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Intervention at Risk: The Vicious Cycle of Distance and Danger in Mali and Afghanistan

Ruben Andersson and Florian Weigand

In crisis-hit countries, intensive risk management increasingly characterizes the presence of international interveners, with measures ranging from fortified compounds to 'remote programming'. This article investigates the global drive for 'security' from an ethnographic perspective, focusing on Afghanistan and Mali. By deploying the concepts of distance and proximity, the article shows how frontline 'outsourcing' and bunkering have generated an unequal 'risk economy' while distancing interveners from local society in a trend that itself generates novel risks. To conclude, the article asks whether alternative forms of proximity may help to break the vicious cycle of danger and distance at work in today's crisis zones.

Keywords international intervention; security; risk management; remote management; bunkerization; peacekeeping; international organizations; Afghanistan; Mali

Introduction

Travelling through Kabul today is a treacherous experience of navigating through roadblocks, checkpoints and barriers. Fortified compounds punctuate the urban landscape of the Afghan capital, constituting multiple walls not just around military bases, but also around embassies, UN agencies and other international organizations. Kabul is a stark example of the fortified presence of international interveners on display elsewhere in contemporary crisis zones, from Juba in South Sudan to Bamako in Mali. This article will inquire into this trend towards fortification and 'bunkerization' (Duffield 2010, 2012) from an ethnographic perspective, focusing on its broader socio-political corollaries.[1] The new landscape of intervention, we will argue, may on some levels be considered a pragmatic 'risk management' outcome at a time of perceived growing threats to the international presence in crisis zones. However, this trend also carries potent negative consequences on personal, social and political levels, which we will here approach through the twin notions of distance and proximity.

In the following sections, we will look at the crisis/conflict-focused communities of international interveners in Mali and Afghanistan, where fieldwork was carried out in 2014–15. We will first discuss how security risk management procedures have been 'imported' into the worlds of civilian organizations from military and corporate sectors, before showing how these procedures have become *internalized*, creating new market dynamics—an economy of risk—as well as new social relations 'in the field'. We will then outline how dominant risk management strategies have created manifold forms of distance between intervening international organizations and local society. Next, we will show how organizations try to overcome this distance and which measures they apply to construct proximity, albeit of a rather limited kind. By focusing on distancing, we will finally inquire into the larger personal, social and political effects of risk management. We will argue that on a personal level, workers are torn between detachment and resistance, while on the political and societal level, distancing may create new risks, which in turn leads to calls for further distancing, generating a negative risk spiral. To conclude, we suggest that a focus on the *productive* (rather than reactive) nature of risk management strategies in the broadest possible sense—including new distancing mechanisms and remote controls—will throw new light on the shifting terrains of international intervention, as well as on the broader relationship between interveners and intervened-upon populations at a time characterized by the perceived rise in 'global' threats and insecurities.

Contemporary Risk Management: The Background

The trend towards increased security risk management in international operations of all kinds has already led to extensive practitioner debates (see especially Egeland, Harmer, and Stoddard 2011; van Brabant 2000, 2001, 2010). However, this development has not been reflected in a larger academic literature, except in one of its aspects: the growing global market in (in)security. Studies on this market have convincingly shown how security has increasingly been commoditized and privatized by security companies, mercenaries or 'corporate warriors' (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011; Avant 2005; Krahmann 2010; O'Reilly 2010; Singer 2003). O'Reilly (2010) is among the authors who trace this 'state–corporate symbiosis' around security provision back to the 1970s and the corporate sector, specifically the extractive industries. At this time, new outfits (using ex-military personnel) started offering protection 'solutions' for companies active in high-risk regions, especially in Latin American areas prone to the threat of kidnap and ransom. As O'Reilly writes, 'by making this threat manageable, they also made it insurable, forging complementary relationships with specialist insurance providers that remain a hallmark of this industry' (O'Reilly 2010, 185). As this nexus expanded, so did business presence in risky regions. As Duffield has noted, capitalist expansion into unstable areas has in this

context been characterized principally by 'the increasing use and sophistication of private protection' (cited in O'Reilly 2010, 186).

Since this early boom in state–corporate symbiosis, risk mitigation has expanded into non-corporate sectors—and one key area of growth has been the international aid, statebuilding and peacekeeping sectors of concern to us here. Since the end of the Cold War, the Security Council and donor states have pushed for more risky and ambitious UN missions in zones of insecurity, involving higher exposure to threats—a development that has moreover coincided with the sharp expansion of international NGOs in these zones. In these sectors, security risk management has not only been rolled out via private security contractors, as in the corporate example above; it has also gradually been implemented 'from the inside' in order to fulfil the imperative to 'stay and deliver' (Avant 2007).

