

Negotiated Access, Limited Compliance: ICRC Humanitarian Diplomacy in Sudan (2023-2025)

Melly Aini Oktaviani^{a,1}, Nurul Aulia^{b,2}

^{a,b}International Relations, Universitas Sriwijaya, Ogan Ilir, 30662, Indonesia
mellyoktaviani952@gmail.com¹, aulia22nurul@fisip.unsri.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

Humanitarian diplomacy is widely credited with securing access to civilians in war, yet its capacity to constrain the conduct of belligerents remains poorly specified. Existing scholarship tends to treat the exercise of humanitarian diplomacy and its effectiveness as a single continuum, conflating diplomatic activity with humanitarian effect. Drawing on the case of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Sudan between 2023 and 2025, this study argues that the reach of humanitarian diplomacy is bounded less by diplomatic skill than by belligerent consent. Through a structured analysis of public ICRC sources, organised around six established humanitarian diplomacy activities, the analysis shows that these activities secured operational access, yet did not produce compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL). The finding indicates that norm promotion and norm compliance are analytically separable and can move independently. The study contributes an explanatory refinement to the concept of humanitarian diplomacy, distinguishing its exercise from its efficacy and identifying the permission structure of armed actors as the decisive scope condition governing outcomes of humanitarian diplomacy.

Keywords : Humanitarian diplomacy; International Committee of the Red Cross; Sudan; International humanitarian law; Humanitarian access

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since April 2023, Sudan conflict exposes a central problem in contemporary humanitarian politics. Violence between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has caused civilian casualties, displacement, hunger, and collapsing public services. By 2025, Sudan faced more than 30 million people needing assistance and 12.8 million forcibly displaced (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2025; World Health Organization, 2025). Aid and medical supplies remained restricted. WHO also warned that 70 to 80 per cent of health facilities were not functioning due to conflict (Tétrault-Farber, 2024; World Health Organization, 2025). These conditions show that relief delivery was inseparable from negotiation and protection.

As the largest humanitarian movement, the ICRC is a neutral, impartial, and independent humanitarian organization (Roeder & Simard, 2013). Its mandate is connected to the Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law. Its work relies on confidential dialogue with authorities and armed actors. This distinguished ICRC diplomacy from conventional state diplomacy (Harroff-Tavel, 2005; ICRC, 2024a). In Sudan, ICRC has operated since 1978 and its activities include legal promotion, hospital support, family links, and emergency assistance (ICRC, 2024b).

Existing studies has examined internal conflict in Sudan from perspective of conflict resolution (Prayuda et al., 2024) and the dynamic of internal politic (Wahiduddin, 2020). Other studies discuss the ICRC across several conflict settings. Firli (2021) analyses the idealist motives behind ICRC's international assistance in Somalia. Syafira (2023) examines ICRC assistance and legal promotion in South Sudan. Rafika (2015) emphasises ICRC cooperation with local actors in Aceh. Eko Nurfaumi

(2017) highlights the limits of ICRC operations in Syria. Rahmad (2019) analyses ICRC action in Afghanistan through international organisation theory and human security.

These studies are useful, but they often position the ICRC as an aid provider, protector, or norm promoter. They give less attention to the analytical differences between diplomatic activity, operational access, and normative compliance. This distinction matters because the presence of negotiation or assistance does not itself prove humanitarian effect. Humanitarian diplomacy instead treats aid delivery, negotiation, local partnership, legal promotion, and advocacy as connected practices. Régnier identifies humanitarian presence, access negotiation, assistance monitoring, legal promotion, local institutional support, and advocacy as core dimensions of humanitarian diplomacy (Régnier, 2011). Yet the existence of these activities does not explain when they alter belligerent conduct.

