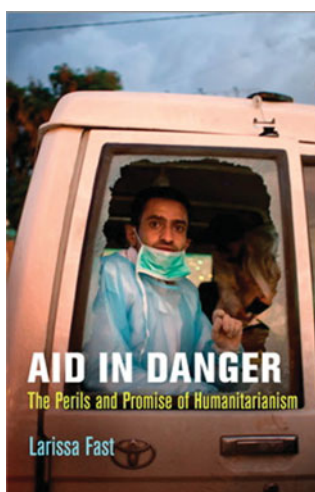


BOOK REVIEW



Aid in Danger: The Perils and Promise of Humanitarianism

Larissa Fast*

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The number of studies on humanitarian security has increased steadily since the mid-1990s. Most of the available literature is comprised of publications written by security experts, setting the tone for a dominant discourse where an alleged deterioration in the security environment requires humanitarian organizations to professionalize their security management. Prominent among such publications are *Operational Security Management in Violent Environments*¹ and the more recent *Can You Get Sued?*, a policy paper on the legal liability of international humanitarian aid organizations towards their staff.² Studies by academics have been rare, although they too have increased in recent years.³ Using a critical approach, scholars such as Mark Duffield⁴ have appraised the security apparatus, analyzing notably the roots and consequences of the “fortified aid compound” and examining how aid workers are being encouraged to view and accept segregated living as a necessary, and even desirable, evil. And, in a study commissioned by Groupe URD, Arnaud Dandoy critically explores the social and geographical segregations stemming from the normalization of security practices in Haiti.⁵

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The title and first page of *Aid in Danger: The Perils and Promise of Humanitarianism* could give the reader reason to believe that author Larissa Fast is a firm advocate of the “normalization” discourse examined by Duffield and Dandoy, and of its consequences. But this is not the case, as Fast’s opening arguments – “Aid is in danger”, “Humanitarianism in crisis” or that “dangers to aid workers have increased” – are preliminary unfortunate statements in an otherwise very welcome book. A scholar and a former aid worker herself, Fast is one of the most prolific academics on the subject. In her book, she brings elements of criticism to the dominant discourse on the security of aid workers and attempts to synthesize the terms of the debate on humanitarian security. Her main intention is to challenge what she dubs “humanitarian exceptionalism” – the mythical image of humanitarians – whereby aid workers should be protected at all times and in all places by virtue of the uniqueness of their function and moral standing. Pivotal to Fast’s argument is the view that the “internal vulnerabilities” of aid organizations and their workers, such as individual behaviour or organizational lapses, are decisive but unacknowledged factors in the security incidents that affect them. A failure to adequately conceptualize these factors inhibits a more in-depth, theoretical understanding of the causes and dynamics of violence.

Comprising six chapters – and somewhat repetitive at times – the book provides an analysis of several significant events that have occurred in the area of aid security, a criticism of the dominant narrative on the security of aid workers, an examination of the multiple causes behind the violence committed against aid workers, a historical review and a description of the professionalization and consequences of humanitarian aid security management. It concludes with an appeal to reinstate “humanity” at the core of security management.

History and statistics

Fast attempts “to debunk the myths of the inviolability of aid workers and the recent genesis of targeted attacks”.⁶ Arguing that aid workers have long been targeted, she makes a short detour through history in which she recalls “early stories of security

1 Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Humanitarian Practice Network, *Operational Security Management in Violent Environments*, 2nd ed., London, December 2010 (1st ed. 2000).

2 Edward Kemp and Maarten Merkelbach, *Can You Get Sued? Legal Liability of International Humanitarian Aid Workers Towards Their Staff*, Security Management Initiative, Geneva, November 2011.

3 See, for instance, Larissa Fast, “Characteristics, Context, and Risk: NGO Insecurity in Conflict Zones”, *Disasters*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2007, pp. 130–154; Jean S. Renouf, “Understanding How the Identity of International Aid Agencies and Their Approaches to Security Are Mutually Shaped”, PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2011; Elise Leclerc-Gagné, “The Construction of the Humanitarian Worker as Inviolable Actor”, PhD thesis, University of British Columbia, 2014.

4 Mark Duffield, “Risk Management and the Fortified Aid Compound: Everyday Life in Post-Interventionary Society”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2010, pp. 453–474.

5 Arnaud Dandoy, *Insécurité et aide humanitaire en Haïti: l'impossible dialogue? Décrypter les enjeux des politiques sécuritaires des organisations humanitaires dans l'Aire métropolitaine de Port-au-Prince*, Groupe URD, Port-au-Prince, September 2013.