This internalization of security risk management has in large part been driven by the United Nations. As Avant (2007, 147) notes, since the time of the UN mission to Somalia in 1992, UN officials, aid workers and donors have become increasingly aware of security risks. In 1994 a Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel was passed by the UN General Assembly, yet in coming years the *perception* of increased risks did not go away; instead it took on even more importance after 9/11 and the ensuing 'global war on terror'. In 2003, after the US invasion of Iraq, the deadly bombing of United Nations headquarters in Baghdad soon came to stand as a watershed for UN missions in terms of security (Fast 2014). After this deadly incident, as details emerged of the inadequate risk mitigation procedures in place, the UN Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS) was created, bringing in experts from the military sector (Collinson and Duffield 2013) and so replicating and reproducing many of the features characteristic of the private security industry. As militarized solutions and robust risk management have since become the norm, a 'bunkered' UN presence has come to signal the deployment of an international mission. Observing this bunkering from Juba, South Sudan, Duffield (2010, 456) notes with some irony how 'after decades of war and dislocation, these militarized buildings are among the first material or built expressions of "peace"'.

In non-UN circles, a similar development has taken place. Amid donor pressure on humanitarian and development organizations to be active in insecure zones, aid workers are increasingly facing acute risks to their safety—or at least believe this to be the case in the absence of conclusive data on attacks (Duffield 2012; Collinson and Duffield 2013; Fast 2014). A robust debate in humanitarian circles has centred on how 'integrated' UN responses have dangerously blurred the lines between humanitarian, military and political actors, adding to the risks (see e.g. Pandolfi 2010, 227 for an academic perspective; NRC 2012 for a practitioner view). This debate is still inconclusive, with authors such as Hammond (2008) pointing out that humanitarian principles do not necessarily protect aid workers from targeted attacks. Yet besides these deeply political considerations, in practical terms numerous risk management initiatives have already been rolled out for humanitarians, replicating to some extent those in existence within the

UN and corporate sectors (Avant 2007). In terms of training and support, groups such as the International NGO Safety Organization (INSO), specialist NGOs such as RedR, and the Geneva-based Security Management Initiative all add security expertise to a field that holds considerable ambivalence towards such measures, influenced as it still is by acceptance-based strategies from earlier decades. Here, amid pressure to 'stay and deliver', *managing* risk has become paramount. In many cases, as will be seen, this has meant transferring risk onto ill-prepared individual workers; in others, as Duffield (2012) notes, it has involved (often piecemeal) attempts at building a resilient 'aid worker self', in a stab at security that has developed alongside (rather than in contradiction with) increased physical bunkering and selective withdrawal (Duffield 2012; cf. Comoretto, Crichton, and Albery 2011).[2]

The landscape of international intervention in conflict-torn regions, in sum, is increasingly structured in terms of complex forms of risk management. Here risk is assessed as a function of the likelihood and impact of a threat, with the latter perceived as an external source of danger to operations or staff. The aim—at least from a UNDSS perspective—is to reduce vulnerability so that only 'residual risk' remains. For UN agencies, missions and NGOs alike, risk management is part of a duty of care towards employees, while at the same time fulfilling the stringent demands of insurers and assuaging fears 'back home' that expatriate citizens may be targeted in faraway crises and conflicts.

As Duffield (2012, 478) pithily puts the key development since the 1990s: 'The apparent expansion of the aid industry has witnessed a simultaneous social, intellectual and emotional withdrawal—a growing *remoteness*—of international aid workers from the societies in which they work.' In short, it is this 'interventionist's dilemma'—that is, a wish for proximity and a drive for engagement in insecure regions, combined with increasing fortification and even withdrawal from these regions—that this article will explore in some ethnographic detail. Building on the rather limited literature on this phenomenon to date (especially Avant 2007; Fast 2014; Duffield 2010, 2012; Collinson and Duffield 2013; Smirl 2015), the next section will explore the specific distancing mechanisms used in both Afghanistan and Mali, before we consider attempts at retaining proximity by 'remote control' in these perceived high-risk settings. We will show how a material and spatial take on the day-to-day realities of intervention may help us understand the negative distancing dynamics at play in many crisis zones today—as well as potential openings to genuine proximity towards local society.

Distancing: Mechanisms and Rationales

As we set out to conduct fieldwork among international interveners in Bamako and Kabul, we soon came to identify mechanisms that drive distancing, and the following sections will delineate these. We argue that the risk management strategies of international organizations in conflict-torn settings tend to create

distance from the local population on multiple and overlapping levels—social, geographical, physical, temporal or concerning mobility—as will be seen in the following examples, beginning with Afghanistan and our experience of negotiating Kabul's complex security environment in 2014–15.

