

## DID PARTISANSHIP AFFECT THE BRITISH MEDIA COVERAGE OF FOREIGN AID TO SYRIA BETWEEN 2011 AND 2013?

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I examine the UK media coverage of foreign aid to Syria starting from the initial uprising in 2011 until mid-2013, when issues surrounding extremist groups, immigration, and national security began to consume press coverage. Focusing on *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, I aim to establish the extent to which partisanship and political ideology influenced this coverage. I conclude that the content of the coverage was not particularly influenced by partisanship, however the structure of the articles was. Additionally, partisanship is far more explicit in general coverage of foreign aid than of specific crisis coverage.

### INTRODUCTION

The media's relationship with foreign aid has become increasingly complex in recent years. With the rise of twenty-four-hour news cycles, online news updates and social media, it is evident that the media now have a significant influence on foreign policy. This is known as the "CNN effect", a term that originally referred purely to network news but now encapsulates the broad range of real-time news that has resulted from modern technological advances (Robinson 2006). The influence of the media on foreign policy agendas extends to the determination of aid expenditure. Press coverage can impact both the amount of spending by countries and where they choose to spend it, as well as the attitudes held by citizens of donor countries towards aid-giving in general (Van Belle and Hook 2000, 321–346). Media outlets have been criticised for neglecting their duty as the objective purveyors of information. Critics assert that the media now prioritize the shock value and marketability of news stories over the accurate representation of events. There has also been increasing focus on the relationship between the press and the aid organizations themselves. NGOs now utilize the media as a PR tool and form of advertisement in the hopes that increased exposure will lead to increased funding. The media willingly comply in exchange for priority access to aid projects and recipients (Polman 2010; Hieber-Girardet 2017; Cottle and Nolan 2007, 862–878).

Given the influence of the media on foreign aid allocation, the subjectivity of this coverage and its susceptibility to external influence make for an important area of study. This paper will examine this subjectivity through a political lens by establishing whether partisanship exists in the newspaper coverage of UK foreign aid spending, focusing specifically on humanitarian aid to Syria between 2011 and 2013. By analysing the coverage of two well regarded and widely read broadsheets—*The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*—with distinct political ideologies (right- and left-wing

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respectively), I will evaluate how partisanship affects the coverage of foreign aid. I shall limit my analysis of news coverage to the two years following the initial Syrian uprising on March 15, 2011. The Syrian conflict continues to be one of the worst humanitarian crises in history. While it began initially as an isolated crisis, it has since become an issue involving military action, national security, immigration and refugee policy in Europe, and terrorism. As a result, coverage of events in Syria is now influenced both by attitudes towards humanitarian aid, and by attitudes towards these additional, highly contentious issues. Therefore, I have limited my scope to when the focus was primarily on Syrian civilians and peaceful resolution without military intervention. Hence, I can ensure that any partisanship that might occur in the press coverage is related to attitudes towards humanitarian aid, rather than towards the other political issues that have since engulfed the crisis. Throughout this paper, partisanship refers to preference or bias, specifically of a political nature. The newspapers examined are traditionally inclined towards certain political ideologies and so partisanship refers to coverage that exhibits preference for these ideologies, and for the UK political parties that embody them.

## PARTISANSHIP AND FOREIGN AID

In order to examine partisanship across foreign aid coverage, it is first important to briefly explicate the policies adopted towards aid by UK governments in recent history. The attitudes towards foreign aid of the main two political parties in the UK—Conservative and Labour—can be seen in both the amount of aid spending that has occurred during their terms in government and the nature of that spending. Between 1970 and 2010 Conservative governments displayed a clear tendency to spend less on foreign aid than Labour ones.

