is the threat of the government returning. As MSF is perceived as being in north-east Syria illegally, this could have major consequences (Interviewee 2). The dynamics described above, together with the context description in chapter 2, match which the first of four factors described by Weiss (2014) leading to the politicisation of aid.

The threats of the context resulted in security incidents within the missions of MSF in the area. As an aid worker of MSF operating in Syria, there is a risk of being abducted, detained, or falling victim to other forms of violence. Whereas the security framework minimizes this risk, it cannot remove it completely. Examples of the risks are provided in each of the different contexts and in the subchapter about how (in)security is experienced. Because of the confidential nature of these incidents, specific details, including the date, are not provided. Such incidents are shared with the operators of the AWSD (2019), in an anonymous way (W. Kok, personal communication, March 27, 2019). The differences in security contexts of the missions are discussed below.

Kobane

The city of Kobane is located right on the border with Turkey. The office for the MSF mission is located in close proximity to the border, with a view of its iron fence. For years, the MSF team ran the operations from the Turkish side, when Syria was off-limits due to the security situation. Turkey did not always agree with MSF, resulting in temporary arrests or the rejection of visas (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). After returning to Kobane, the office became especially important for the organisation during that time, as a way to get medical supplies into Syria and to MSF supported hospitals (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). The health structures that were already present are supported by the MSF team. Moreover, the program focuses on providing maternal healthcare, child healthcare, and has a vaccination team (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). Due to it being an area controlled and inhabited by Kurds, it is now a fairly stable situation to work in for MSF (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). This was not always the case, especially when the tensions with Turkey rose.

The security context was unstable when the area first came under Kurdish control. MSF was one of the first actors to enter the area, which was still contaminated by IEDs and other booby traps (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). Once this threat was mostly cleared, it became a relatively safe city (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). As a means of controlling their territory, the Kurdish authorities installed a lot of checkpoints (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). Consequently, going through the checkpoints became the biggest threat. IS would sporadically attack these checkpoints, and during transportation along the border the team was exposed to sporadic aerial attacks (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019).

Raqqa

The consequences of the conflict showed in Raqqa, as the health structures collapsed a few months into the conflict. When the team arrived, they saw people living in poor conditions, with outbreaks of the measles, diarrhoea, and the absence of running water (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). The MSF response was eventually paused for a while as the city was controlled by IS, where Raqqa became the capital of the Caliphate. Following a series of incidents, MSF decided to pause their operations in areas that were under strong control of IS. When an assault on the city caused a lot of war wounded, MSF set up stabilisation points just outside of Raqqa (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). As the stabilisation units were not capable of performing surgeries, a referral chain was set up to Tal Abyad for the badly injured (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019; Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019).

After IS lost its power over the city, people who had fled wanted to move back into their homes. Before they were allowed back in, MSF needed to set up its hospital, as they expected a lot of blast victims due to booby traps placed all over the city. Rehabilitating the old national hospital took the team quite some time, as the city was not secure enough yet to spend the night (Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019). In the end, the hospital was just set up in time, for when the refugees returned. The surgical unit was working at full capacity, as the expected influx of blast victims became a reality (Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019).

As the frontline of the conflict was located close to, or even in Raqqa, it was generally a more insecure environment to work in compared to Kobane. Surprisingly, however, the incidents that occurred in the region happened when the area was relatively stable. For example, two staff members were arrested by the local authorities for forwarding a message about a demonstration, and an anonymous personal threat was made against the international workers of MSF in the area (Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019).

Tal Abyad

MSF was active in Tal Abyad before it was taken over by IS. MSF left the city during this time but restarted their operations as soon as IS left Tal Abyad. As IS lost its control over the city before the group lost its control over Raqqa, it became an important place for treating war wounded from the fight over Raqqa, due to its proximity. It is less than a two-hour drive and a relatively secure area, which is why it had priority for MSF to be set up as quickly as possible. Next to the hospital, the mission also includes an outreach program into IDP camps in the area (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). The high patient load coming from Raqqa, resulted in a high turnover rate among the staff as it is a stressful environment (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019; Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019). Eventually the surgical capacity had to be increased, and MSF started to increasingly support the hospital (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). The hospital was not fully run by MSF but was under the control of the local health

authorities. MSF supported it financially and with medical supplies. What makes the situation in Tal Abyad unique, is that it has a military ward attached to it. This meant there was a lot of interaction with the Kurdish military actors (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019; Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019). This changed the security situation altogether, as it meant a constant presence of armed actors near and in the hospital. Moreover, the dynamics of working in the hospital could be challenging as the Kurdish forces would recruit their soldiers in the area, including the hospital. This caused fear among both the local population and national staff, and resulted in armed actors being present in the hospital at times (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). Next, the city has a much more mixed population than for example in Kobane, which affected the context as explained by Interviewee 5 (May 20, 2019):

> Tal Abyad, had a much more, was a much more mixed demographic. And had a large non-Kurdish population, and as such, there was a concern that ISIS or other more fundamentalists or even just other insurgent groups, or what-not, had presence there. So, there was just simply a higher risk to be in Tal Abyad.

This means that there was a credible fear of sleeper cells of IS still being present in the city, or at least of people sharing the same beliefs which could pose a threat. Still, it is a relatively safe city compared to Raqqa, even though the population is tense due to the many control cycles they had gone through (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019; Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). The biggest tension in the area was between Turkey and the Kurdish forces, which resulted in crossfire at the border (Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019). Furthermore, an evening curfew was set by the Kurdish authorities, which meant that the MSF team had to seek approval when attending to emergencies late at night.

Security incidents followed from this, as armed actors would come in during the evenings when fewer people were around. For example, a confrontation between two armed individuals even continued inside the hospital, resulting in unrest within the hospital and injuries for the attackers themselves (Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019).

Manbij
MSF tried to expand its operations into Manbij as soon as fighting there had come to an end and the area was 'liberated' of IS. The fighting in the city had taken its toll on the local population. Next to the war wounded, there were a lot of IDPs in the region (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). Because the team in Manbij was still relatively small and it was not clear who the ones in charge were, starting up the response took some time. It was not a familiar context, which impacts how the team could operate, according to Interviewee 5 (Ibid.):

You know, is it local Manbij authorities? Is it the YPG? Is it, you know, who is it? And, so they were just, you know, our first visit there was three weeks after the city was liberated. They were still figuring all their stuff out. And all the various actors there were, because there was essentially a power vacuum. Everybody was looking to be the one in charge, and so, it wasn't clear who we really should be negotiating with. And who had the ability, to say yes or no. And so, and then that also feeds back to the amount of time and resources we had available to figure that out. So, I would say that those were the two primary (...), plus it was you know, still, we had a, we didn't know that context. So, it wasn't also the kind of thing, that we didn't feel safe to go every day. Or spend the night there.

The objectives of the mission are primarily focused around providing primary health care, a vaccination program and outreach into the IDP camps, which are in pretty rough conditions. As the actors that were in control of the city changed over the course of the conflict, the interaction with the local population was challenging as they did not really trust any outsiders and were scared of yet another change of power. Due to this uncertainty of acceptance by the local population, Manbij is a challenging environment for outreach teams. Also, due to its proximity to areas controlled by the Syrian government or the Turkish forces, outreach locations have to be chosen with care (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019).

Al-Hol

MSF its biggest medical response at the moment is in Al-Hol. This is an IDP camp with predominantly people that are affiliated to IS. The population includes over ten thousand non-Syrian women and children, next to over twenty thousand Syrian civilians. As it hosts a lot of non-Syrians and IS affiliates it is a difficult context to work in, especially as it is located in Kurdish held areas. This means that the people controlling the camp have little interest in providing healthcare and other basic needs for its inhabitants, as they are viewed as the enemy (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). Most Kurds in the area have lost people to IS, which affects how they view this type of refugees. By trying to provide aid to these type of refugees as well, it put a strain on the relationship between MSF and the Kurdish authorities. Following from this, it is hard to negotiate with the Kurdish camp leaders and to get medical projects up and running. On the other side, when access was granted to the team, at first the displaced population was hesitant to make use of the MSF services. Because of the ideas of IS, many of them were naturally hostile towards a western organisation (Ibid.).

4.2 The image of MSF

By describing the experiences of the interviewees regarding their interaction with others and the advocacy activities of the organisation, a picture is painted of how MSF was perceived in the Syrian conflict. Who did they interact with, and what was the nature of these interactions? Moreover, how

were the advocacy activities experienced and did they impact the image others had of MSF in any way? The first two sections of 4.2 answer the first research question: '*How do international aid workers of MSF interact with other actors and what are the advocacy activities of the organisation, in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict?*'. Following this answer, the last subchapter provides an answer to the next research question: '*To what extent do international aid workers of MSF experience being perceived in a political way by other actors in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict, following the politicisation of aid?*'.

Interaction with other actors

Providing emergency relief within conflicts cannot be done without interaction with other actors or stakeholders, no matter how independent the organisation sets out to be. As mentioned in the security framework, MSF relies on negotiated access to be able to enter a conflict area (Neuman & Weissman, 2016). This subchapter focuses on explaining these types of activities, from the perception of the international workers of MSF. Who did they interact with, what was the nature of these interactions, and how did they experience these relations with other actors? As Weiss (2014) argues, the activities of humanitarian actors have extended to a political agenda. Furthermore, this section is structured according to the meaning units depicted in Appendix III. It consists of the network, the activities, the essentials and the challenges of interacting in this context. These are the main topics that were derived from the data, after coding the interviews. As mentioned before, coding is a process that can help understand the meaning of data, and help to organise it (Clifford et al., 2016). By grouping similar codes together, the main categories of interaction followed, according to my interpretation.