This article addresses that limitation by analysing ICRC action as humanitarian diplomacy. The research question is: how did the ICRC conduct humanitarian diplomacy in Sudan from 2023 to 2025? The article argues that ICRC diplomacy worked through access negotiation, operational assistance, SRCS partnership, norm promotion, and advocacy. It further argues that these practices secured limited operational openings without necessarily producing normative compliance.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Humanitarian diplomacy is a multifaceted concept that involves both state and non-state actors working in conflict zones. The concept of humanitarian diplomacy can be tracked back to the 19th century with the efforts of Henry Dunant, whose advocacy led to the first Geneva Convention in 1864. The term of humanitarian diplomacy gained prominence in the 1990s and highlighting the role of non-state actors in shaping humanitarian agendas (Chin et al., 2023).

Humanitarian diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy in terms of actors, aims, and instrument. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is usually conducted by state representatives, humanitarian diplomacy involved a wider array of actors. This includes non-state actors, non-government organizations, international intergovernmental organisation, advocacy coalition and individuals (Afifi et al., 2025; Bogatyreva, 2022). Humanitarian diplomacy's primary aim is to persuade decision makers and opinion leaders to act in the interests of vulnerable group and respecting fundamental principles (Bogatyreva, 2022). States also engage in humanitarian diplomacy. However, state humanitarian diplomacy can be influenced by national interests and security concerns (Barakat, 2024). The instrument of humanitarian diplomacy are persuasion, negotiation, confidential dialogue, moral authority, and operational presence (Al-Suhaibani, 2020; Bogatyreva, 2022; Régnier, 2011; Turunen, 2020).

Humanitarian diplomacy conducted by non-state actors seeks to remain neutral, impartial, and independent. Yet it operates in environment shaped by power, violence, and political interests. Thus, humanitarian diplomacy can face a variety of challenges including political interference, security risk, lack of access, funding limitation and difficulties in maintaining neutrality and independence in complex conflict environments (Acuto, 2014; Al-Suhaibani, 2020). ICRC face limitation especially from its discreet and confidential approach (Slim, 2019).

Régnier (2011) identified main activities of humanitarian diplomacy. These actions undertaken by humanitarian organizations to ensure their ability to operate in crisis situations. The first is arranging for the presence of humanitarian organizations within a country where assistance is needed. The second is negotiating access to civilian populations who require assistance and protection. The third is humanitarian diplomacy encompasses monitoring assistance programs to ensure their effectiveness and integrity. The fourth is promoting respect for international humanitarian law and norms. The fifth is supporting local individuals and institutions. The sixth is engaging in advocacy at various levels to

support broader humanitarian objectives. These activities are aimed at securing operational space and promoting humanitarian objectives (Régnier, 2011).

Tabel 1. Regnier's Humanitarian Diplomacy Framework

Objective of Humanitarian Diplomacy	Core Activities
Securing operational space	Humanitarian presence
	Access negotiation
	Assistance monitoring
Promoting humanitarian objectives	Norm promotion
	Local institutional support
	Advocacy

Source: Author's synthesis based on Regnier (2011)

This article uses Régnier's framework as more than a checklist of ICRC activities. It treats the framework as a way to separate three analytical levels. The first level is diplomatic exercise, meaning the activities the ICRC undertakes. The second is operational access, meaning the practical space secured for relief, protection, or communication. The third is normative compliance, meaning observable restraint by parties to the conflict. The distinction allows a more cautious assessment of humanitarian diplomacy. An evacuation, legal workshop, or public statement may indicate diplomatic exercise. It may also indicate temporary operational access. It does not necessarily indicate compliance with international humanitarian law. This article therefore examines belligerent consent as a permission structure. In this usage, permission structure refers to the changing conditions under which armed actors allow, restrict, or instrumentalise humanitarian action.

3. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative case study design based on document analysis (Bakry, 2019). The case is ICRC humanitarian diplomacy in Sudan from 2023 to 2025. This period starts with the SAF-RSF conflict in April 2023. The unit of analysis is the International Committee of the Red Cross. The study examines the ICRC as a humanitarian organisation conducting assistance, protection, and diplomacy.