6 *Aid in Danger*, p. 12.

incidents”;⁷ from the seventy-eight members of the Japanese Red Cross who died during the Russo-Japanese war in 1904–1905 to the Yemeni ICRC guards murdered during an attack on a clinic in 1968 and the two Save the Children staff members killed by a road mine in Biafra during the same year.

Fast shows that while often used to instil the notion that violence against aid workers is increasing, security incident databases have numerous limitations, making interpretation hazardous at best. First, what is most often concluded is that the number of incidents, and therefore casualties, is rising, while neglecting to take into account that the number of aid workers is also growing. This issue of proportions is decidedly thorny. Moreover, Fast adds, where it can be surmised that there is indeed an increase in relative terms in the number of incidents, this is largely due to the over-representation of particularly dangerous countries such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Pakistan. Fast also shares her doubts regarding the reliability of the reporting, as it largely relies on media sources and self-reports by organizations. Finally, she points to the difficulties posed by definition – both in terms of what constitutes a “security incident” and what constitutes an “aid worker” – to assert that the notion that insecurity affecting humanitarian workers is on the increase is really very flimsy. To quote the author, “statistics are more important for what they obscure rather than for what they illuminate”.⁸

The “politicization” discourse and the under-exposure of internal vulnerabilities

Core to the dominant discourse on insecurity is the view that “politicization” has contributed substantially to violence against aid workers. In particular, the so-called blurring of lines between, on the one hand, political and military stakeholders and, on the other, humanitarian organizations is said to cause confusion in the minds of would-be attackers who are apparently unable to differentiate between those whose humanitarian work is driven solely by “humanitarian principles” and everyone else.⁹ Fast disputes this basic assumption – the idea that it is “the context of aid, its politicisation and the corresponding loss of impartiality, neutrality and independence that results in the targeting of aid workers”.¹⁰ Referring to Laura Hammond¹¹, she argues further

7 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

9 For a sample of a very rich literature making these arguments, see for instance Care International, *A New Year’s Resolution to Keep: Secure a Lasting Peace in Afghanistan*, London, 13 January 2003; Nellie Bristol, “Military Incursions into Aid Work Anger Humanitarian Groups”, *Lancet*, Vol. 267, No. 9508, 4 February 2006, pp. 384–386; or the more recent Stella Dawson, “Aid Workers in Conflict Zones No Longer Immune, Now Targeted”, Thomson Reuters Foundation, 20 November 2014, available at: www.trust.org/item/20141120045856-v6h6d (all internet references were accessed in November 2014).

10 L. Fast, above note 6, p. 99.

11 Laura Hammond, “The Power of Holding Hostage and the Myth of Protective Principles”, in Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (eds), *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2008, pp. 172–195.

that the “blurred lines” argument underestimates the intelligence of belligerents and civilians, since it assumes they are too ignorant or naive to know the difference.¹² While recognizing that, if put in its proper place, the politicization of humanitarian assistance could be a problem, Fast insists that “these axiomatic discourses, rooted in central debates of humanitarianism, compose the primary explanations for the violence aid workers face. ... Unfortunately they neglect other contributing factors and the constellation of dimensions as an interrelated whole.”¹³

She calls the reader’s attention to two events – the bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad in August 2003 and the killing of seventeen Sri Lankan Tamil ACF staff members in Muttur in August 2006 – and to a series of short stories inspired by real incidents to show how internal vulnerabilities and the actions of individuals and organizations are factors in the occurrence of security incidents. In the first case, Fast asserts that the UN failed to address key vulnerabilities that might have prevented the attack,¹⁴ while in the second, she points to ACF’s “questionable security-management decisions”,¹⁵ thereby placing external causes within a larger web of causations. Consequently, Fast calls for an exploration of “the analytical framework that unmasks the role of individuals and institutions in order to understand the causes of violence”,¹⁶ an exploration which is often neglected to the benefit of a discourse on “politicization” that tends to exceptionalize aid workers. Conversely, Fast argues, aid workers typically are “ordinary people”¹⁷ and “the ‘self-generated’ risks – risks and vulnerabilities that occur as a result of the behaviour and actions of individuals – are integral to the realities of aid work and security management”.¹⁸ In no case can those mistakes justify an attack, provided they do not amount to direct participation in hostilities. They do, however, need to be examined when one intends to understand the circumstances under which attacks occur.

Professionalization

As the debate on the security of aid workers has become progressively tainted by a “discourse of fear”,¹⁹ Fast describes how the management of humanitarian security has gone on to become a business opportunity for professionals working in risk prevention and management. This was notably the case in the 1990s after the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda and in the aftermath of the killings of six ICRC delegates in Chechnya in 1996, which resulted in more attention being paid to

12 *Aid in Danger*, p. 103.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 145.