Starting with the network, it consists of a range of different actors. MSF has to interact with local actors such as the Kurdish authorities. In order to be able to enter the area in a secure manner, it is important to know if the organisation is 'welcome'. The same applies for the local population living there and other people who hold any form of power, such as the city council, imams, and community leaders (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). If MSF is unwanted as an organisation, it is not going to force its presence (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). The organisation is not going to operate in an area if an actor that holds power, opposes to the operation and could pose a credible threat. That is why it is important to know what the network of MSF thinks of the organisation. MSF interacted with the Syrian government at the beginning of the conflict, but without a positive result (W. Turner, personal communication, March 27, 2019; UN, 2018; Whittall, 2018). Another element of working in the Syrian conflict is interacting with armed actors. While the organisation principally does not work together with military actors because it wants to adhere to the principle of neutrality, MSF does have to interact with them (Brauman & Neuman, 2014; Slim, 2002). In north-east Syria, the FSA, YPG/YPJ, SDF, Ahrar al-Sham, IS, Al Nusra, and the Syrian army, make up the most important local armed actors

(Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). Next to these, there were local armed actors that stayed within a smaller area, such as the Raqqa Hawks (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). And of course, there is interaction with other states who have a military presence, including Russia, the US, Turkey, and Iran. While interaction usually does not go past negotiating access and sharing coordinates for security reasons, sporadically it includes more. For example, at times that MSF ambulances were full, the US military would transport patients to the hospital (Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019). Furthermore, interaction is necessary for medical actors to be able to provide emergency relief. The medical actors range from the Ministry of Health, to the hospital director, the hospital staff, the Kurdish Red Crescent, the Kurdish Health Authority, and other medical NGOs (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019; Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). Permission is needed from the different types of health authorities. Interaction with the remaining medical actors is based on sharing information because of similar objectives, which is why NGOs are an important part of the network. The interaction with other NGOs consists mostly of sharing information about the security context. These security discussions include meetings with UN-affiliated organisations, other INGOs, Syrian NGOs and delegates from embassies (Interviewee 2, May 15, 2019). Interacting with a demining NGO, Tetra Tech, was necessary to operate within Raqqa (Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019).

MSF conducts multiple types of activities when interacting with other actors. In general, there are a lot of meetings with the various stakeholders to try and explain the activities of MSF. The first steps is negotiating access and setting up rules in order to get the operations running effectively (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). This process had different outcomes with various actors. First, with the Syrian government, the negotiations for access failed. Whereas MSF still tried to reconnect and offered to operate throughout the country of Syria, these meetings were unsuccessful (Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019). Next to official meetings, there are a lot of unofficial meetings referred to as 'drinking tea' by international staff members of MSF (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). MSF uses these moments to understand the context better and to clarify their operations and approach in providing aid.

As the operational start-up was important for the team, MSF mostly agreed with the terms posed by local authorities. Interviewee 5 (May 20, 2019) stated this had consequences for the NGOs that came in after MSF, which could not ask for more independency while operating. However, this did not mean the team would agree with everything, as MSF still works according to their principles. With the most important principles being impartiality, neutrality and independence, the way the self-administration wanted to work could compromise this, according to Interviewee 5 (May 20, 2019):

> Mostly it was around principle-stuff. So for instance, we would want to go to Manbij, and we didn't want an
> escort. They didn't want us to go to Manbij without an escort <laughing>. And so, it was about, you know,

what degree of freedom, as a humanitarian actor, do we have to operate independently. Both in terms of access, and in terms of, needs/assessments and programming choices. And staff recruitment, and these kinds of issues. So this was, it was a classic example of working, where a strong state actor and a humanitarian organisation, don't necessarily share all the same operating values or principles.

Sometimes these disagreements resulted in a standstill in negotiations (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). Mostly, operational needs prevailed over holding on to the approach of MSF. Yet, there was no official line drawn, and the negotiation strategy depending on the situation. MSF got official permission from the Kurdish authorities in Syria and Iraq, to operate in Kurdish controlled areas, and to support it logistically from Iraqi Kurdistan (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019; Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). The MSF team discussed the security context and had discussions about it with the Kurdish authorities, as both actors can have different sources. By maintaining communications with the Kurdish authorities, a lot of operational freedom was received in return (Interviewee 2, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). When transiting from one area to another, the team has to check in with the local authorities, which is described by Interviewee 8 (May 27, 2019):

I mean the agreement was there, so it was just confirmation so they know we were going. And the Kurdish checkpoints that were along the way, then they were already expected us, and then they would just wave us through rather than stopping us. Sometimes they would wave us past some of the queues of traffic.

Compared to non-armed actors, the interaction with armed parties is more difficult. Whereas MSF staff is unarmed, soldiers that come into the hospital for treatment do have weapons. The team then tries to explain how MSF operates and asks these actors to leave their guns outside. This is normal for the MSF team, yet it is hard to understand for the soldiers. They are used to carry their guns everywhere and expect preferential treatments, as they are fighting in the war (Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019: Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). It can turn into a difficult situation when an armed individual gets angry for not being allowed to bring their weapon along, especially because the staff member or security guard is unarmed. These differences usually take a while to explain but are eventually adhered to (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). Moreover, the YPG was challenging to work with due to the reputation MSF had as an actor that speaks out. As they worried MSF would document all acts of violence and would publish this into a report, they would never talk in numbers. The YPG would mention patients were on their way but did not say how many. Consequently, this resulted in difficulties for the MSF team, as they had to prepare for the arrival of these people in need of treatment (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). As an armed actor that is in control, the YPG could potentially shut down MSF operations. This means the YPG had a strong position in negotiations and could set terms for MSF. A striking example, Interviewee 7 (May 27, 2019) mentioned it was mandatory to have a

poster of the YPG leader in all offices, including the MSF office in Tal Abyad. The MSF team there obliged, to be able to keep operations going. This illustrates the struggle to find the balance in negotiations, between accepting demands by other parties and adhering to the humanitarian principles. In this case, being affiliated with the YPG was less of a concern than potentially losing the ability to provide services in the Tal Abyad area.

At the end of the day, MSF is a medical organisation. Therefore, most of its day to day activities are of a medical nature. This consists of making things work on a logistic level with hospital directors or other medical authorities, about which services to provide and what staff to hire (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). It can be challenging to negotiate with a hospital director, being an international aid worker who is relatively young and female, as Interviewee 7 (May 27, 2019) explains. At first, she was not taken seriously, and she needed a lot more time to earn her authority than her male colleagues would. However, Interviewee 3 (May 15, 2019) saw this as a positive feature, being perceived as 'innocent'. This is how she gained trust faster than her male colleagues. When working with the Kurdish Red Crescent (KRC) with a vaccination outreach, MSF would organise the operation, and the KRC would perform the actual injections (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019).

Next to negotiating, medical activities include offering services to the local population. The relation between caregiver and caretaker was generally very respectful, and the local population was especially respectful to women. However, different languages pose a challenge in the caregiver/caretaker relationship, as it is difficult to employ staff which can speak English, Kurdish and Arabic (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019; Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019). Moreover, as the healthcare standards were relatively high before the conflict, patients expect more from the medical services, than what is provided. Therefore, it could be challenging to tell them this was not the case, and they would argue with the staff member (Ibid.). Next, when patients affiliated to IS were brought in, extra measures had to be taken, as both the local population and national staff in Kurdish controlled areas did not 'love' these type of patients (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). The measures mostly include regular check-ups by international staff of MSF and explaining the principle of impartiality and its importance. So it was a challenge to make sure they were not neglected.

When interacting with the different types of actors in north-east Syria, there are a few essential points within the approach of MSF. First, being present in the region early on in the conflict gave MSF legitimacy over others (Interviewee 2, May 15, 2019). As the team already built up its network and earned its trust by supporting multiple local health facilities, this shows they are needed and therefore accepted (Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019). Next to communicating with the authorities, interaction is needed with the local community in order to be accepted and to be able to operate (Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019). Moreover, the local community knows more about the context "than any foreigner ever will" (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). The process of interaction starts by showing respect and

involves unofficial chats, which involves drinking a lot of tea, as "drinking tea is more relaxed, and that's when the truth comes out" (Ibid.). Finally, extensive interaction with local actors is necessary for building a network. A trustworthy network is important for triangulating information in an unknown environment (Ibid.; Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019). This means validating information across multiple sources, to ensure it holds truth.

Whereas, Weiss (2014) argues that a focus on more political activities is part of the politicisation of aid, the activities of MSF do not seem to address the root causes of human rights violations. Contrastingly, the mentioned activities and interactions with various types of actors are necessary to be able to operate in such an area. The activities merely take place in the political arena, yet have an operational purpose. Therefore, these types of interaction do not indicate a shift towards a more political agenda. However, the advocacy policy of MSF is a different process from providing aid, which can have a political purpose. The advocacy policy of MSF in Syria is discussed in the next subchapter.

Advocacy activities

The advocacy activities of MSF are a way of raising awareness about certain situations, publicly denouncing acts of human rights violations or to persuade certain actors in private negotiations into joining or supporting a certain mission (personal communication, May 6, 2019; Weiss, 1999; MSF, n.d.). This does not mean advocacy activities always include speaking out politically. Yet, these activities do happen in the political domain, regardless of them taking place in the private or public sphere. MSF has a history of speaking out in conflict situations when they deem it necessary, and the Syrian conflict is no exception. The organisation spoke out about the usage of chemical weapons (Forgione, 2017) by the Syrian government, which allegedly contributed to the negative perception of MSF by the Syrian government (Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019). Thus, advocacy activities can have a big impact on MSF its operations on a macro level, but how were they experienced in the field? What were other advocacy activities, and how were they perceived? This subchapter discusses how the international workers of MSF perceived these activities in the missions in Syria, with a special focus on the considerations surrounding advocacy and what its impact can be, following the code structure of Appendix III. Examples are provided, together with quotes from different interviewees.