The corpus was selected through purposive screening. Documents were included when they met three criteria. First, they referred directly to Sudan between 2023 and 2025. Second, they described ICRC or Movement activities linked to assistance, protection, access, law, partnership, or advocacy. Third, they helped assess one or more of Régnier's six activities. Generic pages, duplicate news items, and sources unrelated to Sudan were excluded. The corpus consists of ICRC facts and figures, ICRC statements, the ICRC two-year report, WHO and OCHA documents, Saferworld and Humanitarian Outcomes reports, Reuters reporting, and academic literature. ICRC social media was scanned as supplementary public communication. The data were analysed through reduction, thematic classification, and interpretation (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The analysis followed three steps. First, documents were reduced into event-based notes covering actors, activity, location, output, and source type. Second, the notes were coded against six categories, which are presence, access negotiation, assistance monitoring, norm promotion, local institutional support, and advocacy. Third, coded evidence was synthesised around the distinction between diplomatic activity, operational access, and normative compliance. Source triangulation reduced dependence on ICRC self-reporting.

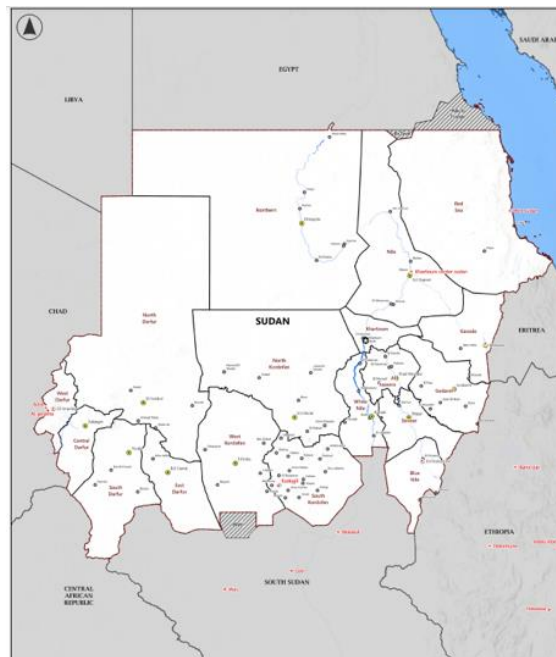
The method has limits. Public ICRC sources report outcomes more clearly than negotiation details. They also make assistance monitoring and failed negotiations difficult to observe. This creates an epistemic bias toward visible achievements, public communication, and English-language institutional records. The analysis therefore treats silence in the public record cautiously. It does not assume that confidential practice was absent simply because it was not documented.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Sudan's Humanitarian Crisis and ICRC Humanitarian Presences

ICRC has operated in Sudan since 1978 and its activities have covered Darfur, Khartoum, Blue Nile, Kassala, Al Jazeera, and South Kordofan. This established presence matter when conflict erupted between SAF and RSF in April 2023. Sudan's humanitarian crisis deepened sharply thereafter. WHO reported 30.4 million people requiring assistance in 2025. It also identified 16 million children within the affected population. The conflict generated the world's largest and fastest-growing displacement crisis, with 12.8 million forcibly displaced (World Health Organization, 2025).

The crisis also affected women and girls. Saferworld reported that 6.9 million women and girls faced risks of gender-based violence, while women peacebuilders sustained frontline responses (Saferworld, 2025). Against this backdrop, ICRC presence was maintained through both independent operations and partnership with the Sudanese Red Crescent Society (SRCS). This dual modality reflects Régnier's (2011) first activity, namely arranging for the presence of humanitarian organisations.



Picture 1. ICRC Presence in Sudan
(source: ICRC, 2025a)

In 2023, the ICRC worked with SRCS across affected areas and acted as a neutral intermediary. In food sector, ICRC supported community kitchen for displaced person in Al Fashir State, the capital of North Darfur. In A Al Jazeera state, ICRC with SRCS distributed food assistance to displaced person. By 2024, ICRC provided food assistance to people in Kassala, Blue Nile, Gadaref, West Darfur, North Darfur, and Central State (ICRC, 2025d). During 2025, ICRC delivered food and multipurpose cash assistance to people in Sudan. ICRC also distributed household items to around 48,670 people (ICRC, 2026). Beside access to food, ICRC support the access of water for people in Sudan during conflict. In 2025, the ICRC donated pumps, chemicals, and equipment for Khartoum water systems. This improved safe water access for about 2.4 million people. It also rehabilitated water systems to serve 465,000 people in several states (ICRC, 2026). Water provision was equally central to sustaining civilian survival during protracted conflict.