Afghanistan: Life in the 'Kabubble'

Afghanistan is often described as a country that has been at war for decades. But even though violence certainly has been a prevailing characteristic, its scale and target have changed constantly over the years. After the Taliban government was toppled in 2001 and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established, the number of foreign nationals in Afghanistan and particularly Kabul increased massively. Not only soldiers from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states were deployed to Afghanistan but with the sudden influx of aid many foreign civilians also came to work in the booming humanitarian and development sectors (see ICG 2011; Tadjbakhsh and Schoiswohl 2008 on the scale of foreign funding). However, attacks on aid workers remained on a low scale throughout most of the early 2000s. Gradually the perception of risk started changing around 2008 in response to highly visible attacks on civilian compounds hosting predominantly foreigners, such as the attacks on the luxurious Serena Hotel in January 2008 and on the Indian Embassy in July 2008. The attacks on foreign civilians reached a new peak in 2011 with the attack on the UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan) compound in Mazar-e-Sharif in April 2011; the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul in June 2011; the British Council in August 2011; and on the US Embassy in September 2011. The image of Afghanistan as a dangerous place for foreign civilians was maintained in subsequent years, not least after the attack on the restaurant Taverna du Leban in Kabul in January 2014, one of the most popular hangouts of foreigners in the city, and another attack on the heavily fortified Serena Hotel in March 2014.

When we returned to Kabul in summer 2014 not much had changed from our previous visits between 2011 and 2013. Stepping out of Kabul International Airport, one gets onto the first parking lot. It looks very modern but is almost always entirely empty as most vehicles, for security reasons, are not allowed to park that close to the airport. Walking through a small gate one reaches the second parking lot, which is for cars with special permits. This is the place where most foreigners are picked up. The drivers wait in one of the numerous armoured 4x4 Toyota Land Cruisers. Many of the cars are white and marked with a UN logo, but there are also cars from embassies as well as development and humanitarian organizations, many of them unmarked, without visible logos and often even without blue, red or green number plates, which could indicate their international affiliation. Indeed, the drivers of cars with diplomatic red number plates usually drive without visible plates, storing these inside and only using them at checkpoints. One has to cross a small street and walk through a building to reach

the third parking lot. Any car can get here after going through numerous and time-consuming security checks. It is by far the most crowded of the three. Again Toyota cars are waiting here, but now Toyota Corollas in multiple colours and of old models dominate the picture. This is the place where most Afghans who arrive at the airport get picked up.

But the airport is not the place where the separation and the systematic distancing of internationals from Afghan society ends. It is just the beginning. Foreigners in Kabul often refer to this phenomenon of social distancing as the 'Kabubble'. The Kabubble describes the social life of foreigners from mostly Western countries who live in Afghanistan. It is not one distinct group of people but rather consists of different overlapping social networks. Life in the Kabubble offers most Western comforts, including big parties, movie nights, salsa classes and opportunities for sports such as football or yoga at embassies or international organizations. Even though some Afghans are part of this bubble, it is very distant from the social sphere of most locals.

Certainly 'expat' bubbles exist in almost any country around the world, yet in the Afghan case the 'Kabubble' is clearly part of what Duffield (2010) has termed the 'international aid archipelago', in which first world comforts are recreated behind high walls in select 'third world' city spaces. Social distance is here underpinned by both geographical and physical distancing. Indeed, most foreigners in Afghanistan live in Kabul (or, in some cases, other major cities such as Mazar-e-Sharif)—thus staying clear of rural areas, which are considered to be too insecure to live or work in. However, even within Kabul the distance between foreigners and Afghans is enormous as security measures separate the Kabubble physically from the rest of the city and wider society. While there is no Baghdad-style 'green zone' in Kabul and foreigners live in all parts of the city, many of them can be found in the embassy quarter Shash Darak, in areas close to the airport as well as in more residential areas such as Taimani and Wazir Akbar Khan. Employees of most international organizations have to live in designated compounds or guesthouses. These are protected physically by high walls, barbed wire, armoured gates and guards. For example, visitors of embassies and UN compounds often have to get through at least two or three gates protected by armed guards. The more exposed and hence dangerous outer gates are usually staffed by Afghans whereas foreign security contractors or UN Gurkha soldiers[3] often guard the inner ones. Development and humanitarian organizations often do not arm their guards but almost certainly wall themselves up. To get in, one needs the right kind of ID or a direct friend or colleague acting as a sponsor inside. It is these physical measures that in the first instance separate the Kabubble from most Afghans.

The distancing is further reinforced by temporal mechanisms. Most foreign employees of international organizations only spend a short period in the country. The international contracts for Afghanistan are usually shorter than for other countries and most organizations grant their foreign employees additional holidays every six to eight weeks. This 'Rest and Recuperation'

(R&R) or 'Compensated Time Off' (CTO) routine is meant to enable recovery when working in 'high risk' countries. But as the next break is always only a few weeks away, this arrangement also makes it more difficult to 'settle in' and actually live in Afghanistan.