To start off, multiple respondents stated they were not involved in the advocacy policy but did say something about the considerations that have to be made when speaking out. When speaking out, whether it is in private or in public, MSF tries to achieve a change in a certain situation. However, there can also be negative consequences following advocacy activities. This is why the possible positive and

negative effects have to be balanced against each other. For example, a section of MSF or the entire organisation could lose its negotiated access. Interviewee 3[2] (May 15, 2019) explains this:

> A consideration always has to be made between the criticality of the mission in an area (and the risks of speaking out) and what the impact can be on the situation if we decide to speak out. Will it influence the situation for the better? Moreover, are we the only ones that can speak out about it? And is this new information?

Thus, in general, the organisation only speaks out when they consider the benefits of speaking out to outweigh the risks, which is in accordance with the strategic framework described by Haver (2016). Especially if the needs of the population are high, and therefore the mission is considered to be critical. If earlier advocacy activities had a negative impact, the organisation would think twice before speaking out again. This is the case in Syria, and the criticality of the mission is perceived to be high. That is why interviewee 2 (May 15, 2019) explained "I suppose given our advocacy objectives, we weren't advocating for a huge amount. It was more about our access and our ability to operate in the North East of Syria". Hence, mission operationality is often chosen over advocacy within the context of the Syrian conflict. If MSF decided not to speak out, there were instances that other actors would encourage them to do so (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). Other actors viewed MSF as having more legitimacy in speaking out, due to its history and long-term presence in the Syrian conflict. Furthermore, considering whether or not to speak out about an issue is affected by individual stances towards advocacy. As not everyone within MSF has the same definition of what it means to speak out (Interviewee 2, May 15, 2019), the decision on whether or not to speak out sometimes "comes down to a judgement call" (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019).

Still, MSF did speak out in different missions in north-east Syria. First, there were statements on the chemical weapons usage (Forgione, 2017), which allegedly contributed to the government to see MSF as "a very serious enemy" (Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019). Next, when control of Raqqa was taken over by the Kurdish forces, people that used to live there were returning home. As the city was rigged with booby traps, it caused a lot of blast victims. This resulted in publicly raising awareness for the Raqqa response:

> Mostly, advocating for external or media-based activities in Syria, was about the Raqqa response and the number of blast victims that they were seeing. Yeah, and that surgical capacity to respond to that. I think that drew a lot more attention. Also within the mission as well, it was one of the strong reasons for being there" (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019).

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[2] Quote retrieved from written interview summary, as the audio file of interview 3 is corrupt. It is also translated from Dutch to English, as this interview was conducted in Dutch.

Next to the Raqqa response, the organisation spoke out about the poor conditions in the IDP camps nearby Manbij, aiming to improve them (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). In response to MSF making political statements or trying to raise awareness, other actors in the field could advocate for their cause when negotiating with MSF. This includes showing their political position, as illustrated by the example of the YPG. The armed group made it mandatory to have a poster of their leader in all offices in Tal Abyad, including the office of MSF (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019).

Even though possible pros and cons are considered beforehand, the impact of an advocacy campaign can be different than expected. Therefore, it can have positive, negative, or no impact on operations of the organisation and its staff in the field. The latter can happen, for example, if the advocacy activities are designed to persuade other actors in negotiations, but the resulted effect does not take place. Contrastingly, when it does spark a change, the results can be positive. Such as with the demining efforts where awareness was raised among other actors. Regarding this situation, it was positive "with different donors and humanitarians, mostly demining actors, I think we helped move things in a positive direction" (Interviewee 2, May 15, 2019). Thus, advocacy activities resulted in a positive change. However, it also had negative effects, apart from losing access to government-controlled areas. By being an organisation that speaks out about what it witnesses in the field, other actors can alter their approach in interacting with MSF. For example, members of the YPG were scared that MSF staff were documenting everything, and would, therefore, lie about violent incidents or withhold information altogether (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). Yet, the reputation of MSF as an actor that speaks out is weaker in this context than in other contexts such as Africa. According to interviewee 6 (May 24, 2019), the reason for this is the shorter history of MSF in speaking out in Arab countries. Uncertainty about the consequences of speaking out on security, resulted in the MSF team to refrain from advocating at times. So even though nothing was said yet, it already had negative consequences. This is explained by interviewee 7 (May 27, 2019) as follows, when she talked about Kurdish forces recruiting military personnel in an MSF supported hospital:

> I think if we would speak out for example about the fact that they were recruiting our national staff to go to the front line, I think we're, if there are still expats there, also our national staff, we all would be at high risk. If we would say those things.

In turn, if security accidents actually did happen, this could consequently pause advocacy activities in the region for a certain period of time (Interviewee 2, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019). So did it have a big effect on how other actors perceived MSF in general, within north-east Syria?

Perception of MSF by other actors

Following the interaction with others and the advocacy activities of the organisation, how do the various actors in the field perceive MSF? Does MSF have a reputation as being a political organisation, which the politicisation of aid suggests (Meininghaus, 2016; Weiss, 2014; Duffield, 2012; Metcalfe et al., 2011)? Following my interpretation of the interviews with international staff members of MSF, multiple themes arise. These categories capture their answers regarding the perception of the organisation, as depicted in Appendix III. The first one being MSF its self-image, as they aim to present themselves as an organisation that adheres to the humanitarian principles. Next, the perception of MSF by other actors is discussed. Positive, negative and uncertain images are discussed as the main perceptions. The results show that MSF is mostly perceived as a provider of medical services, as opposed to a political actor. However, there are exceptions to this general perception, and MSF is also perceived in a more political way. Finally, the uncertainty of information makes it hard to paint an objective picture of how MSF is perceived.

MSF tries to adhere to the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence (Neuman & Weissman, 2016). However, this self-image does not mean as much if others do not see the organisation this way. Other actors have a certain perception of the organisation, which forms the identity if this becomes the dominant way that people see MSF. The organisation sets out to be a medical facilitator in providing care to those in need, following the violence in Syria (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). Moreover, based on the principle of impartiality, MSF aspires to treat everybody the same, as everyone has the right to healthcare (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). It is important to interact with all actors, yet not to get too close to a certain actor. This could jeopardise a neutral perception (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). For example, close interaction with the Kurdish authorities could affect the perception by the Arabic population in cities such as Tal Abyad or Raqqa, as Interviewee 6 (May 24, 2019) explains:

> And so, the difficulty is, what I said, based on how we were operating, was trying to walk that fine line and find that balance between having to work with the powers that be, which were the Kurdish authorities and the Kurdish Red Crescent, but also maintaining sufficient distance and independence. So that we wouldn't be affiliated with them in a way that might put us in danger.

To start off with actors having a 'positive' image of MSF, the first one relates to the statement above. As far as the team in Raqqa noticed during its operations, they were not perceived by the local population as working too closely with the Kurdish authorities. Thus, maintaining the image of a neutral actor that operates by providing medical services to those in need (Ibid.). Patients mostly just see the organisation as a caregiver (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). Especially the vaccination outreach

reinforced the image of MSF as being a medical actor (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019; Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). This view was shared by armed actors, as MSF provided medical assistance for their wounded soldiers. MSF was needed by the local armed actors and the organisation was often the only actor supporting local hospitals (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). Even the IS women in the Al-Hol camp that were hostile in the beginning, adjusted their state of mind as soon as they notice they could actually benefit from the healthcare (Ibid.). As MSF was present early on in the conflict, this reflected in the perception other actors had. "I think our reputation was generally pretty good because we've always been actively trying to be present. And have taken great risks in order to do that. That's somewhat known", according to Interviewee 5 (May 20, 2019). MSF was respected for the services they provided, especially within local communities (Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). A positive image and gratefulness of the local population resulted from the impact that missions had, such as in the case of Raqqa, as described by Interviewee 2 (May 15, 2019):

> In Raqqa for example, it was very clear the impact that we had. Especially at the start of our work in the city. You were in essence, or really were, the teams were really saving people's lives. Who had been blown up by these mines and explosive devices. So it was very clear to people, this is what we are doing, and hence, and also we were working there ahead or before other organisations set foot in the city. It wasn't like there were a million other NGOs that people that they had to compare to us. Because we were really the only one.

How the MSF team was perceived in earlier operations, helped when they were expanding to new areas:

> I think because we had been working in Kobane for a couple of years prior to getting into Raqqa, that they already quite knew us. Because it was a lot of the same authority figures that were working from Kobane and then coming down towards Raqqa. So, I think that there were already some strong relations build-up. And yeah, I think the Americans, in terms of the armed forces, they know MSF quite well. Because, even though we don't work together, we are often in the same countries at the same time (Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019).

Finally, MSF was also seen as an employer, as an organisation which supports the community financially (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019).

In contrast to these positive images various actors had, MSF was also perceived in negative ways. To start off with the most obvious one, MSF was perceived in a negative way by the Syrian government. The government accused the organisation of siding with the opposition (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019; Whittall, 2018). Access to the country was denied to the organisation, which means MSF is operating illegally (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). This is, if one argues that the state is the only actor who holds any legitimate claims over territory. Moreover, the advocacy activities on the use of

chemical weapons (Forgione, 2017), allegedly only made the reputation of MSF worse, in the eyes of the Syrian government (W. Turner, personal communication, March 27, 2019. The term "serious enemy" was used by Interviewee 4 (May 15, 2019) to describe how the Syrian government perceived MSF. Besides a serious enemy, MSF was depicted as a terrorist organisation:

> There is this reference that most of our staff make to statements made by the Syrian ambassador, where he referred to MSF as, by name, from all the other NGOs, he referred to MSF by name, that MSF is the same as ISIS and the same as white helmets, and MSF are terrorists without borders, because they are illegal in Syria, not having their approval, to be in Syria (Ibid.).