During conflict, civilian face difficulties to access essential health services. In response to conflict, ICRC provide donation of trauma case supplies to frontline hospitals in Sudan and distributed first aid kits for SRCS volunteers. The ICRC also provided regular support for 6 hospitals in Sudan with medical supplies and running cost. However, due to conflict, several vital services, such as maternity care, childcare, and vaccination are cut off from the service. The ICRC reported in 2025 that 70 to 80 per cent of health facilities were no longer functioning (ICRC, 2025f). This situation indicates a structural constraint on presence itself. Presence enabled trust and continuity where services were damaged or absent. However, the scale of collapse suggests that operational reach remained partial rather than comprehensive. This tension is consistent with Régnier's (2011) observation that humanitarian diplomacy is often improvised, contingent, and unable to open every door in a conflict setting.

ICRC has maintained long term ICRC assistance in Sudan covered health, water, sanitation, food, essential items, and livelihoods. SRCS is the forefront of Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in Sudan. The ICRC worked closely with the SRCS to provide humanitarian assistances in Sudan. These services were helped sustain their presence and maintain trust. Its assistances made humanitarian principles operational in places where services were damaged or absent. However, this research suggests that the presence of ICRC was not secured primarily through ICRC agency rather than through the shifting calculations of armed actors.

B. Access to Negotiation and Protection

Negotiating access to civilian population concerns more than physical entry into affected areas. It encompasses negotiations, assurances, and relationships that allow humanitarian actors to reach civilians needing protection and assistance. In Sudan, this dimension was central because access depended on security guarantees, armed control, communication channels, and acceptance by conflict parties. It also illustrates the confidential, discreet approach that Slim (2019) identifies as both a strength and a limitation of ICRC practice.

Because ICRC diplomacy often relies on confidential dialogue, public sources reveal outcomes more clearly than negotiation details. In June 2023, ICRC was able to conduct evacuation from Mygoma Orphanage in Khartoum. The ICRC reported that 300 children and 71 caretakers were evacuated to Wad Madani on 7 June 2023 (ICRC, 2023b). The operation required safe passage from conflict parties, logistics, provisions, and continuous communication with Sudanese ministries. The ICRC described its role as neutral intermediary, not as a coercive actor (ICRC, 2023c). The ICRC's 2023 report also records further protection-related access operations. It states that the ICRC evacuated ten infant children from Umbadda, Khartoum, to Wad Madani. ICRC also facilitated the release of 565 detainees in thirteen operations. Those released included 91 minors, 170 war-wounded people, and 27 Egyptian soldiers (ICRC, 2024b).

These cases demonstrate negotiated access to protected persons. Detainee-related access should not be treated as ordinary humanitarian delivery. It required contact with parties to the conflict and recognition of the ICRC's neutral role. The ICRC's confirms that releases occurred at the request of parties. It also notes that the ICRC gave released detainees basic assistance for return. This illustrates access diplomacy around movement, protection, and post-release support. During January to June, the ICRC and SRCS reached 1,105,762 people across Sudan. The ICRC Head of Delegation stated that work continued "wherever and whenever access allows" (ICRC, 2025g). The humanitarian diplomacy seeks space to operate, yet that space remains conditional upon belligerent consent. The evacuations and releases suggest genuine diplomatic achievement through negotiation. However, conflicting parties may have permitted these operations because they served their reputational or strategic interests.

C. Norm Promotion and the Limit of Compliance

In Sudan, the ICRC's norm promotion of international humanitarian law (IHL) through several activities. These were IHL training, legal engagement, dialogue with weapon-bearers, public communication, and advocacy on civilian protection. First, in 2023, the ICRC promoted IHL through

training lawyers and staff of the Judicial and Legal Science Institute in Khartoum. These activities targeted legal professionals who could interpret, teach and apply humanitarian norms within Sudan (ICRC, 2023c). In 2024, ICRC widened this engagement. It organized IHL roundtable for journalist in Kassala and Port Sudan. Engaging journalist mattered because media have role to shape narratives about civilians, combatants, and humanitarian workers. ICRC also promote IHL by training weapon-bearers to enhance their knowledge of the rules of war. Besides, ICRC maintained bilateral dan confidential dialogue with parties to the conflict to remind them of their obligation under IHL (ICRC, 2025d).