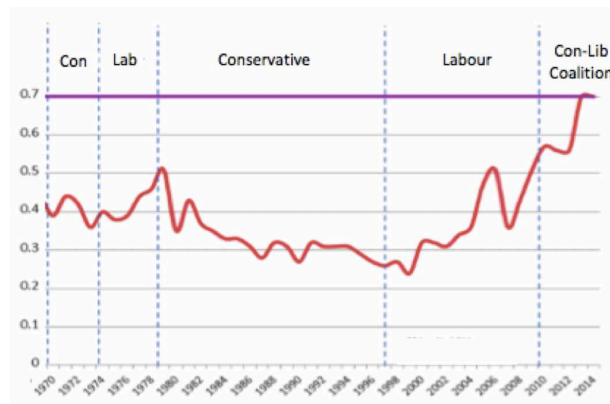


FIGURE 1 SOURCE: OECD

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this trend, showing that, generally speaking, aid spending as a percentage of GDP decreased throughout the term of a Conservative government, and increased throughout the term of a Labour government. Further differences in ideology influencing foreign aid can be seen by how these two governments spend their aid and the rhetoric they use when defending their aid policies to the British public.

The Conservative party used a distinctively Nationalist rhetoric when announcing its plans for foreign aid in their manifesto for the 1970 General Election. They asserted that developing countries should be left to their own devices when dealing with their individual issues, and that assistance from the British government should be reserved only for “those matters freely agreed upon as being of common interest” (Craig 1975, 343). The subsequent Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major continued in the same vein, cutting foreign aid spending as a percentage of GNP and reallocating aid to align it more closely with Britain’s national interest.

Labour governments, in comparison, tended to place much greater emphasis on improving the welfare of recipient countries. Labour’s 1974 manifesto advocated that organizations whose objectives included the “peaceful settlement of disputes, ...the promotion of human rights, ...[and] the rule of law and to the improvement of living standards throughout the world” (Craig 1975, 466) be given priority in the allocation of British aid. And in the late 1990s, aid under the Labour government of Tony Blair underwent a clear shift from the explicit advancement of the national interest to a “growing emphasis on ethical [and] moral duties to protect the rights and interests of others” (Chandler 2003, 295).

The Conservative and Liberal-Democratic coalition government that took office in 2010 continued with the aid-giving practices set in motion by the previous Labour government and continued to increase foreign aid spending, despite other domestic and international budget cuts. This is a significant consideration that I will discuss this in more depth later.

## **PARTISANSHIP AND UK MEDIA COVERAGE**

Having established partisan trends in the approach to foreign aid, it is now important to determine partisan trends in the UK media. In this paper, I examine the differences in the coverage of foreign aid between *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*. I chose these papers as they are both popular and well regarded, while still maintaining distinct political leanings. Whilst UK tabloids such as *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* are known to cover news in more emotional and involved ways, the two broadsheets I am examining are renowned for their accurate coverage and typically restrained reporting style (Baker 2010, 310–338).

According to a MORI survey conducted in 2005, 64% of *Telegraph* readers intended to support the Conservative Party in the coming elections, *The Guardian* on the other hand, had a far more left-wing readership, with 48% of readers intending to vote for the Labour Party, and a further 34% backing the Liberal Democrats. *The Telegraph’s* core readership is typical of the traditional ‘middle England’ demographic, populated by retired army officers with patriotic memories of Great Britain’s nationalistic history. The personal links between the paper’s editors and the leadership of the Conservative Party, along with the paper’s influence over Conservative activists, has resulted in the paper being referred to as the ‘Torygraph’ (‘tory’ is a term used to identify Conservative voters, often used with negative connotations) in

common parlance. On the contrary, *The Guardian* holds a reputation as a platform for liberal and left-wing opinions. This has led to the use of the phrase ‘Guardian reader’ as a label for people holding liberally-oriented political views. The partisanship of these papers is reinforced by the fact that these two publications are continuously used as models of analysis for media coverage due to their representation of press from both the left and right political spectrums (Doulton and Brown 2009, 191–202; O’Grady 2011, 2489–2500; Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti 2016, 265–279).