Next, the MSF teams were perceived negatively by IS affiliates at the start of their operations in Al-Hol, because the organisation was seen as belonging to the West (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). The Kurdish authorities viewed MSF as unwanted in some areas, because they felt that the MSF teams were taking over their services to the population (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). As an extension of this view, the Kurdish population felt that MSF was picking Arab employees over them, within one of the MSF supported hospital (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). Moreover, MSF was sporadically viewed by different Kurdish authorities as a potential spy, due to being Western and because it publishes reports about what it witnesses (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). The YPG for this reason, would not share the number of fatalities, out of fear that this was being recorded and published later on (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019). Local communities could also have a negative perception of MSF at times. Interviewee 2 (May 15, 2019) explained this was usually before MSF was working in an area and had explained their activities or how the team operates. Before this 'introduction' process, the organisation was often seen in Arab communities, as affiliated with the West. Thorough interaction was needed to break the perception of being affiliated with other parties, depending on the community (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019).

Furthermore, rumours were the cause of a temporary negative image. This ranged from MSF being blamed for the death of a child following vaccination activities (Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019), to the organisation "stealing people's organs" (Interviewee 2, May 15, 2019). The consequences of these rumours were that the teams had to explain themselves over and over, to rectify this negative image. Moreover, some parts of the community perceived MSF hospitals as not being a proper hospital, due to the fact that they could not receive all the services as before the conflict (Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019; Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). When an MSF team worked in the same area as a local health facility, they would sometimes clash with them due to different medical ideas. For example, when prescribing antibiotics:

> They say: 'you don't know us, you never worked here before. So you don't know the way our body works here in Syria. And it is different in other countries'. So in that case yeah, they were saying to us, that they were different, they were not Western and they were not African. So that they needed these antibiotics (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019).

This negative perception originated from MSF being an external medical actor, meaning not from the region.

Security incidents can also have a negative effect on the internal image of MSF. This results in an unwillingness of staff to go to Syria. Interviewee 5 explains this with an extreme example: "you can only handle so many times your staff getting abducted in the same place, before people go, what the hell are you doing?". These type of incidents and its impact on (in)security is discussed in the next paragraph. Finally, uncertainty lies in being unable to measure all perceptions by others. Interviewee 2 (May 15, 2019) argues that it is too big of a task to be able to measure correctly. Especially in situations where MSF operates according to a low visibility strategy, it is hard to know what the local population thinks of the organisation, according to Interviewee 5 (May 20, 2019):

> You know, that is one of the problems when we take a low visibility strategy, it makes it difficult to speak to the entire community about who you are. And given when a community is large, you need to really explain who you are, that is a mass campaign. As opposed to a small village where you can just go around and talk to everybody. And, so, I think that because of our low visibility strategy, I'm not sure of the degree to which people really made a distinction whether we were West, MSF, or somebody else.

Next, MSF did not operate in all areas or engage with every actor in the field. After it was clear that interacting with IS would pose a threat to the security of aid workers, it was decided to break all communications with the group and its affiliates (Interviewee 6 , May 24, 2019). However, by not engaging with these actors, MSF loses information about their acceptance. The image that MSF thinks people have of them is then biased, as a part of the population is excluded. This could, in turn, have consequences for how the security situation is managed. Also, others could perceive this as contributing to the counterterrorism discourse (Weiss, 2014), as IS, labelled a terrorist organisation, is excluded from interaction. Another relevant point concerning uncertainty of the image of MSF is that other actors would gladly voice their positive opinion about MSF when talking to employees, yet will probably not express their negative views of MSF (Interviewee 6 , May 24, 2019).

In summary, the image of MSF is mostly in accordance with what the organisation wants it to be, being perceived in accordance with the humanitarian principles (Neuman & Weissman, 2016). However, there is a political side to its image as well. Whereas the longstanding presence of the organisation and its interaction with local actors mostly enhances the image of MSF as a humanitarian

actor, its advocacy activities in Syria affect the organisation in a political way, to some extent. MSF is perceived by the YPG as an actor that documents everything, and by the Syrian government as siding with the opposition. Moreover, the organisation is perceived as belonging to the West to some extent by IS affiliates, Arab communities, and local health facilities. Partially, the perception is similar to Abu-Sada (2012) her findings, in stating humanitarian assistance is perceived as a Western product, provided by 'white' outsiders. Only after MSF starts operating in an area, this image changes. The extent to which the perceptions impact the experiences of international aid workers surrounding (in)security, is discussed in the next section.

4.3 (In)security in the Syrian the conflict

This paragraph focuses on the experiences of international aid workers regarding their security in the field. First, an explanation is provided about how security was managed for the teams in the field, as a context for their personal experiences of MSF staff. These experiences then explain how the international workers of MSF experienced their (in)security in the Syrian conflict. Both positive and negative sides of providing emergency relief in the conflict are described, emphasizing the activities leading up to a state of (in)security. This chapter answers the following sub-question: '*How do international aid workers of MSF experience their (in)security, in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict?*'

Managing security

The first section explains how security is managed in the field. How did international staff members perceive security management? The security approach of MSF, its risk assessment, their personal assessment, risk mitigation and contingency are discussed. These are the meaningful themes derived from the interview transcripts, which captured the experiences surrounding security management.

To start off with the general security approach of MSF, there are a few points that were described as factors of importance. Before leaving for a mission in a conflict area the international staff is informed about the context. Concerns regarding security are explained and there is an open security discussion, which is especially important in the light of duty of care. The organisation also explains that there is always a residual risk that has to be accepted by its employees, as not all risk can be mitigated against (Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019). Interviewee 5 (May 20, 2019) argued that this risk acceptance of MSF might be a little bit higher than it might be for other organisations, as they are a medical organisation which could tend to themselves in case of an emergency.

Furthermore, MSF works according to a hierarchical model in decision making if it comes to security (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). Interviewee 3[3] (May 15, 2019) described the system as follows:

> Everyone has their own responsibility to determine if a situation is secure, but it's not a democratic process.
> If I tell my team that we are leaving, they have to listen. And if my boss tells me that I have to leave, so do I.
> The evaluation will follow later, but at that moment it has to happen quickly.

At the end of the day, the decision of whether or not to leave comes down to a trade-off between mission risk and mission impact. If the expected risks are higher than the expected impact, the organisation will leave (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). Furthermore, MSF teams always communicate their missions to the various actors in the area, to explain their objectives and to check if they are accepted. This gives other actors a chance to let MSF know they are not welcome. In that case, the team will not force its presence, as that would put the lives of everyone involved at stake (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019).

Next, risk assessment is an important factor in security management. The risk is measured by the likelihood of the event happening, multiplied by the impact it has when it does occur (internal document, March 8, 2019; Haver, 2016). So how does the organisation assess that in the field? According to the interviewed staff, this begins with a context analysis and conflict mapping. This will give a good first indication of the dynamics of conflict, and what the most important risks are (Interviewee 4, May 14, 2019). Evaluation of earlier incidents can help with assessing the risks in the current context (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). The risks of a certain context depend partially on its level of acceptance by other actors. Interviewee 6 (Ibid.) described his experiences regarding assessing their acceptance as follows:

> So, you're always working a little bit within this confidence interval of yeah, how safe do you think you are?
> And how well accepted do you think you are? And of course, people are going to tell you that you're safe, and
> that you're welcome. And so on, and so, you know, there was never any obvious indications that we were not
> welcome anywhere, that I recall from the time that I was working. And all my discussions with community
> leaders, with sheikhs, with leaders of our groups and so on, seemed to indicate that MSF was welcome in the
> areas that we were working in.

The hardest thing within this assessment is to understand if information from other actors is trustworthy, as this determines the likelihood of an event (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). The security manager tries his or her best to understand this, by mapping the military and geopolitical factors of the conflict. This would give an indication of whether or not an event is a 'rational' move for the actors

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[3] Translated from Dutch

in question. Moreover, by triangulating their sources, the security manager can determine the trustworthiness of information (Ibid.). In the end, certain decisions come down to a personal assessment of the likelihood of threats. Whereas Interviewee 7 (May 27, 2019) stated "you can see in their eyes in what kind of state of mind they are", others value their gut feeling (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019; Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). Interviewee 3[4] (May 15, 2019) even stated "it can be the case that a risk analysis declares an area as relatively secure, but you still don't feel secure. You can't explain this, but your gut feeling thinks it is not secure". The impact is assessed for both the organisation as for individuals (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). Each threat can have a different amount of risk level for an aid worker, depending for instance, on the type of staff members, which is taken into account by the one in charge:

> These types of health workers might be at more risk compared these other ones. So, to give an example, it could be the case, that someone who was a health worker who is involved more with external representation. Who was known, more widely known within the community, might be at greater risk than a kind of, an assistant to a doctor or nurse, who never leaves the clinic. So, I was really trying to break it down as much as we possibly could. But it's quite difficult, it is very subjective (Interviewee 2, May 15, 2019).