In 2025, ICRC organized workshop for legal actors that involved ministry of justice consultants and Sudanese public prosecution (ICRC, 2026). Norm promotion extended beyond closed settings. In 2025, ICRC a release of report on two years of war in Sudan. This report stated that lack of respect for IHL had contributed to Sudan's crisis. It also highlighted obstruction of emergency healthcare, attacks on hospital, attacked on essential infrastructure, sexual violence, and missing persons during conflict. This report is part of ICRC public communication (ICRC, 2025b). This blends the confidential and public registers that Harroff-Tavel and Régnier (2011) describe as characteristic of ICRC diplomacy. The report converted operational observation into a normative claim addressed to a wider audience.

Despite ICRC activities in disseminate IHL and remind parties of their obligations, it could not compel the SAF and RSF to comply. The persistence of attacks on civilians, hospitals, and infrastructure shows the limits of humanitarian diplomacy. This finding is consistent with the framework's premise that humanitarian diplomacy lacks enforcement power (Acuto, 2014; Al-Suhaibani, 2020). The effectiveness of IHL promotion depend on the willingness of armed actors to internalize restrain. In Sudan's case, the ICRC's work preserved legal language and channels of dialogue amid widespread of violation. Such preservation may hold longer-term value that immediate compliance.

D. Supporting Local Institutions

In Sudan, the evidence shows that ICRC humanitarian diplomacy is embedded in Sudanese institutional capacity. The most important partner of ICRC was SRCS. After April 2023, ICRC operated independently with SRCS to assist people affected by the SAF-RSF conflict. This partnership supported hospitals, water authorities, rehabilitation services, displaced communities, families separated by conflict, and detained-related operations (ICRC, 2023c). In 2023, the ICRC invested to support SRCS institutional capacity and supported the reallocation of SRCS staff during the emergency.

ICRC also support SRCS through materials. The ICRC provide generators, vehicles and supported running cost of SRCS branches and headquarters. The supports were needed to strengthen mobility, administration, and operational continuity of SRCS during conflict. In 2025, the ICRC expanded institutional support to SRCS across Sudan. It supported operational continuity at SRCS headquarters and all 18 state branches. This included salary support for 35 staff members (ICRC, 2026). The ICRC also supported SRCS leadership and coordination. It supported Branch Directors' meetings and a humanitarian negotiation workshop. The workshop was delivered with the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (ICRC, 2026).

ICRC further, strengthened SRCS emergency preparedness by donated equipment to Early Actions Teams and first-aid kits. Such support enabled local teams to respond violence and disrupted states services (ICRC, 2024b). Restoring Family Links also relied on local institutional capacity. In 2023, the ICRC supported 14 SRCS branches to provide family-link services. Together, they facilitated more than 66,500 phone calls between separated family members. They also responded to over 1,900 hotline calls from families seeking missing relatives (ICRC, 2024b).

The ICRC provide support to local health institution. It donated medical supplies to hospitals across Khartoum, Al-Jazeera, Kassala, Damazin, Darfur, and Port Sudan. It supported the Federal Ministry of Health during the cholera response. It also provided five vehicles to strengthen the ambulance system.

These activities sustained national health capacity during wartime disruption. The ICRC supported local medical expertise through training. In 2023, it trained 70 emergency-room staff in basic emergency practices. It also trained ortho-prosthetists, physiotherapists, nurses, and hospital staff linked to rehabilitation services. This indicates support for Sudanese professional capacity, not only material delivery (ICRC, 2024b).