It has been established that Conservative governments are less inclined than Labour governments to spend money on aid, especially in a predominantly humanitarian way and that *The Telegraph* shares and supports the ideologies of Conservative governments, whereas *The Guardian* and its readership favor more liberal views. These facts would indicate that coverage in these two newspapers should vary so that *The Telegraph* can be expected to produce articles that are critical of foreign aid to Syria and that *The Guardian* will produce articles that are more supportive.

### **CASE STUDY: SYRIAN UPRISING AND CIVIL WAR**

The Syrian uprising in 2011 and the civil war that followed have been acknowledged as amongst the worst humanitarian crises of our time. The uprising began when protesters took to the streets to challenge the authoritarian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. What started as pro-democracy protests turned violent when security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing many. This triggered more nationwide protests and by July 2011, hundreds of thousands of Syrians were protesting. These protesters began forming rebel groups and the violence escalated into a fully-fledged civil war. By June 2013, the UN had estimated that at least 90,000 people had died in the fighting. The violence led to an enormous number of refugees fleeing the country. Approximately 4.5 million have fled since the conflict began, and a further 6.5 million are estimated to have been internally displaced within Syria. The Syrian crisis triggered the biggest ever call for humanitarian aid from the UN. Roughly 70% of the population was left without access to adequate drinking water, one in three people rendered unable to meet their basic food needs, and more than two million children are out of school, and four out of five people live in poverty. The warring parties worsened the problems by refusing humanitarian agencies access to civilians in need. As well as those requiring aid in Syria, there are also large amounts of aid needed to support the refugees who have fled to neighbouring countries including Lebanon and Jordan (BBC 2016).

### **IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS**

It is important to outline the political climate in the United Kingdom at the time of the Syrian uprising. In 2010, David Cameron took office as Prime Minister as part of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. Cameron was explicit in his assertion that his government was not going to cut foreign aid even though it was looking to reduce spending in other departments.

This broke away from the traditional Conservative position. It was not, however, the result of a shift in party ideology. Rather, it was an initiative led by a few high-ranking members of the new cabinet (Heppel and Lightfoot 2012, 130–138). If partisanship does affect *The Telegraph's* coverage of aid to Syria, it could take two forms: it could either break away from its traditional conservatism to support the new Conservative Prime Minister, or it could choose to prioritize coverage of the backbenchers' dissent and disagreement over the increased aid spending. The *Guardian* also faces a dilemma: it could follow its traditional liberalism and present aid spending positively, supporting the new Conservative Prime Minister, or it could portray aid spending in a negative way to criticise the Prime Minister's actions. An additional complexity for *The Guardian* is the Liberal Democrat coalition as more *Guardian* readers than ever voted for the Liberal Democrats in the 2005 General Election due to disenchantment with the Labour Party. Therefore, it may focus a disproportionate amount on Liberal Democrat politicians when it covers aid to Syria to appeal to these readers.

#### FOCUS OF STUDY

In comparing media coverage of foreign aid to Syria in *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*, I will look to identify the following things. First, I will look for differences in the portrayal of aid to Syria: is UK aid spending portrayed in a positive or negative way? I will also ask whether either newspaper focuses more on the UK government as an actor in the situation or limits itself to a more widespread coverage of the crisis and aid requirements. I will also examine the focus of the news articles, looking to establish whether aid is central to the article, or a secondary consideration. Following my case study analysis, I will compare this focused coverage of aid to Syria with a brief analysis of the general coverage of foreign aid in these newspapers, to determine whether there is more or less partisanship in specific case coverage of foreign aid compared to macro coverage of foreign aid.