In addition, for security reasons, international organizations heavily restrict the movement of employees, who are usually only allowed to go to certain 'white-listed' places. Since the attack on the Taverna du Liban in 2014 the lists of most organizations no longer even include restaurants. And as the restrictions were tightened further in the context of the election period in 2014 the majority of UN employees are only allowed to visit fortified UN and embassy compounds in their spare time. Similarly, the employees of many embassies can only visit other embassies, UN compounds or the international military HQ. This does not only separate them from the Afghans but also from foreigners working for local or international NGOs (INGOs) and hence splits the Kabubble. Conversely, an employee of an INGO told us that she was no longer allowed to go to any 'high profile' locations, including UN compounds. For example, one of the largest UN compounds in Kabul, the UN Office Complex in Afghanistan (UNOCA), is not only located on Jalalabad Road, where attacks happen frequently, but indeed it is also highly visible because of the physical security measures surrounding it. Further-more, most international organizations have a no-walking policy in Kabul. So people have to drive (to the few locations they are allowed to visit), often in armoured vehicles, and cannot set a foot out of their 'walled car' before reaching the safety of their walled destination. When caught breaking these rules not only the foreigner but also the Afghan driver may lose their job. And some organizations, such as many embassies, only allow their international staff to move when accompanied by an armed 'Close Protection Team' (CPT). This once again increases the visibility and also restricts movement further as it requires the 'protected person' to leave exactly at the time the CPT has been told to do so.

In addition, many organizations have a curfew for their international staff, not allowing movement in the city between 11 and 12pm to around 6am. After large-scale attacks or in times of perceived particularly high risk, additional measures are also applied. A common procedure is lock-downs, forcing employees to stay at home while often not even being allowed any visitors. In November 2014, at the time of frequent attacks in Kabul, a friend of ours who works for a humanitarian INGO was 'imprisoned' at home for weeks—for security reasons. The rationale of these lock-downs is difficult to understand for most people in Kabul as it does not reduce the perceived vulnerability but rather enhances it as it creates easy targets and causes detachment, making it increasingly difficult to judge the situation accurately.

Many foreigners in Kabul 'explain the inexplicable' of how risk management is conducted by referring to a mix of insurance interests, militarization of security, laziness and a lack of local understanding among their security managers. Indeed, international organizations are becoming increasingly risk-averse as they are afraid of their image, donor pressure and potential lawsuits. Distancing

international staff from the local context provides the organization—rather than its employees—with the illusion of security. Moreover, human resources personnel have told us in discussion that security managers are often hired because of their experience in the military, not because of their knowledge of Afghanistan. Hence, they do not have the training or experience to analyse the context-specific risks in a detailed way, to communicate these risks appropriately and to treat civilian staff in a civilian way. They focus on what they know: security through distance. In addition, separation makes risk management much easier since, by locking people up, one does not actually have to analyse the risks for different people at different locations, saving a lot of time.

For instance, an employee of an UN agency told us how all of their security managers decided to lock the foreign staff up at home and have a vodka-drinking competition together on a Friday evening. On Friday evenings foreign staff usually want to visit people and attend parties, yet security managers have no organizational incentive to enable movement, as this case highlights. In addition, it indicates that these managers lack the ability to analyse and communicate risks, instead only imposing a lock-down to 'ensure security'. Finally, the fact that all of them got drunk together indicates a complete lack of awareness or the absence of any sense of responsibility as it is specifically on Friday evenings that attacks tend to happen.

Mali: Land of Distant Peace

'May the last person to leave Afghanistan turn off the lights.' So said a T-shirt of a bulky male passenger—presumably a private security contractor—at Bamako's airport as we were leaving the country in June 2014. Indeed, the links between Mali and Afghanistan have been drawn on many levels ever since full-blown conflict hit Mali's north in 2012: in military terms, as regards the presence of parallel counterterror operations; in policy and media representations, as in the moniker 'Africa's Afghanistan' that began to be circulated as Mali's conflict unfolded that year; and even in terms of manpower, with some Western soldiers being redeployed in this new theatre as Afghanistan's ISAF mission was winding down.[4] There is a further connection, too, of central concern to us here: the application to Mali of a risk management template very much like that of Afghanistan.

In hindsight, this template may seem quite sensible. In early January 2015, the UN undersecretary-general for peacekeeping summed up a dreadful year in Mali to the Security Council with these words: 'No other mission in contemporary times has been so costly in terms of bloodshed.' By this time, UN soldiers faced almost daily assaults by improvised explosive devices, ambushes and suicide attacks.[5] Yet the backstory to the mounting dangers reveals a complex and highly unequal 'risk economy' that the following pages will seek to unpack.

Unlike Afghanistan, Mali has a UN peacekeeping mission whose history it is worth briefly delineating.[6] As the Gaddafi regime in Libya fell following NATO

bombings in 2011, Tuareg (Tamachek) fighters resident there made their way back to their homeland in northern Mali, rekindling the rumbling conflict between this region and the distant southern capital of Bamako. After initial attacks in January 2012, the separatists of MNLA (Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad)—joining forces with jihadist groups—eventually took over northern Mali, making use of the hiatus created by a coup d'état in Bamako that March. As emboldened jihadists seemed to be threatening the capital in January 2013, the French military intervened on the request (however forced) of the interim Malian president.[7] As the French 'Operation Serval' routed the armed groups, a West African military mission (AFISMA, or the 'African-led International Support Mission to Mali') was put in place and by mid-2013 incorporated into a new UN 'Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali' (MINUSMA), established not least thanks to strong French backing at the Security Council with a view to winding down the country's own forces. It was in this context that we arrived in Mali in May 2014 for research in Bamako, at a time when tensions were yet again to flare into the open.