In the end, a summary of the risk assessment is described in a local security plan. Each staff member that is going to a certain area, has to read this. These plans include a thorough and in-depth security analysis of that area and include a set of mitigation measures and contingency plans. Risk mitigation and contingency plans are an important part of security management, as it determines if the residual risk can be decreased to an acceptable level. Whereas mitigation measures try to lower the risk, a contingency plan states how to react if an incident does occur, to minimize the impact. This is to counter the 'vulnerability' of an organisation, as described by Wille & Fast (2013). It can occur that operations are put on hold in the aftermath of an incident, to make sure the environment is secure enough to operate in (Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019). The first type of mitigation is a personal state of mind when entering a conflict area, according to the experiences of Interviewee 6 (May 24, 2019):

> Well, I guess I was also responsible for other people in those situations. I mean I think you automatically become very conservative about where you walk, and what you do. Try to limit your time there as much as possible. Stay alert to the context, and, you know, I think you're automatically a lot more alert. Because there's probably a little bit of adrenaline pumping in your body. And so, you're paying a lot more attention to what is happening on the road. You're paying a lot more attention to, you know, what might be small pieces of information in the community and so on and so forth.

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[4] Translated from Dutch

Furthermore, the team is briefed on how to act if a security incident occurs, basically repeating contingency plans from within the local security plan, which everyone has to adhere to (Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019; Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019). It includes an escalation system, in how to proceed as a team, following a security incident (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). Next, evacuation plans are in place if the team has to leave due to increasing threats. To be able to do this efficiently, a maximum number of expats is allowed within the mission (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019; Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). Following a security incident, this maximum amount can be reduced, if necessary (Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019). This policy is in accordance with the argument of Stoddard & Jillani (2016), in stating that humanitarian actors act in lesser numbers within high-risk environments.

Before the team enters an area, they have to decide on their visibility strategy. Mostly, when operating close to the frontline, the MSF team would have a high profile approach to distinguish themselves from armed actors (Interviewee 6, 2019). If the team does not know the context and level of acceptance, they will most likely choose a low visibility approach. By not standing out, the amount of attraction is limited (Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). Furthermore, an insecure or uncertain context can result in limits on the freedom of the team. This can vary from not being allowed to move at all outside of the facilities, to moving in pairs, only moving along certain cleared roads, or being limited to certain outreach activities (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019; Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019). This usually happens when the risks cannot be assessed, due to the scarcity of information:

> Your risk is generally a function of the trend and your level of exposure. And you determine that risk, you, you know, when you're doing a risk analysis. And you determine it based on the amount of information that you have about different events, and so on and so forth. Now, if you're not certain about the quality of information you have, then you can't be very sure about what the threat is. And then, so you can't understand what your risk is. And when you don't understand what your risk is, you're going to become a little bit more conservative in the amount of exposure that you put yourself in. Because your judgement of whether or not a certain thing is a threat or not, is ambiguous.

Next, there are more obvious and practical mitigation measures. These measures range from actively avoiding the Syrian government, to check-in calls, restrictions in frequency of transportations, not sharing locations of operations, having access to a phone, having a WhatsApp security group, including a safe room in each of the facilities, having a translator present, placing metal detectors in the hospital, and by having unarmed guards present in the facilities (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019; Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019; Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019; Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019; Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019; Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019).

Experiencing (in)security

This subchapter describes how the international staff members of MSF experienced their (in)security in providing aid within the Syrian conflict. The results are structured according to positive experiences and their impact, negative experiences and their impact, and finally, neutral experiences and reflection. These were the meaningful themes after coding and grouping the conducted interviews, as depicted in Appendix III.

All of the respondents said they felt 'relatively' secure most of the time, which is not that shocking as otherwise, they would not have stayed. Relative security applies to this situation, as conflict areas are inherently more insecure than peaceful environments. Yet, aid workers accept a certain amount of insecurity in their field of work. Following from this acceptance, the first thing that is notable about the positive experiences of these aid workers regarding security, is their state of mind. Most of the international workers of MSF are experienced in this type of work and have operated for many years in environments similar to the Syrian conflict. Therefore, Interviewee 5 and 6 (May 20, 2019; May 24, 2019) stated that they never really feel insecure anymore. Interviewee 1 (May 14, 2019) feels the same and adds she only worries about the security of the team sometimes, but never about her personal security. Interviewee 2 (May 15, 2019) has less experience in working in these type of environments, yet still did not feel insecure. Whereas he started out cautiously, he adds: "I probably felt more secure as I went on, but I suppose that is just natural for any environment where you are becoming more familiar with it". Others stated that they experienced their security in a positive way, as they operated in relatively peaceful times within the conflict (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019; Interviewee 4; May 20, 2019). Moreover, the same applied for personnel that spend a lot of time away from the violent areas (Interviewee 2, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). Interviewee 3 (May 15, 2019) adds that she felt the Syrian conflict was quite secure for a conflict area. Moreover, Interviewee 6 (May 24, 2019) argues that it is more secure than in Iraq and Yemen due to the predictability of violence in Syria. Therefore, he felt so secure that he was pushing for more operational activities:

> I think that I was probably pushing, for us as an organisation, to be, what's the word, more progressive or take more risks. Take more risks is the wrong word, but to sort of push our operations forward more, other than to be more conservative. So if security always has an interaction with your operationality. You know, your ability to implement your programs.

The local security situation in Kobane was one of the contexts that contributed to a secure feeling among the workers, despite the city still being located within a conflict area and having strict security

rules (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). Interviewee 5 (May 20, 2019) described the contrasting feeling of working in Kobane, within the context of the Syrian conflict:

> Walking around Kobane for instance, we could walk around the town. I never felt unsafe. I mean you're sitting there in Syria, and you're supposed to be terrified all the time. Walking around Kobane felt like of the more safer contexts that I've been to.

Moreover, interviewee 2 (May 15, 2019) explained that he trusted the security managers that were responsible for the staff. He felt secure as "I think because of that faith, that I had in the mission's ability to manage security". Interviewee 7 (May 27, 2019) argued that she feels secure because:

> I knew, I also had every one of the team at my back, and they are also protecting me. And also the national staff is always kind of helping you and supporting you and yeah. Even due to you being a woman, they are even protecting you more.

Adding to this, Interviewee 8 (May 27, 2019) adds that individuals have to be able to trust that the rest of the team will follow the security policy, in order to feel secure, which was the case in her experience within the Syrian conflict. Moreover, Interviewee 4 (May 15, 2019) trusted the security policy, even though he knew the consequences of the residual risk:

> I think I would say the security policies and security plans and the standard operating procedures we put in place, are quite effective in mitigating our security risks. It doesn't eliminate it completely, we still lost some colleagues in the line of duty, but yeah, in most cases, it secures us. And I can say, it's one of the things that maybe kept me alive the last twenty years.

Next, quality of information is important, which is why Interviewee 5 and 6 (May 20, 2019; May 24, 2019) emphasized on the importance of data triangulation, to be able to really feel secure. Interviewee 4 (May 15, 2019) stated the importance of being up to date, "to have knowledge of what's going on. If there are active threats or not". Furthermore, the hierarchy in the decision making helped to contain the feeling of security, as it provides structure and works very well (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019). Whereas there might have been a high turnover rate among staff in the field, continuity in Amsterdam provided structure, leading to a sense of security (Interviewee 2, May 15, 2019). This helps because it gives a sense of shared responsibility, which indicates to the security managers in Syria that they are not alone in managing the security situation (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). Furthermore, a good communication system is important in feeling secure (Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019). This is explained by Interviewee 10 (June 4, 2019):

> For me is to understand, yeah, okay, for me personally if I'm informing myself of what the context is, and I understand what the risks are, and I, yeah. The communication part, that we get the information, as members of a team in a location. We get the information from our coordination and from our management, about the, that there is a real loop of information going on.

Next, knowing that the organisation is truly accepted by the community is important. The negotiated access and security guarantees of other actors are a part of this (Interviewee 3, May 15, 2019). Furthermore, Interviewee 7 (May 27, 2019) felt secure in Kurdish held areas, as she knew their armed forces needed MSF, and would therefore not harm the team. Adding to this, Interviewee 6 (May 24, 2019) felt secure because of the military presence close to the hospital in Tal Abyad:

> Because we didn't understand the context of the community well enough to know we would be threatened by the community. And having the authorities, the military authorities nearby was a way to mitigate that, without having to have armed guards in our compound.

Getting too close to a military actor can be dangerous though, in altering the perception that various actors might have of MSF, in the light of the principle of neutrality (Meininghaus, 2016; Slim, 2002). Being perceived by IS as a Western organisation put the international staff of MSF in danger, yet Interviewee 5 (May 20, 2019) never felt this threat to be credible. As the power of IS was already in decline, it made less sense for them to attack NGOs as IS was mostly defending their remaining territory.

As opposed to the general secure feelings, there were also negative experiences surrounding security. These insecure moments range from being triggered by the general conflict environment, to personal situations that are experienced as threatening. As mentioned before, conflict areas are inherently insecure environments. Going to such an environment causes a "tense" feeling when first arriving, as interviewee 2 (May 15, 2019) described. The uncertain dynamics of the context add to this, creating an insecure feeling at first (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019; Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019). Interviewee 6 (May 24, 2019) described starting his mission in Syria as follows:

> Yeah you don't know the environment. The people within that environment don't know you, and you're operating in an area that you know is, let's say, unsafe. So if it's, if you're doing an assessment in an area that has recently been retaken territory by the SDF, you'll know that there is a lot of booby traps and mines, and things around. You know that there's potentially individuals or sleeping cells or individuals that support ISIS within the community. And you don't know what their perception of you is. And often you're operating in an area that is relatively close to the front line. So adding all those together, yeah, it's a little bit tense.