The ICRC also supported Sudanese public service institutions. It worked with water authorities, health facilities, the Federal Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Animal Resources, prosthetics and orthotics centres, morgues, and medico-legal actors (ICRC, 2024a; ICRC, 2026). These activities indicate that local institutional support was multi-sectoral and technical. Humanitarian diplomacy of ICRC in Sudan operated through ICRC's ability to act depended on Sudanese institutions and local professionals. Diplomacy occurs through everyday coordination, training, institutional support, and relational work, not only formal negotiation.

However, localisation also carries tensions. IFRC described SRCS as a major humanitarian responder with extensive volunteer capacity (IFRC, 2023). Humanitarian Outcomes reported that Sudanese local initiatives continued operating despite severe disruption, but faced weak coordination and limited direct funding (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2023). These sources suggest that local actors were indispensable but under-resourced. ICRC support strengthened local capacity, but it did not resolve structural inequalities in humanitarian funding and risk distribution. Local actors enabled access and continuity. They also faced insecurity, institutional strain, and limited protection.

E. Advocacy Across Public, Institution, and Digital Arenas

The work of humanitarian diplomacy often related to advocacy at various level. ICRC seeks support for humanitarian objectives, civilian protection, and respect for humanitarian norms. In Sudan, ICRC advocacy operated through public statements, leadership-level engagement, confidential dialogues, and digital disseminations.

In May 2023, one month post conflict out-break in Sudan, the ICRC posted in its website and warned that humanitarian situation in Sudan were worsening. The post highlighted shortage of food, water, medical supplies, and family contact (ICRC, 2023a). In June 2023, ICRC legal advisors published a recap of basic IHL rules applicable in Sudan. The post reminded all parties to respect the legal obligation. As targeted attacks on civilians in Sudan's conflict continue and limited access to deliver aid, in July 2023, the ICRC called for greater access to deliver aid. It noted that civilians were struggling to access water, food and essential services (Lefolle & Nikolic, 2023). In November 2024, ICRC President Mirjan Spoljaric visited Sudan. She met General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, President of Sudan's Sovereign Council. In the meeting, she stressed the need for humanitarian space, safe access, and protection for humanitarian actors. She also met SRCS leaders in Port Sudan (ICRC, 2024c). The visit shows advocacy of ICRC concerned and reinforced the ICRC's claim that neutral humanitarian action must be protected.

In January 2025, the ICRC expressed alarm over attacks on power plants, water stations, and dam. The ICRC reminded parties that hospital, water, and electricity installations require protection under IHL (ICRC, 2025c). Infrastructure protection become one of advocacy theme of ICRC in conflict zone. In April 2025, the ICRC released a report on the civilian tool of the conflict. The report stated that over twelve million people had been uprooted. It also highlighted attacks on health facilities, sexual violence, missing person, and damaged infrastructure (ICRC, 2025b). The report converted operational evidence into public humanitarian pressure. The president of ICRC also conducted advocacy to international audiences. President Spoljaric spoke at the High-Level Ministerial Meeting on Sudan in London on April 2025 about the consequences of war and call to international audience to not neglect Sudan's conflict (ICRC, 2025e).

Digital and social media is used by ICRC to amplified the situation in Sudan. ICRC's Facebook and website posts repeated that civilian protection and unhindered humanitarian access are legal obligation. ICRC Africa post also amplified the same message for regional audiences (ICRC, 2025a). Social media helped ICRC to show its protection claims. ICRC posts presented Sudan as a crisis where civilians endured displacement, collapsing healthcare, and severe humanitarian needs. Digital and social media has helped non-state actors to communicate its institutional advocacy into more accessible public language.

ICRC's advocacy was operated beyond Sudanese parties. It tried to influence states, donors, international organisations, and publics. It did so without abandoning its neutral humanitarian mandate. It aimed to keep legal norms, civilian protection, and humanitarian access visible amid the decline of international attention. Yet advocacy remained structurally limited by the parties' behavior and the absence of enforcement power.

Régnier's third activity, assistance monitoring, is the least visible dimension in the public record. ICRC reports document distributions, hospital support, water repair, and detainee releases. They say less about how assistance was monitored after delivery. They also say little about diversion, complaints, or corrective measures. This does not mean that monitoring was absent. It shows that monitoring is harder to observe through public sources than presence, access, or advocacy. This article therefore treats assistance monitoring as a low-observability dimension. Its evidentiary limits are part of the finding. Public humanitarian reporting captures negotiated outputs more easily than internal controls.