19 After David L. Altheide, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis*, Aldine de Gruyter, Hawthorne, 2002.

the dangers of humanitarian work. It was against this background that guidelines and manuals began to be published, standardized policies and procedures emerged and a market for security professionals was established. Of course, as Fast explains, this shift did not occur in isolation and was integral to the general trend among humanitarian agencies for standardization and professionalization implemented over the previous twenty years. However, she goes on to lament:

As aid agencies have grown and matured, they have moved closer to professionalisation and career paths and away from volunteerism and charity. This translates also to the sought-after skill sets, which now emphasise technical expertise over relationally proficient skills, such as empathy.²⁰

Discussion

A well-informed challenge to the dominant security narrative, Larissa Fast's *Aid in Danger* provides an opportunity to open up a discussion on the three aforementioned aspects: history and statistics, the discourse on politicization and its impact on the humanitarian security discourse, and lastly, the professionalization of the humanitarian sector. The book makes a useful contribution to the debate on the security of the humanitarian worker, a debate that is all too often tainted by general and decontextualized explanations delivered by security experts intent on convincing us of their own utility.

How did the humanitarian exceptionalism discourse come to gain so much influence? A quick look at the evolution of the debate on security shows that it was in the mid-1990s that concerns about the insecurity of aid workers first appeared as a topic for institutional discussion. This was a time when most humanitarian workers were confronted with massive violence against civilians – to which they were not immune either. All that is required is to recall the wars in Somalia, West Africa, Chechnya, the African Great Lakes and the former Yugoslavia to understand how legitimate this growing concern was at that time. The seminal *Operation Security Management in Violent Environments* was published in 2000, while the ICRC and ECHO held their first workshop and seminar on humanitarian security in 1997 and 1998 respectively. A couple of years later, the advent of statistics on security was to have significant consequences on the shaping of humanitarian security. Yet, together with Fast, most researchers and practitioners – Koenraad van Brabant²¹ and Arnaud Dandoy²², to name but two – who have taken the time to conduct a proper analysis of humanitarian security statistics have highlighted the limitations of the data. Indeed, when

20 *Aid in Danger*, p. 163.

21 Koenraad van Brabant, *Incident Statistics in Aid Worker Safety and Security Management: Using and Producing Them*, European Interagency Security Forum, London, March 2012.

22 Arnaud Dandoy and Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Monclos, "Humanitarian Workers in Peril? Deconstructing the Myth of the New and Growing Threat to Humanitarian Workers", *Global Crime*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2013, pp. 341–358.

looking back at this “*decennium horribilis*”, it is hard to fathom how the present time could ever be viewed as the worst yet for humanitarians.

These remarks are not meant to imply that nothing has changed and that there are no legitimate causes for concern. The growth in absolute numbers of security incidents does have a measurable impact on the perception of security – even if in relative terms the deterioration in humanitarian security is much less obvious. Incidents such as intrusions by armed men in hospitals, attacks on health personnel and looting do occur, for a variety of different reasons. Moreover, it is undeniable that kidnapping, while nothing new, has never appeared to be so widespread, and the interconnections between the perpetrators are indeed truly worrying. However, these specific threats apply only to a limited number of countries and, although negotiating access is certainly a challenge if not well-nigh impossible in some regions of Somalia and Syria, aid workers have never been so numerous and so active at the heart of war zones.

The statistics nonetheless conspire to trigger a discourse of fear, one that “exceptionalizes” humanitarian workers who may find themselves faced with an unprecedented level of threat. Politicization came as a neat and convenient argument to explain these new threats, despite all the limits of the statistics that Fast quite rightly emphasizes. Yet, aid agencies do not operate above and beyond politics, and there is a space for aid agencies and the authorities to negotiate and seek common ground. It is only by acknowledging the reality of the power struggles in which humanitarians find themselves entangled that they will be able to confront the truly complex situations they face. In this regard, principles help little. Indeed, when exploring the role of humanitarian “principles”, the definitions and interpretations of which are much debated,²³ it may be worth considering that deliberate, non-neutral assistance could actually keep humanitarian workers safer. For instance, based on the experience of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders, MSF) in the 1980s, political embedding – be it in Angola, Eritrea or Afghanistan – might have provided more protection than working on all sides of a conflict, as went on to become the norm in the 1990s. Although having recourse to principles – of neutrality and impartiality, for instance – when attempting to dialogue with warring parties can prove useful, in general the adage “principles protect” does need to be challenged.²⁴

At this point, the reader must remember how the “politicization” argument supports the humanitarian organization’s reluctance to expose its internal vulnerabilities, even if these play a fundamental role in the occurrence of security incidents. Here the author, only too aware, enters complicated territory. But she justifies her position convincingly by claiming that the fear of putting the blame on the victim should not dispense an organization from the need to conduct a thorough review of the circumstances behind an incident.