Like Kabul, Bamako appeared very much the same as on our previous visits in 2001 and 2010–11; the war had after all taken place much further north, leaving the capital virtually untouched. Yet soon enough, some subtle and not so subtle changes were becoming evident as we navigated the capital's new landscape of international intervention.

First of all, there was a striking social distance between Bamako's population and the 'expatriate' community, unlike in earlier periods when more locally anchored development aid groups had dominated the city's international scene. Many of the new expat workers had flown in from other crises, and thus arrived in this nominally 'post-conflict' setting with a rather different set of expectations and instructions. And as in Kabul, one major concern was perceived insecurity owing to potential terrorist attacks. In response to this risk, non-UN actors—entering in large numbers as aid money had started flowing back into Mali following the French intervention and democratic elections—had geared their operations towards the unseen dangers. Some NGOs in Bamako had situated their offices close to easy evacuation routes should the worst happen. One large French aid organization had a map on its wall showing 'no-go zones' where staff were not allowed to stop after 6pm; this included two areas in town, plus anything beyond the city limits. 'Stay in the Radisson', one officer formerly involved in the EU military training mission in Mali (EUTM) had advised us before travelling to Bamako. 'It's the only hotel with armed guards.' To enforce distance, as in Kabul, private security had been employed in large numbers not only at the Radisson but at virtually all international offices including embassies, donor organizations and NGOs. Often these clusters of security guards were contracted from the same companies, bringing a very selective source of employment to Bamako's frail economy.

Distance was also enforced via high protective walls and barriers, again as in Kabul or indeed elsewhere in the international 'archipelago' of intervention. As it was set up in mid-2013, MINUSMA had commandeered the five-star Hotel de

l'Amitié in central Bamako. The hotel, whose pool had on our earlier visits to Mali been a favoured haunt of the local elite, was now off limits behind its cement vehicle barriers, curls of razor wire and tanks manned by armed blue helmets. As UN staff drove up to the gates at lunchtime in their white four-wheel drives, they clogged up the busy road outside, frustrating local drivers and adding to the sense of separation. Elsewhere in the capital, the hotel housing EUTM was now surrounded by fenced-in walkways and barriers; still, some military officers arriving fresh from Afghanistan complained that protection was too basic compared with Kabul. Yet the paragon of physical distance was the French Embassy, which had been clad with anti-blast, soil-filled metal mesh containers jutting out onto the pavements, blocking traffic and making any movement in and out of the complex very cumbersome. The so-called Hesco bastions (first used around military installations in Afghanistan), along with the UN tanks and barriers, signalled a new distance between intervener and local host in a formerly safe country with a large development-oriented international presence.

Temporal mechanisms were, as in Kabul, adding to the sense of distance, albeit on a lesser scale, with short durations and frequent breaks punctuating expatriate life, not least at the UN. Funding and project length also played an important role in this regard: military trainers at EUTM, for instance, complained in interview about the short-term nature of funding, minimizing prolonged engagement with the ailing Malian security forces.

Mobility was a further obstacle to proximity. Few UN staff used local taxis; instead, a slow-moving shuttle bus took staff to headquarters each morning. Other workers simply used the standard white four-wheel drives, recreating the international 'bubble' within the vehicle itself. Some UN employees, aware of potential resentment among taxi drivers, toyed with the idea of using a pool of local vehicles for transport. This plan soon ran into problems, however, owing to administrative as well as risk management concerns. Among non-UN aid staff, similar procedures were in place. Intricate rules enforced by in-house security officers governed daily life for many workers: this involved curfews and non-walking policies for certain areas, the exclusive use of designated drivers, and set home times. The low actual risk of an attack taking place in Bamako was almost beside the point, as some such workers acknowledged. Instead, international organizations' delineation of a specific set of rules around mobility simply circumscribed their *liability*, beyond which workers could always venture on their own—at their own risk. As in Kabul, risk was transferred to individual staff members as the organization secured its own reach, reputation and duty of care obligations.

Yet the largest form of distancing in Bamako was geographical. To Mali's government, the very decision to locate the UN headquarters in the capital was a provocation as it indicated the state's failure to manage its own affairs. To the UN, however, the reason behind a Bamako base was simple: insecurity in the war-scarred north—that is, precisely the insecurity it was there to prevent. The UN agencies and peacekeepers had been slow to deploy up north; and as

they did so, the protective measures there were even starker than in the capital. In the towns of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal, peacekeepers and civilian UN staff lurked behind high walls, from where—or so Malians complained during field interviews—they all too rarely emerged to keep the people safe from attacks by either rebels, stray jihadists or the Malian armed forces.[8] A similar trend, as will be seen, also hampered the aid sector as it set up operations in Mali's north, contributing to the 'integrated' programming of the UN as well as to donor priorities for the region.