#### METHODS AND RESULTS

Using the search engine Factiva, I searched for news articles that included the keywords "Syria" and "foreign aid" or "humanitarian aid" or "humanitarian assistance" and were published between March 15, 2011 and June 13, 2013. This timeframe encompasses the period from the beginning of the Syrian uprising up until the point at which military intervention, extremist groups and the flow of refugees into Europe began to overtake humanitarian concerns in press coverage. Broadly speaking, coverage of aid to Syria varied little between the two papers. Neither paper was critical of the British government's provision of aid to alleviate this humanitarian crisis. There were, nonetheless, some elements of the coverage by these two newspapers that appear to suggest some degree of partisanship or preference for certain ideologies. The initial articles reporting the government's announcement of its intention to give aid to Syria perpetuate the attitudes that might be expected considering the respective political leanings of the two papers. *The Telegraph* mentions the aid

commitment in a single sentence at the end of a mostly unrelated article entitled “Nicolas Sarkozy admits David Cameron was right to veto European treaty” (Mason 2012). The emphasis here is clearly on the successes of the Conservative Prime Minister. *The Guardian* dedicated comparatively more coverage to the initial aid commitment, outlining the amount to be spent, how it would be distributed, and the humanitarian needs it aimed to satisfy. That at such an early stage in the Syrian crisis—the estimated number of affected civilians was only 20,000 at the time—*The Guardian* covered aid to the country so extensively supports the hypothesis that *The Guardian* was more sympathetic to aid concerns than was *The Telegraph*.

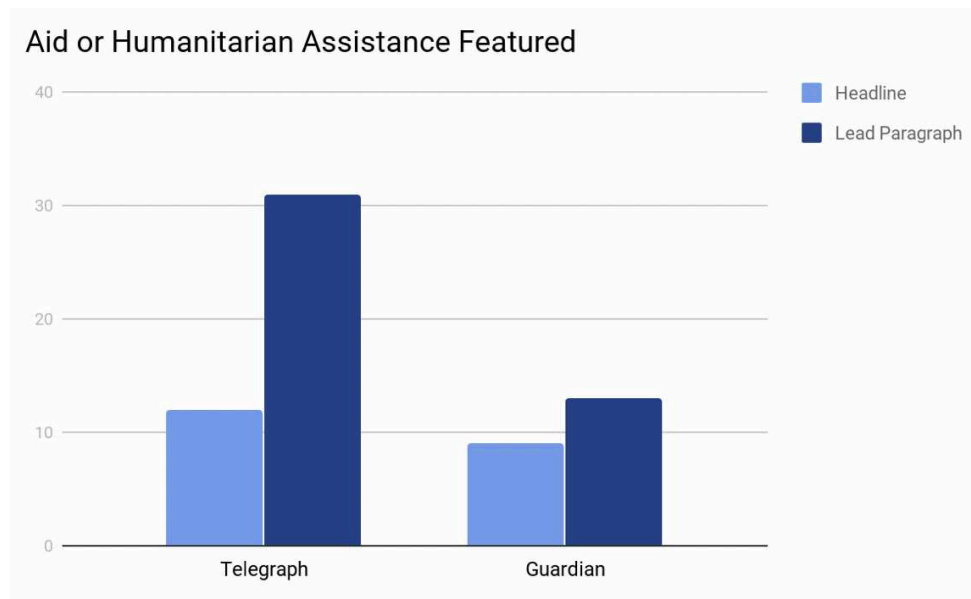


FIGURE 2

This inequity of coverage disappeared once the extent of the crisis became clear. In fact, as shown in Figure 2, *The Telegraph* in fact had slightly more headlines that featured aid or humanitarian assistance than *The Guardian*. This difference was greatly intensified when including headlines and lead paragraphs. While many of the articles that resulted in the search incorporated a reference to humanitarian aid as a small side note, these figures show that *The Telegraph* had more coverage that was focused on the need for, or commitment and use of, aid. This is surprising considering the typical conservative ambivalence or antipathy towards aid. One reason for this may be that the Conservative government was such a vocal proponent of giving aid to Syria. The time frame of this coverage coincided with the first Conservative Prime Minister in 13 years, and it is likely that *The Telegraph* did not want to criticize him, especially given that the Conservative government was a weak one as it was in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Another reason for this could be that, despite the traditional conservative disinclination to support foreign aid, the Syrian crisis was such an objectively horrific humanitarian disaster that there were no valid criticisms of the aid commitments.