Whereas this uncertainty goes away as a staff member gets to know the context, the security context itself can also change. The fighting can intensify, causing an increase of the risks and therefore, moments of insecurity (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). Operating within these environments for longer periods of time can cause stress and increase the time exposed to the biggest threat. According to Interviewee 6 (May 24, 2019), this is the risk of being unintentionally targeted. As a form of being unintentionally targeted, IEDs were a source of insecurity, even though a demining company had cleared the areas that MSF would operate in. There was always a chance that they did not find all the explosives, as was the case in Tal Abyad, where unexploded IEDs were found (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). Furthermore, the demining organisation took ten days to clear the hospital in Raqqa, instead of fifty days, which did not give out a secure signal to the team (Interviewee 8, May 27, 2019). Next, hearing gunshots or explosions in proximity of an MSF facility can cause an insecure feeling. Even though staff members are used to working in conflict areas, hearing these noises cause a physical reaction for some, triggering muscles to tense up as a "reflex" (Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019). As violence is close by, the security manager can decide that it is best for the team to go into a safe room, which are located in the hospitals and MSF houses. Interviewee 3[5] (May 15, 2019) gives an example of what happens inside a safe house when the violence erupts nearby:

> It might not have been violence directed towards us, but it is happening around us. We would lay on the kitchen floor of our house until the fighting ended. Those are moments that you are scared, but I think that is normal in such a context.

The safe room is also used when soldiers are celebrating, firing their rifles up in the air. This type of 'happy shooting' would result in insecure moments, in which the team had to wait it out inside their house (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). An extreme example of using the safe room, was when multiple armed factions had a military meeting in Tal Abyad, bringing heavy guns inside the hospital to show off their power:

> When, in the back of the hospital, there was a big military meeting area. And I think, two or three times all military people from the whole area were coming there together. Coming with tanks and big cars, and like, all big guns that they were having through the hospital, would be walking through the hospital. And then we would say, like, this is too many people we cannot stop them. Let's go to the hibernation room and wait till when they have passed through the hospital (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019).

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[5] Translated from Dutch

Next to providing a safe space, using the safe room creates an uncertain situation. Because the team is essentially locked up in the room, they are depending on their communication tools to check if the situation had passed, which can cause a feeling of insecurity (Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). The staff member who is responsible for the security of the team has an extra burden in these types of situations. Being responsible for others would cause security concerns, more so than concern over personal security (Interviewee 1, May 14, 2019; Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019; Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019). Especially when a security manager has to decide on whether or not an insecure situation is over. Moreover, security managers have to think about the trade-off between mission operationality and security. For example, advocacy activities regarding the recruitment of staff in the hospital would not take place, as:

> I think if we would speak out for example about the fact that they were recruiting our national staff to go to the front line, I think we're, if there are still expats there, also our national staff, we all would be at high risk. If we would say those things (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019).

This would then alter the image of MSF for the worse in the eyes of the YPG, making it more dangerous to be part of the organisation (Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019).

Other moments of insecurity caused by the dynamics of the conflict, followed when external armed actors entered the area. This was the case when Turkish forces threatened to enter Syria. Whereas this started as an uncertain risk with violence at the border, it turned into a situation where Turkish forces actually entered Syria. The head of mission has to decide whether or not to pull the team out, in such an event (Interviewee 5, May 20, 2019). Moreover, most feelings of insecurity were caused by a possible return of the Syrian government, both among national and international staff. As the relationship between MSF and the government is tense at best, it would have major consequences if areas were retaken by al-Assad his forces. National staff worried that they might be arrested for working for MSF, a threat which also applies to international workers of the organisation (Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019; Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019; Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019).

Apart from insecurity caused by fighting in the vicinity, hidden explosive devices and the return of the government, crowded situations in MSF facilities would lead to a loss of control. Interviewee 10 (June 4, 2019) argues that her most insecure moments would be when the hospital was crowded:

> When we had a big explosion which meant, not a huge mass casualty but a fair number of blast victims coming in at once. And that created a lot of crowds and a lot of reactions and a lot of, also, response from the authorities, I think in that moment, when it is just so vast and so much going on, that would probably be a time where I would feel nervous. Because you have a mixture of response adrenaline and things you need to

be doing for patients, but also this fear of, is everybody safe doing their jobs and can they continue doing them?

Another example of a crowded situation is when walking from the MSF house to medical stabilisation points in a crowded city. Interviewee 8 (May 27, 2019) was most afraid for a possible abduction during these trips, as "it would be very easy to get lost in that crowd and picked up, and nobody would even notice". Especially, because a staff member of MSF was abducted under similar circumstances in the past (Ibid.).

Next to insecurity caused by the dynamics of conflict, individual actions can contribute to insecure experiences. As Interviewee 6 (May 24, 2019) went to inspect a location close by, he did not ask permission from headquarters as a way to save time. As he already knew the person he was going with, he did not deem it necessary. However, it turned out the location was a lot further than expected, causing an 'escalation' of the situation as no one knew where he was. An escalation in this context means that a situation becomes an official security incident for MSF. The communication protocol dictates that after a check-in moment is missed, first the security responsible is warned, then the head of mission, and eventually the emergency manager in Amsterdam (internal document, March 8, 2019). If it reaches this last stage, it becomes a critical incident (CI). Finding the missing person then becomes top priority for the headquarters in Amsterdam, allocating all possible resources to finding him/her. Even though there was never any real danger in this situation, this was perceived as an insecure situation by the team. As even one person can cause serious damage, these types of security situations cannot be taken lightly (Interviewee 4, May 15, 2019). Another example of insecurity is when individual soldiers would bring their guns inside of the hospital. There were agreements with all Kurdish armed forces to prevent this, however not all individuals adhered to these agreements. When MSF staff tried to remind these soldiers of their agreements, it would mostly result in being shouted at by the armed soldier (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019; Interviewee 9, June 3, 2019; Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). Yet, eventually the soldier would comply or leave. Moreover, as discussed earlier, there were times that a small team of Kurdish forces would come into the hospital to recruit soldiers:

> There was quite a recruitment going for the military, recruiting people or forcing people to fight for them. So this happened two times in the time that I was there and they were collecting all men between 18-30 years old who did not do their time yet. And they got kind of arrested and they were sent to the front line to fight with them. And it also happened in the hospital, so we lost some nurses or cleaners or guards needed to go with YPG and fight with them. Yeah, and of course I, yeah, I didn't enjoy that, I didn't like it (Interviewee 7, May 27, 2019).

The YPG would mostly focus on recruiting national staff members. To be as successful as possible, they would come in at night, because they knew that fewer staff members were around at those times. Yet, for the international aid workers that were present, these situations were more intense. The international aid workers had no fear of being taken, but could not do anything to prevent it from happening either. Recruitments are seen as a separate issue from detainments by the authorities or abductions by extremists, as it only affects the international staff members of MSF indirectly. Another example of an individual act of violence impacting security negatively, was an assassination of a local major. It caused the biggest moment of insecurity for Interviewee 7 (May 27, 2019):

> Once the mayor of the city was killed and he was living like twenty meters away from the office where I was sitting. And he was killed by ISIS in a moment that I was sitting in the office. So that moment I felt, yeah, more scared than for example, then for example, when they were coming with a lot of military forces into the hospital. [...] I knew that I was an ideal target for ISIS, and they were literally twenty away from me.

Next to knowing the threat of being targeted by some actors because you are an aid worker, insecurity follows from uncertainty in perception as well. As "you don't know necessarily know the opinions of the people living in those areas, about foreigners and especially, foreign organisations such as MSF" (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019; Interviewee 10, June 4, 2019). Especially, concerning IS affiliates:

> We don't know the perception of ISIS fighters or people who affiliate themselves with their ideology and so, would they, would people, would ISIS fighters see us as a legitimate target or not? And you might assume yes, but it's, I mean, it's hard to not, would we be less of a target than the military? Or would we be more of a target than the military because we are foreigners? I don't know (Interviewee 6, May 24, 2019).

This uncertainty translates to the security experiences as well. Reflecting back, Interviewee 10 (June 4, 2019) describes her experience as not feeling uncomfortable, yet also not feeling that secure, due to a constant alert state of mind. Moreover, interviewee 6 (May 24, 2019) argues that he would invest more time in building up networks, to counter the uncertainty of the context. Information is valuable to create a secure situation. Lastly, Interviewee 8 states that "we were a little bit more relaxed than we should have been" (Interviewee 8, 2019).

In summary, the security situation was perceived in a fairly positive way. Mostly, trust in the security policy and the team contributed to these positive experiences. Certain predictability of violence, together with areas of low-intensity fighting added to a positive, yet confusing sense of security as well. In contrast, there were insecure experiences among international aid workers of MSF. Whereas the general dynamics of the Syrian conflict caused direct forms of insecurity when fighting came close to MSF facilities, there are also indirect forms of insecurity. Uncertainty due to possible

undiscovered IEDs and a perceived loss of control in crowded situations resulted this type of insecurity. Moreover, constant anxiety existed for the consequences of a possible return of the Syrian government exists, due to its poor relationship with MSF. Whereas this mostly applies to the national staff, international aid workers also experienced it as a security threat, regardless of the contingency plans that do exist. Adding to this, not knowing the perception that individuals might have of MSF, contributed to these negative experiences regarding security. This uncertainty in not knowing if they could be targeted because the image of MSF is politicised or not, is negatively experienced by the international aid workers.

5. Conclusion and discussion

5.1 Conclusions

Following from the humanitarian security debate that suggests the politicisation of aid is a risk for humanitarian security (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard, 2017; Meininghaus, 2016; Fast, 2010; Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico, 2009; Harmer, 2008), this research explored that relation within the dynamics of the Syrian conflict. As the statistics of the AWSD (2019) and previous research are inconclusive according to my assessment, this project aimed to provide a qualitative perspective based on phenomenological evidence. It explored the first hand realities of international aid workers of MSF in the extreme context of aid provision within the Syrian conflict, which is highly insecure according to the number of security incidents (AWSD, 2019) and has shown the consequences of political perception for a humanitarian actor (UN, 2018; Whittall, 2018; Clifford et al., 2016; Meininghaus, 2016; Nouvet, et al., 2016). After analysing interviews with international aid workers of MSF and the policy documents of the organisation regarding security, an answer can be provided to the following research question: '*To what extent do international aid workers of MSF perceive the organisation to be politicised following their advocacy policy and interaction with others, and how does this affect their experience of (in)security in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict?*'.