Overcoming Distance? Remote Control and the Illusion of Proximity

As UN and NGO staff in Bamako and Kabul were well aware, bunkering and partial withdrawal from 'the field' has led to significant gaps in the international presence across Malian and Afghan territory. To deal with this predicament, agencies have strived to overcome distance through remote controls: that is, by subcontracting and technologizing their missions. Such measures allow workers and organizations to keep hold of a semblance of proximity—yet this is an illusion, as the new methods usually fail to bridge the growing gap between interveners and local populations, while creating further social divisions within the missions.

Afghanistan: 'No Trees in the Settlement'

Even though the funding for development and humanitarian projects was decreasing, the international presence in Afghanistan and particularly Kabul remained high in spring 2015. As the international Resolute Support (RS) mission took over from ISAF in January 2015, it reduced the number of military camps in rural areas, yet it has continued training the Afghan National Security Forces (mirroring the EUTM mission in Mali). In addition, a US combat mission remains in place, which uses drones and other military devices such as surveillance technology to ensure proximity without risks. Drone strikes are commonly conducted in the rural border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are geographically distant and challenging to access.

Besides such technological means of remote control in the military sphere, international civilian actors in Afghanistan also rely on *social* means to similar effect. As in many other countries, most governmental organizations and the UN subcontract the implementation of projects to international and local NGOs. In Afghanistan, additionally, for security reasons, only the local staff of these organizations are then involved in implementing and monitoring the projects in rural areas. However, this social form of remote control still puts people at risk. Even though Afghan workers may be less of a target in some cases, for them access is often dangerous as well because they are perceived as supporting foreign actors and interests. Particularly in the 'grey' zones that are not clearly

controlled either by the government nor by armed opposition groups, attacks on Afghan civilians working for development or humanitarian organizations are common.

Some INGOs allow their international employees to visit projects in the countryside infrequently if the area is considered to be safe. But there are many foreigners working for INGOs in Kabul who have not seen any rural part of the country. Similarly, many international staff in the funding organizations barely have a chance to see how rural projects are implemented. An employee of an international organization in Kabul summarized the problem:

> I recently had to write a report on the impact of a storm on informal settlements in one of Afghanistan's eastern provinces. I misunderstood my counterpart on the phone and wrote that tents had been damaged due to the lack of trees in that particular part of the settlement. In the revision process, I was told that there were no trees in the entire settlement. My requests for missions were either not approved or were cancelled. How am I supposed to write about these issues if I have no idea what it actually looks like there? Why am I here if I can't see the projects I am working on?[9]

This example illustrates the frustration of many foreign employees who have to adjust to the imposed distance to the local context.

Mali: A 'Giant with Clay Feet'

In Mali, the vast separation between Bamako headquarters and northern insecure zones was a constant source of worry among expat workers. For instance, one of many European peacekeepers critical of MINUSMA called it 'a giant with a bloated head and clay feet': by this he meant that a large bureaucratic base had been set up in Bamako while the limited military presence up north was in the hands of inept commanders and ill-equipped soldiers from African countries. The idea here was that such regional forces would be more prepared to shoulder risks while ensuring security for Malians. Yet this plan proved extremely difficult to implement. Besides the lack of political progress over Mali's crisis, MINUSMA also faced problems of its own, including its complicated mandate alongside the French counterterrorism operations—but also significant logistical problems of supplies for northern troops.[10] The frontline African soldiers had no armoured cars, scant protection and little preparation for the dangers ahead; unsurprisingly, they would also end up being the largest takers of casualties as attacks against the UN kept mounting during 2014–15. By the end of February 2015, there were 46 dead in the mission; five were Asian and 41 were African, with 18 of these from one single country—Chad, whose soldiers manned both the French counterterrorism frontline and the riskiest regions covered by MINUSMA.[11]

Meanwhile, the sparse Western forces deployed as part of MINUSMA's intelligence capacity up north had rather different working conditions. Unlike their African peacekeeping colleagues, the Dutch and Swedish soldiers there were extremely well trained and well equipped; they used armoured vehicles as

well as helicopters and surveillance drones, scanning remote desert areas for the presence of elusive jihadist fighters. The larger French counterterrorism operation Barkhane was similarly technologized, for instance via US Air Force Reaper reconnaissance drones. Amid such forms of remote control, the actual footprint on the ground remained limited to brief anti-terrorism incursions of the French military and their Chadian helpers, echoing the threat-based proximity that remained in Afghanistan.