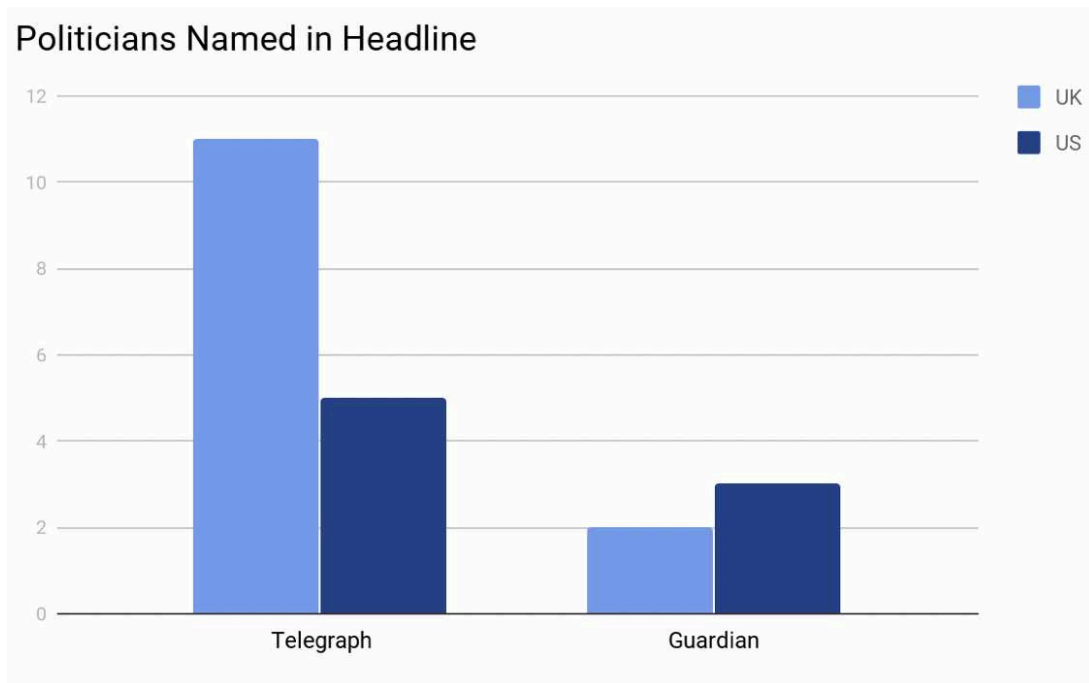


FIGURE 3

One way in which the coverage differed distinctly was in the way the newspapers represented the UK government. While neither newspaper was critical of the government and their actions around giving aid to Syria, the amount of representation of the government and government figures varied drastically. This can be seen in Figure 3, which shows the number of headlines that named UK politicians. Of the articles, *The Guardian* only mentioned Cameron in their headlines, and this occurred only twice. When they featured Justine Greening in a headline, they only referred to her as a ‘minister’ and went on to identify her in the actual article. Contrastingly, *The Telegraph* named either Cameron or Foreign Secretary William Hague in 11 of their headlines. This distinction continued in the body of the articles, with members of the cabinet being extensively referenced and quoted in *The Telegraph* coverage. *The Guardian* on the other hand would tend to have minimal quotations and references and these would come towards the end of the articles (excluding the few articles that were focused on the actions of a particular politician). An example of this is seen in the article covering the Syrian crisis summit. Hillary Clinton is quoted in the lead paragraph and is quoted once again, giving the perspective of the American government, before William Hague is quoted with his input for the UK government. As shown in the graph, US political leaders are in fact equally if not more represented in *The Guardian* coverage than their UK counterparts. While there is no open criticism of the actions of the UK government, as one might have expected considering the partisanship of *The Guardian* discussed previously, the unequal representation of the UK government in these two papers’ coverage certainly points towards some bias at play.