To be able to better understand the answer to this question, a summary is provided of the most important results that followed from the different sub-questions. First, the interaction of MSF with various actors, together with the advocacy activities of the organisation were explored within the context of the Syrian conflict. MSF interacted with a variety of actors, ranging from the local population, to armed actors, government officials, local authorities and other (I)NGOs. Interacting with other actors starts when negotiating access and continues by explaining the activities of MSF in a certain area. Next to providing medical services or discussing the logistics to make this happen, there were also activities of a more political nature. 'Negotiations' already imply a political process, which seemed to be true when these meetings discussed the approach of the organisation in relation to local procedures. However, these 'political' meetings were conducted to ensure that emergency relief can be provided in accordance with the humanitarian principles, instead of steering the humanitarian agenda towards a political one, as Weiss (2014) suggests. That is why I am using the term 'interacting' instead of 'working' with, as this would inherently imply a breach with the principle of neutrality. Contrastingly, the advocacy activities are of a political nature and aim to change certain situations. According to the interviewees, the organisation did have successful advocacy campaigns in Syria, for example, to raise awareness for blast victims to be able to increase its surgical response. Mostly though, the advocacy activities are seen internally in the light of supposedly worsening the relationship with the Syrian government, due to MSF speaking out about chemical weapons usage (Forgione, 2017).

This caused further advocacy activities to be kept to a minimum, as the team chose operational effectiveness over advocacy in this context. MSF did not want to risk losing access to other areas as well, referring to being banned from government-controlled areas.

Next, the second sub-question explored how other actors in the field perceived MSF. The organisation tries to present itself as being neutral, independent and impartial to the various actors in the field. However, do these actors share this image of MSF, or do they perceive them differently? Mostly, the teams in the field are perceived as a provider of medical services to those in need, without any political components. The interviewees state this is mostly established by their longstanding presence, but also by continuous interaction with various actors. Activities such as a vaccination outreach reinforce this image as a medical actor. Contrastingly, by providing these services the MSF team was perceived by local authorities as unwanted at times, stating that they rather provide these services for their population themselves. Furthermore, MSF is perceived as illegal by the Syrian government, which denied MSF access to Syria and accused the organisation of siding with the opposition. Next, MSF has an image as an advocacy actor among the YPG, who feared that the organisation was documenting everything. Because of this, the YPG would not share certain information about patients, including their numbers. This impacted the ability of MSF to effectively treat their patients. Moreover, some communities are hostile towards the organisation at first, as they view MSF as part of the West. Mostly, this can be resolved by teams explaining their activities, as they do when negative rumours temporarily alter the perception by local population.

The last sub-question explored how international staff members experienced their (in)security, in providing emergency relief within the Syrian conflict. For the biggest part, the experiences regarding the security situation were fairly positive. Due to trust in the extensive security policy, and the abilities of the team and its experienced managers, the interviewees stated they felt secure during their time in Syria. Knowing their environment and that they were accepted by the local population were important factors. Moreover, the conflict was experienced as a relatively predictable context due to its clear front lines and insecure areas, compared to, for example, Yemen or Iraq. The interviewees trust that security policies and practices protect them as well as possible, and accept the residual risk. However, that does not mean that there were no experiences of insecurity. Mostly, uncertain situations in which the interviewees did not know the context or doubted if they were accepted, resulted in feelings of insecurity. Moreover, insecure feelings followed when emergencies caused a situation to get overcrowded, and the team felt as if they lost control. Surprisingly, these uncertain or uncontrollable situations had a similar impact on their sense of security, as confrontations with armed actors. As these international workers of MSF chose to work in these kinds of environments and often have multiple years of experience in operating in these types of contexts, they do not feel insecure

easily. That is why security managers in the field mostly worry for the security of the team, instead of being concerned about their own situation.

As an answer to the main question, the experiences of international aid workers of MSF show that the organisational image is mostly non-political. Interaction with other actors reinforces their medical image, and the aid workers were rarely perceived as being affiliated with a particular side. The results show that a political image is only perceived in a limited way. Only the advocacy activities of the organisation, together with its Western background resulted in a political perception to some extent. Next to Syrian government perceiving MSF in a political way, the results show that the image of MSF is perceived as political by IS affiliates. To some extent, privately owned local health facilities and the YPG, perceive the organisation politically as well. Furthermore, the perception of MSF within certain Arab communities, previously controlled by IS, is unknown. The same applies to people living in government-controlled areas, but this does not affect the experiences regarding security as MSF does not operate in these areas. The extent to which MSF is perceived as a political actor mostly impacts the organisation in an operational way. It only impacted security in a limited way, in contrast to what I hypothesised. Experiences of insecurity resulting from a politicised image are limited to feelings of anxiety caused by the possible consequences of a return of the Syrian government in the near future, and by possible attacks by IS affiliates or rogue individuals. Moreover, a grey area exists in the perceived image of MSF within certain communities previously controlled by IS. This uncertainty in perception results in insecurity when expanding MSF operations to new areas. However, the mindset of aid workers, together with trust in the security framework of MSF and those who manage security, prevent these feelings of insecurity from resulting in negative consequences, such as aid workers wanting to leave. Therefore, negative consequences of a political image on security are mostly mitigated. It can still have major operational consequences when MSF is perceived as anything but a medical actor, which is why an assessment has to be made before speaking out. This is an ethical trade-off between operational effectiveness and the necessity of advocating for issues that the organisation witnesses the field.

5.2 Discussion

Interpretation of the results and contribution to theory

In light of the humanitarian security debate, the results of this case study show the extent to which the politicisation of aid manifests itself in practice and how it affects (in)security. Other than being a risk factor, there is no convincing evidence from previous research (Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygard, 2017; Meininghaus, 2016; Fast, 2010; Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico, 2009; Harmer, 2008) to suggest the politicisation leads to insecurity. The results of this research show that being perceived in a politicised manner can have consequences. It can have extensive operational consequences, as was the case with

the Syrian government. Mostly, a politicised image makes operations more difficult, as the MSF team has to explain themselves and earn the trust of local communities or among local health facilities. Yet, a political perception can have security implications as well. Next to being perceived negatively by IS affiliates for being 'Western', the consequences of a possible swift return of the Syrian government causes anxiety among both national and international staff of MSF. Therefore, agreeing with Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico (2009), being perceived as affiliated to a specific 'side' can result in security implications. However, the extent to which these risks exist is already mitigated by the general security framework that is implemented when operating in conflict areas. These measures definitely have a 'therapeutic' side to them as well, as Duffield (2012) suggests. Yet, I do not agree that security measures protect against 'self-induced' anxiety. Based on the results of this research, security measures protect against risks generated by the dynamics of conflict. However, these risks are not new. Thus, the daily realities of international aid workers of MSF providing aid within the Syrian conflict, do not necessarily reflect the humanitarian security debate. Whereas the politicisation of aid might still be a risk factor in the field, it is not experienced as affecting security in a significant way within this case study. Instead, more non-political factors result in the most insecure situations, such as fighting close by or crowding of the hospital floors. With the Syrian conflict being an extreme case, what does this mean in general?

As stated before, this is an extreme case due to the disproportionally high number of attacks against aid workers in Syria (AWSD, 2019) and because of the consequences that the political perception by the Syrian government had (UN, 2018; Whittall, 2018). This makes it remarkable that the interviewed aid workers themselves experienced the conflict as relatively secure, describing it as having predictable forms of violence. I argue that two findings play an important role in this relative sense of security. First, the perception of MSF by the Syrian government resulted in the organisation being cautious with their other advocacy activities. As MSF teams did not want to risk their medical operations, the organisation abstained from any other major advocacy activities, which reinforced the image of MSF as a medical actor. If the organisation had favoured their advocacy policy over operational effectiveness, a more political image could have been construed. Consequently, the effects on security might have been greater. Next, the mindset of MSF employees and their trust in their security management system provides a general feeling of being secure. It does not matter in this case if this is a false or justified general sense of security, as it mitigates against any momentarily insecure experiences in a therapeutic way, as Duffield (2012) would argue. Thus, as the results of the extreme case study did not confirm the politicisation of aid as having a strong effect on (in)security, it tells us something about an average case. As both previous research on the topic and this case study did not find conclusive evidence for an increase in insecurity because of the politicisation of aid, it results in an indication for an average case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). As the studied mechanisms are present to a lesser

extent on average, there will most likely be fewer security implications. That being said, this project has its limitations, which affect the generalisability of the results. These limitations are discussed later on. To the extent to which the results of this case study can be generalised, I would not dismiss the politicisation of aid as a credible threat to humanitarian security altogether. The experiences of international aid workers of MSF did confirm it as a risk factor for security. However, this does not mean that security measures have to be increased, as the current security framework seems to mitigate the risks just fine.

Societal implications

The effects of the politicisation are noticeable to some extent in the field. Its consequences are affecting humanitarian operations and security, to an extent. Therefore, it becomes more important in the field to know how other actors perceive the organisation. For example, the perception of MSF within certain Arab communities, previously controlled by IS, is unknown. By missing information on how the organisation is perceived by certain communities, it makes it more difficult to make well-founded decisions regarding outreach activities. If there is no interaction, the Western background of the organisation will most likely determine its image. As the results show that being perceived as a 'neutral' humanitarian actor has to be earned, it is even more important to interact with all types of communities. Neutrality, impartiality, and independence, remain important in the image of a humanitarian actor. I do not think that a humanitarian organisation can ever fully adhere to these principles, due to the constraints that conflict situations pose. Yet, this does not have to matter. If an organisation, such as MSF, aims to present itself according to the humanitarian principles, it will reinforce their image as a medical actor. In practice, this means the organisation has to keep thinking about the consequences of how to interact with others. This also involves deciding on whether or not to speak out about issues that the team has witnessed.