Any 'softer functions' were by contrast handled at arm's length. By 2014 a clear division of labour was present not just in peacekeeping but also in aid, as local and 'regional' African workers almost exclusively manned the operations of NGOs and UN agencies in the north.[12] This division of labour expanded on an arrangement existing a few years before the 2012 conflict, as international staff had increasingly been withdrawn from the north because of the security risks (Bergamaschi 2014, 354). Yet while it was true that jihadists had kidnapped Westerners in the past decade, killing some of them, Malian staff were also at risk of attacks, as both local and international aid workers emphasized to us in interview. Even if no spectacular murders of Malians had yet taken place, four Malians working for the International Committee of the Red Cross had been kidnapped in early 2014, before eventually being liberated by French forces; and in May 2014, two Malians working for an INGO were killed as their vehicle was blown up.[13]

For the aid world, as in the military sector, distance to the field could be overcome through a combination of high technology and bureaucratic procedures. On the technological side, remote mapping, sensing and data-gathering have come to inform humanitarian response programmes in the region (OCHA 2014). As for bureaucracy, 'remote management' techniques—previously applied in settings such as Somalia—have enabled project managers in Bamako to check in on partner organizations or lower-ranking employees in the field via email, phone or 'flash visits' (Collinson and Duffield 2013). In this way the northern danger zone remains at a safe distance, yet comfortably within virtual reach.

In private, aid managers in Bamako complained about the limitations of remote management, and donors were even more scathing as project objectives were being left unfulfilled. Among beneficiaries and local organizations, accusations flew about frittered-away assistance as well-placed 'partners' in the north pocketed large sums and supplies.[14] A further problem, voiced by some interviewees, was that remotely managed partners may be involved with parties to the conflict—a problem that became increasingly hard to control as visits from Bamako HQ were limited to occasional flash visits.

The Illusion of Proximity

As Collinson and Duffield (2013, 8) note, 'The increasing use of remote technologies as a means of reducing risk is an attractive proposition as it appears to solve many problems, including meeting aid agencies' duty of care

obligations, reducing field costs and limiting physical exposure while simulating the experience of proximity'. Yet, as they go on to remark:

> 'Presence' does not always equate with proximity: many international aid organizations and personnel may be physically or institutionally present, but at the same time essentially remote from their client populations and, indeed, from their own national and local employees … many of the hazards that affect international aid engagement in insecure or conflict-affected environments stem from the basic conundrum of aid organizations seeking, maintaining or expanding their presence while simultaneously limiting key aspects of their proximity so as to reduce or minimize the exposure of international staff to security risks.

It should be clear that, in both Mali and Afghanistan, remote controls have largely failed to generate any meaningful 'proximity'. Instead, they have been productive in another sense, as they have fomented an unequal 'risk economy' (Shaw 2005) in which risk has been transferred to actors who are often less well equipped to deal with them (see Shaw 2005; Friedrichs and Friesendorf 2009 on similar processes in Iraq). The French and Americans, by spectacularly fortifying their bases or missions, have transferred risk to the 'softer' targets of the UN; and as the UN bunkers up, risks are unevenly distributed too, away from powerful Western contingents towards national or regional troops, as seen among African soldiers in northern Mali. This is similarly the case in Afghanistan, where Afghan forces are a much more frequent target than the international forces. As UN agencies and NGOs outsource their programmes or use exclusively local or 'regional' staff, risks are similarly transferred down the social hierarchy. Finally, as all actors become increasingly risk-averse and fearful of venturing outside their compounds, risks to local populations increase, as does a general sense of insecurity. Distancing has here generated negative effects on several interlinked levels, as the next section will show in some detail.

Distancing: The Consequences

In this final section, we will explore the consequences of distancing on personal, social and political levels. Distancing, and the risk economy it entails, involves deepening social divides between 'expat' staff and local or regional employees; between practitioners and beneficiaries; and between internationals and their national counterparts. As such divides grow, new risks are also generated, including the risk of wider political blowback, as will be seen in the concluding notes to the section.

Personal Level: Detachment, Resistance and Burnout

Our observation is that people working for international organizations in Mali and Afghanistan either play according to the rules and become increasingly detached from local society or else resist the security regime to avoid detachment. In

addition, many people express a feeling of burning out, especially in the 'high-risk' and bunkered environment of Kabul.

A consequence of the constructed distance is a detached behaviour among many employees of international organizations. Some people become increasingly insecure or even paranoid the longer they are in the country. Armoured cars, armed guards and the other usual 'security' measures ironically often construct a perception of constant insecurity on the personal level. These measure make many people more afraid, particularly when the separation strategy is not balanced by in-depth analysis and communication of the actual threats and risks. And even if people are rationally aware that the risk is low, the constant exposure to 'security' influences their perceptions. One risk manager of an international organization in Mazar-e-Sharif, in the comparatively quiet north of Afghanistan, explained to us that it made a big difference if employees flew straight to Mazar-e-Sharif or travelled via Kabul: 'In Mazar-e-Sharif we also allow the expats to walk. But people who spent a few days in the main office in Kabul before coming here are often too scared to do so and sometimes ask why we were not using armoured cars up here.'