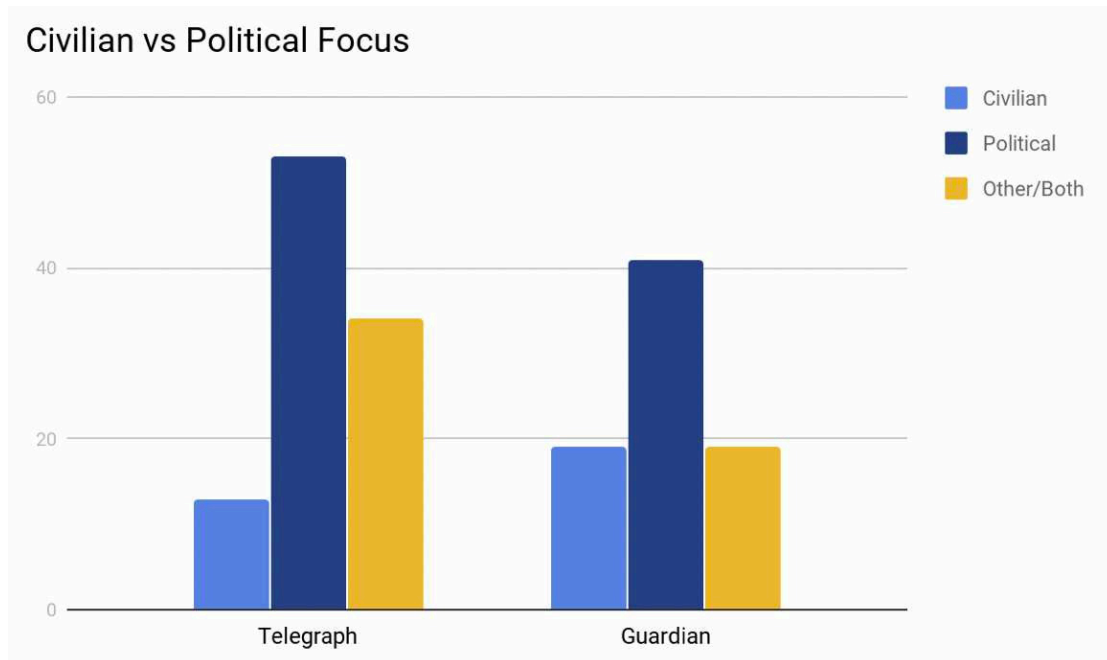


FIGURE 4

A final difference between the two papers and their coverage of Syrian aid between 2011 and 2013 is the overall focus of the article. Figure 4 shows the number of articles that focused on the civilians in crisis, and the number that focused on the conflict and political ramifications surrounding it. Both newspapers had a large quantity of articles that focused on the politics surrounding the crisis, which is logical as the political conflict was, and still is, central to the crisis and resulting disasters. However, the number of purely civilian focused articles in *The Guardian* versus *The Telegraph* is significant. *The Guardian* has a distinctly higher number of articles that were primarily covering the civilian ramifications. The 'other' column are the outlier articles that were focused on something else (for example the pregnancy of President Assad's wife) but most of these 'other' articles had equal coverage of the political and the civilian aspects of the crisis. This typifies the overall theme that, even though *The Telegraph* provided much more coverage of foreign aid and the humanitarian crisis in Syria, this coverage was more often than not accompanied by equal if not more coverage of the political and military aspects of the conflict. This differs from *The Guardian's* coverage which had a much more even spread of focus. These differences could be representative of the trends outlined at the beginning of this paper, in that the Labour Party tends to be more concerned with the individuals receiving aid, whereas the Conservative Party is more concerned with how the UK will be affected by international affairs and so will have a cover more of the political and strategic foreign policy elements of an event. While there were some nuanced differences in the way these two papers covered the foreign aid allocations to Syria in the first two years of the conflict, overall the tone of the coverage was similar across both in that it supported the government's commitment to provide extensive amounts of aid to Syria.