From a security perspective, the security measures that already exist, ensure that any feelings of insecurity do not result in a general trend of aid workers wanting to leave the Syrian conflict. Mitigation measures make sure the risks are reduced to a minimum and contingency plans prepare for situations where evacuation is necessary. Thus, the threats that do follow from the politicisation of aid can be decreased to a minimum, which probably contributes to why its impact on security is hardly noticed in the experiences of these aid workers. In turn, this means the indirect effect of the politicisation of aid on the local population in need of humanitarian aid, as mentioned by Narang & Stanton (2017), is negligible.

Limitations

The results and conclusions of this project have to be seen from the perspective of international humanitarian workers of MSF. Their lived realities are based on their perception, which can differ from others. For example, their choice to work in these types of environments, together with years of experience, contribute to a high tolerance level regarding insecurity. Moreover, these experiences take place in the unique set of socio- and historical context of the Syrian context. The limitations of the research design are discussed below.

A first limitation of this research is that it focuses solely on aid workers of MSF. The organisation is, of course, not a representative of the whole humanitarian sector. For the results of the case study, this means that experiences of aid workers of the ICRC could differ, due to a different approach. This being said, MSF is an organisation to which the effects of the politicisation of aid should show more, due to its policy of advocating. Therefore, the scope is still very much valid.

Moreover, as MSF only operates in opposition-controlled areas, the experiences of the direct security effects of the politicised perception by the Syrian government are not included. However, it is clear there would be security implications, because of previous experiences regarding detainment by the Syrian government.

Following from risks in the field, the next limitation of the research is that it did not include experiences of national aid workers. National workers cannot cross the border when a situation becomes too dangerous, making their lived realities probably more intense. As my interviews took place within the Netherlands and excluded fieldwork in Syria, I focused the scope on international aid workers only. An advantage of this selection is that they usually know a lot about the security management system as well, which resulted in useful information during the interviews. As a side note, one of the audio files of the interviews was corrupted, prohibiting me from transcribing and coding one interview. By immediately writing an interview summary and getting it checked by the respondent, the impact of this incident is negligible.

As the empirical chapter is mostly based on the interviews, the conclusions are dependent on the interview process. Limited time with my respondents, resulted in prioritizing certain questions over others. Next, how the respondents answer my questions then impacts the results, as I am interpreting the experiences of my respondents. As I myself do not have that much experience in interviewing, the first interview was a bit uneasy, it the sense of asking a lot of probing question.

By using the AWSD (2019) and policy documents, an in-depth explanation of the case could be provided. This triangulation of methods, together with a thorough description of the context of case, resulted in more valid outcomes.

Future research

As for future research, I would recommend exploring these phenomena in other cases as well. Although this extreme case does give an indication in how the effects of the politicisation of aid would manifest itself in an average case (Flyvbjerg, 2006), exploring more cases could increase the validity of my claims. Also, it would increase the extent to which the results can be generalised. Whereas my research suggests that a politicised image only slightly impacted insecurity, it is difficult to generalise the results without confirming these findings in other cases. As previous research on the topic of humanitarian security, did not focus on experiences in the field, I find it difficult to make general claims without exploring other cases first.

To be able to complete the narrative of the Syrian conflict, it would be interesting to conduct similar research with the ICRC. As this organisation is active in government-controlled areas through the Syrian Red Crescent, it would provide important information from another perspective. Mostly, because the organisation is not as outspoken as MSF and does not share its views on advocating. Next to international aid workers, future research should focus on national aid workers as well. These people spend more time in these areas and cannot leave when the security situation worsens, which is why their experiences regarding the research topic would be valuable. This type of future research would result in a better understanding of exactly how the politicisation of aid manifests itself in practice, as previous research mostly focused on identifying this trend on a macro level.

Reflection on the research process

Looking back on how I conducted this research, there are a few things that stood out for me regarding the process.

First, I have to mention the research planning, which featured in my research proposal. In the end, my timeline was feasible to conduct the research in. That being said, the process of writing my research proposal did not go entirely as planned. I severely underestimated the amount of literature that existed on the topic, which resulted in my literature review to take up a lot of time. Still, this did not impact the eventual timeline as much as I thought, as I built in enough time for delays.

Next, I thought it would be hard to find a balance between conducting research that was both interesting from an academic point of view, and would be interesting for the organisation of my research internship. As previous research has taught me, theory and practice do not always go hand in hand. In this case, it proved to be entirely different. As MSF has a large academic branch as well, the organisation is very open to theoretic perspectives. This resulted in a positive collaboration in which I had a lot of freedom to work on my research at the office of MSF-OCA in Amsterdam. The only struggles I had were personal, as I had to adjust to being in a working environment, instead of at the university. I was impressed and frankly a bit overwhelmed by the organisation, despite everyone at the office in

Amsterdam being very open and welcoming to me. Eventually, I adjusted to this new environment and learned to be more assertive in communicating, to be able to plan my interviews. I really enjoyed learning about the field during these interviews, which contributed to a positive research process altogether, as I found it a really interesting topic and organisation, to explore and write about.

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Appendix I: List of interviews

List of preparatory personal communication

Date	Who	Position	Topic
03/01/2019	Wouter Kok	Security Advisor MSF-OCA	Research outline
27/03/2019	Wouter Kok	Security Advisor MSF-OCA	MSF and security
27/03/2019	Will Turner	Emergency Manager MSF-OCA	MSF and the Syrian conflict
29/03/2019	Tomislav Dunderovic	Applied Security Referent MSF-OCA	MSF and applied security
17/04/2019	Will Turner	Emergency Manager MSF-OCA	Planning and design of data collection
24/04/2019	Sherwan Qasem	Operational Support Officer MSF-OCA	MSF and the Syrian conflict
30/04/2019	Sherwan Qasem	Operational Support Officer MSF-OCA	MSF and the Syrian conflict
06/05/2019	Respondent 5	Advocacy Officer MSF-OCA	Syria and MSF advocacy policy

List of interviews

Date	Who	Position
14/05/2019	Interviewee 1	Head of Mission
15/05/2019	Interviewee 2	Humanitarian Affairs Officer
15/05/2019	Interviewee 3	Project Coordinator
15/05/2019	Interviewee 4	Project Coordinator / (deputy) head of mission
20/05/2019	Interviewee 5	(Deputy) head of mission
24/05/2019	Interviewee 6	Project Coordinator
27/05/2019	Interviewee 7	Medical team leader
27/05/2019	Interviewee 8	Deputy medical coordinator
03/06/2019	Interviewee 9	Project Coordinator
04/06/2019	Interviewee 10	Medical team leader

Appendix II: Interview questions

Introduction

Questions

1. What was your position within MSF, during your time in Syria?

    a. Since when part of MSF

    b. Other missions = *Yes/No*

2. Could you tell me about your mission in Syria?

    a. Time period in Syria

    b. Reasons for going

    c. Objectives/responsibilities of you and MSF team

    d. Examples of daily activities

3. What other actors did you interact with in Syria?

    a. Type of actors

    b. Type of relationship with them

        i. Dependent on them? (logistics, information, access, security)? Examples?

        ii. (Care giver/care taker relationships) = *only for medical staff*

4. What was the image that these actors had of MSF? How were you perceived (neutral, as part of West or foreign policies of states)?

    a. Examples of how this manifested itself

        i. Its impact on operations

    b. Differences between views of actors

    c. Could you speak publicly about your work as a MSF employee?

5. What was the impact of being part of an organisation that speaks out about what it witnesses in the field? How did this affect your operations in Syria?

    a. Examples of challenging/helpful aspects?

        i. Perceived as taking a political side?

    b. From what you have witnessed in the field, do you agree with how MSF spoke out in Syria? Want them (HQ) to do more/less?

    c. Did speaking out have security implications? How you personally experienced security?

6. How have you personally experienced your security in the field?

    a. Important personal factors that contributed to (in)security

b. Manifestation of security management in daily operations?

    i. What do you rely on for security?

    ii. Own assessment as well? Or 'down the line'?

    iii. Strengths/vulnerabilities in the security policy of MSF?

c. Personal encounter of incidents of violence/other moments you did not feel safe

    i. Examples?

    ii. Which actors involved?

    iii. Biggest threat/risk?

d. Development security over time

    i. Examples of moments that this changed?

    ii. What changed?

e. Ever thought of leaving the mission? / Pulling the team out? *= dependent on type of employee*

    i. If so, after which situations?

    ii. How do you assess this?

7. Personal additions in how you've experienced security within Syria?

Finalisation

Appendix III: Code structure

Code structure of ATLAS.ti linked to the concepts of the research framework

Concept	Components	Meaning Units
Approach of MSF	Mission context	1. Operations
		2. Motivation
		3. Responsibilities
Syrian civil war	Security context	1. Conflict
		2. Threats
		3. Incidents
Humanitarian image	Interaction	1. Network
		2. Activities
		3. Essential
		4. Challenges
	Advocacy	1. Considerations
		2. Impact
	Perception	1. Humanitarian principles
		2. Positive
		3. Negative
		4. Uncertain
(In)security	Security policy	1. Approach MSF
		2. Risk assessment
		3. Risk mitigation and contingency
	Personal security	1. Assessment
		2. Positive impact
		3. Negative impact
		4. Positive experience
		5. Negative experience
		6. Neutral experience
		7. Reflection