23 Rony Brauman, “Médecins sans Frontières and the ICRC: Matters of Principle”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 94, No. 888, December 2012, pp. 1523–1535.

24 See Michaël Neuman, “Is Medical Care Really Under Fire? A Debate on Humanitarian Security”, MSF UK Opinion and Debate, 19 November 2014, available at: www.msf.org.uk/article/opinion-and-debate-is-medical-care-really-under-fire-a-debate-on-humanitarian-security.

So, if the violence is not new, what is? It seems that if one major evolution in humanitarian security is to be singled out, it is most definitely in the way that security management has been impacted by its “professionalization”. One of the consequences of this evolution has been the patent centralization of security management to the detriment of the autonomy of field staff; another is, as Fast says, the emergence of the “fortified aid compound”. There are a range of factors to explain this professionalization and the spiralling impact of bureaucratic procedures in the realm of humanitarian security. Fast does not say enough about the push factor behind such an evolution, and further research is required to better understand how the humanitarian security sector developed.

If Fast’s central argument is that aid insecurity is often misunderstood and misrepresented, her main message is a call to restore a Solferino-inspired “relational approach”, embodied in the principle of humanity, a reference to history that leads to a seemingly paradoxical situation. While *Aid in Danger* is a constructive appraisal of “the situation is worse than before” discourse, she refers to another “Golden Age” that never really existed.²⁵ Indeed, as much as Solferino is a founding moment of contemporary humanitarianism, is it in fact that pure moment of compassion and relation that Fast refers to?²⁶ I am very doubtful that purity of intents is ever to be found, no more at Solferino than during the Biafra war – another event often invoked in support of a mythical humanitarian history. There is no doubt that, while neglecting the “relational approach” has put humanitarians behind walls, any principled-based approach must be carefully thought through because relying on the principle of humanity alone will not respond to concerns about the safety of humanitarian workers.

The failure of protective and deterrence measures to safeguard aid workers often results in more, rather than less, tough security measures. The tendency is to erect and reinforce the walls, rather than reflect on why they are there. Doubts and controversies about the consequences of normalizing aid security confirm the urgent need for a critical analysis of the drive towards professionalization that is sweeping us along and an examination of the different options available for developing alternatives to the prevailing security model. However, I would not subscribe in full to Fast’s idea that “in these ways, the security agenda has trumped the relational ethos of humanitarianism”,²⁷ not because I support erecting walls, but rather because overly relying on a “relational approach” seems somewhat naive and underestimates the role that political negotiation can play. “Proximity” was, for a long time, MSF’s watchword for security management. As in other organizations, that concept has now been replaced by one of “acceptance”, too often perceived as being equivalent to “being nice”. It is undoubtedly critical for any humanitarian agency to reflect on its relations with all the components of the society in which it intervenes. However, while not ignoring the importance of negotiations with political players, Fast expands little on these processes. Neither

25 See Corinne Chaponnière, *Henry Dunant: La croix d’un homme*, Perrin, Paris, 2010.

26 *Aid in Danger*, pp. 37–45.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

concept – proximity or acceptance – seems to capture the inherently political nature of humanitarian action or the extent to which the security of aid workers actually depends on the aid organization’s capacity to engage with all the different stakeholders in order to reach acceptable compromises. In this regard, Fast’s deconstruction of the humanitarian security discourse is convincing but her proposal to reframe the discussion based on a rather naive reading of history and principles is somewhat tenuous.

However, these paradoxes reveal the extent of the continuing debate on aid security. The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) held a book launch in London on 19 August 2014, which coincided with World Humanitarian Day (WHD). WHD was accompanied by a Twitter hashtag, “#humanitarianhero”, sanctioning the “humanitarian exceptionalism” discourse and putting the fallen humanitarian worker on a pedestal as a victim of belligerent passions and a target of groups who no longer respect either the sanctity of these workers or the humanitarian principles that are supposed to protect them. A ceremony was held at the memorial to “innocent victims” at Westminster Abbey immediately after the ODI event.²⁸ In this context, earnest consideration of Larissa Fast’s arguments is the best way to stimulate a debate that is otherwise not happening, in particular when it comes to internal vulnerabilities or the right to express a critical voice in the face of an inherently flawed dominant narrative on exceptionalism.

28 For a critical analysis of the event, see Eleanor Davey, “Memorialising Humanitarians”, *History & Humanitarianism*, 19 August 2014, available at: <http://aidhistory.wordpress.com/2014/08/19/memorialising-humanitarians/>.