ICRC humanitarian diplomacy in Sudan operated through access, operational assistance, SRCS partnership, norm promotion, and advocacy. Each dimension mapped onto Régnier's (2011) activities and relied on persuasion, negotiation, confidential dialogue, moral authority, and operational presence. The evidence indicates that these instruments secured meaningful but bounded outcomes, including evacuations, detainee releases, sustained services, and preserved channels of legal dialogue amid extreme violence. The same evidence, however, exposes the boundaries of the concept. Access remained contingent on belligerent consent, norm promotion did not translate into compliance, and localisation coexisted with unequal risk. These findings are consistent with the framework's premise that humanitarian diplomacy seeks neutrality and independence while operating within power, violence, and political interest (Acuto, 2014; Slim, 2019). The Sudan case therefore illustrates both the operational value and the structural constraints of non-state humanitarian diplomacy in this modern international politics.

5. CONCLUSION

The Sudan case reframes humanitarian diplomacy as an activity whose reach is set less by diplomatic skill than by belligerent tolerance. Régnier's (2011) six activities are visible in practice, yet they operate as conditional openings rather than durable capacities. Each achievement depended on the consent of armed actors who could revoke it at will. Humanitarian diplomacy thus appears not as a stable repertoire but as a sequence of contingent settlements. This situation shifts attention from what humanitarian actors do to what conflict parties permit.

The ICRC conducted humanitarian diplomacy in Sudan through interlocking activities of presence, negotiated access, norm promotion, local partnership, and multi-arena advocacy. These activities secured concrete outcomes, including evacuations, detainee releases, and preserved channels of legal dialogue. They did not, however, alter the conduct of the SAF or RSF. The answer to the research question is therefore double-edged, diplomacy delivered operational access without producing normative compliance. This divergence complicates a common assumption within the literature. Scholarship often treats norm promotion and norm compliance as points on a single continuum. The Sudan evidence

suggests they are analytically separate and can move independently. Sustained dissemination of international humanitarian law coexisted with its systematic violation. Consequently, the presence of diplomatic activity cannot be read as a proxy for humanitarian effect.

The findings also unsettle celebratory accounts of localisation. Local partnership extended reach and sustained continuity where international actors could not operate. It simultaneously transferred insecurity and institutional strain onto national staff. Localisation therefore functions as a redistribution of risk as much as a redistribution of agency. Scholars should treat this tension as a defining feature of contemporary humanitarian diplomacy, not an incidental cost.

The article's conceptual contribution is to distinguish the exercise of humanitarian diplomacy from its efficacy, and locates the difference in belligerent consent. This clarifies why identical activities yield divergent outcomes across conflicts. The contribution extends Régnier (2011) rather than displacing his framework. It adds an explanatory variable, namely the permission structure within which the five of six activities operate.

Several scope conditions bound these claims. The analysis rests on public ICRC sources, which record outcomes but obscure confidential negotiation and monitoring. Diverted or captured assistance would remain invisible to this method. The findings describe a single, non-international armed conflict with two dominant belligerents. They may not travel to fragmented conflicts, consensual disaster settings, or state-led humanitarian diplomacy. Three tractable directions follow. First, comparative designs could hold the six activities constant and vary belligerent characteristics, isolating consent as an explanatory factor. Second, practitioner interviews and archival access could illuminate the confidential negotiation that public sources conceal. Third, research could examine how national staff experience the risk that localisation transfers to them. Each direction targets a gap that the present study identifies but cannot itself resolve.

The broader implication is interpretive rather than prescriptive. Humanitarian diplomacy in Sudan preserved legal language and human contact amid conditions designed to extinguish both. Whether such preservation reshapes later conduct remains an open empirical question. What the case establishes is narrower and firmer. In Sudan, the boundary of the possible was drawn less by humanitarian intent than by the armed actors who controlled access to civilians.

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