### COMPARISON TO COVERAGE OF MACRO AID

To compare the findings of this focused case study to the coverage of foreign aid in general, I conducted another search through Factiva. This time I removed Syria from the equation, and searched only for “humanitarian aid” or “foreign aid” or “humanitarian assistance”. I also changed the date to limit the search to articles that have been published in the previous year in order to prevent overlap from the media coverage I had previously examined. These searches returned substantially different results from that of the Syrian case study. By looking at headlines alone, it is clear that the partisanship of these newspapers, and the traditional political approaches to foreign aid is very much present in the coverage of foreign aid on a macro scale. Articles from *The Telegraph* include “Britain’s foreign aid law is a scandal that abuses the country’s generosity. It must be scrapped”, “Britain’s aid target is politicians’ virtue signalling with other people’s money”, and “Someone needs to have the guts to say ‘Bah! Humbug’ to foreign aid” (Patel 2016; Johnston 2016; Johnston 2016). In contrast, the headlines from *The Guardian* present a very different attitude towards aid spending: “Foreign aid is failing fast—but it’s not too late to fix”, “Plan to align UK aid with trade policy could sideline poor countries”, and “In their ruthless flight from liberalism, Tories have left decency behind” (Byanyima 2016; Quinn and McVeigh 2016; Williams 2016). From this small selection of articles, it is clear that there is a distinction between the political preferences of these two newspapers towards foreign aid as a macro concept. This raises the question of why the initial coverage of aid to Syria was so much more neutral than the coverage of aid as a macro issue. The first reason for this could be new government that was in power from 2010. As previously discussed, David Cameron was the first Conservative Prime Minister to make it a priority to increase aid spending. In this way, his views aligned more with those of *The Guardian*, which is why the newspaper did not criticise the government’s aid spending. More recent Conservative governments, however, have not made such strong commitments to maintaining the aid budget. *The Telegraph* may have wanted to support their new Conservative Prime Minister, and therefore might have been more willing to support his decisions to increase aid spending in relation to Syria. Furthermore, the crisis in Syria was such an objectively terrible occurrence that criticism of the aid efforts could have come across as harsh or inhumane on the part of *The Telegraph*. Regardless of arguments in favor of or against aid, when there is a specific crisis with death tolls, and images of innocent children suffering, is very difficult to criticize providing assistance. This could be a reason for why there is so much more criticism in *The Telegraph’s* coverage of aid on a macro level; they are criticizing the concept rather than specific aid efforts.

### CONCLUSION

Coverage of foreign aid to Syria in the first two years of the humanitarian crisis proved to be almost wholly objective. This was especial-

ly true in terms of the presentation of the crisis, the need for aid, and the role of the UK government as an active leader in the provision of aid to Syria. Political preferences did manifest themselves in the way the coverage was framed. In particular, *The Guardian* focused much less on the involvement of specific members of the UK government, and instead focused on the country as a whole. Comparatively, *The Telegraph* made consistent references to the actions and words of UK politicians, particularly Conservative cabinet members. While *The Telegraph* included foreign aid in its coverage as much as, if not more than, *The Guardian*, a substantial amount of these articles also included extensive reporting focused on political news, in particular how it related to the UK. This shows that despite a clear sympathetic sentiment towards those suffering in Syria, there are still remnants of the nationalist approach to aid that has defined Conservative governments throughout British political history. Finally, the comparison between coverage of foreign aid to Syria and that of foreign aid as a macro concept shows that there are far more explicit differences between the two newspapers when covering foreign aid generally rather than specifically. While this paper was only able to touch on this briefly, it would be an interesting and worthwhile topic for future study.

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