But there are also people who appear to be enjoying the attention and perceived status that goes along with the separation from the rest of society through armoured cars and guns. On a more pragmatic level, raising 'security concerns' certainly is the easiest and most-used excuse for not attending a meeting in Kabul. Furthermore, due to the lack of exposure to the local context, some people behave as if they were in their home country to the extent that it does not conflict with the risk management strategy. Some foreigners do not even lightly adapt to the Afghan culture, for example in terms of what kind of clothes to wear, reinforcing the image of 'harmful' Western culture, which ultimately may generate novel risks.

In Bamako, similarly, risk perception influenced daily life among the international workers we met in the course of research. For instance, security officials mentioned that, in UN security meetings involving NGOs, expat staff attending were considerably more concerned about any dangers in the capital—including robberies—than about the much higher risks to their local staff up north. The sense of separation from the 'field', as in Kabul's more extreme bunkered world, also meant that a bubble was being created in which one could behave as if in one's home country. Bamako has seen its once-famous 'party scene' return in an edgier guise as the new expat communities from the UN, humanitarian and military worlds have started mingling in the capital's nightclubs. This scene has alienated many locals, with frequent complaints about the drinking, dining and also prostitution that has come to define their experience of the international presence.

But some people also show resistance to risk management procedures and try to overcome the constructed distance. Several people known by us who work for international organizations in Kabul were fed up with the imposed separation from the local context, and wanted to finally see the country they were working in. They developed sophisticated strategies to get out of their compound and, for

example, joined us on trips in the city or the countryside. They stepped out of their highly protected bubble, roamed in old non-armoured Toyota Corollas and walked around in Kabul without any protection. However, this requires a lot of courage. Not only do these people risk their jobs but they also have to overcome the atmosphere of constant life-threatening danger constructed by the security regime. Conversely, in Mali some international workers took evident pride in their daring, for instance in actively seeking to go north. Others circumvented strict NGO rules in Bamako, for instance in bending the restriction of transport to the use of a single NGO-provided driver and car, or by visiting Bamako's nightlife areas (commonly curfewed) by foot after dark. One aid worker told us about feeling 'like a teenager again' as she headed back past the doorman at her NGO's residence too late at night; as in Kabul, she and others of her disposition also actively sought to negotiate bureaucratic obstacles to venture north on occasions. All these attempts indicate ways of trying to escape the straightjacket of security management—that is, of getting 'closer' to ground-level realities instead of removing oneself from them. Such attempts are by their nature only ever partially successful, as noted in other aid settings (Smirl 2015). Amid mounting insecurity in both Mali and Afghanistan—and as Bamako was finally hit by a terrorist attack targeting a Western-frequented nightclub in March 2015—such efforts were also bound to get much more difficult, with curfews and no-go areas strictly enforced. However, attempts at 'reaching out' beyond the bubble do point towards alternative modes of engagement of the kind envisioned by Fast (2014) and others, as will be briefly touched on in the conclusion below.

Meanwhile, a surprisingly large number of employees of international organizations, not least in Kabul, perceive themselves to be *burning out*. When having more personal conversations with them, topics such as stress, depression and mental health in general come up very frequently. This perception is supported by studies on staff welfare of international organizations in conflict-torn spaces. For example, the UN refugee agency reports in a 2013 study that 57 per cent of its staff feel sad, unhappy or 'empty', 50 per cent face tiredness and a loss of energy and 47 per cent have sleeping difficulties (UNHCR 2013, 56). The report concludes that 'although not diagnostic, survey respondents endorsed symptoms typically associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression at high rates' (UNHCR 2013, 56). Even though these high rates are certainly not only linked to distancing, many interviewees in Kabul at least partly blame the risk management strategies for the personal problems they are facing: since there are few opportunities for leaving the house, they say, they work all day and often late into the night. But at the same time they feel distant because they cannot see the impact of their work as they are not allowed to visit the projects. The distance from local social life—to the extent that even visiting Afghan colleagues and their families is forbidden—and the often limited access even to the social networks of the 'Kabubble', apart from immediate colleagues, does not help to balance these challenges.

Political and Societal Level: The Stirring of Resentment

Distancing, and the risk economy through which it is produced, causes problems on political and societal levels as well. First, it is leading to clear information gaps in precisely the areas of deepest concern to interveners. While this may be 'beneficial' insofar as it entails stricter control of information flows by militaries (Shaw 2005), it also has negative consequences for interveners by fuelling a vicious cycle of failing to understand the local context, which in turn results in stricter security measures and further distancing. This is seen not least in northern Mali, whose complex constellation of factions and allegiances has remained opaque to the international interveners despite efforts at intelligence gathering. In this complex field, internationals have tended to compensate for their lack of anchoring in the local milieu via bunkering and remote controls— thus locking themselves out of deeper engagement while increasing opacity even further.

Second, the risk economy generates some distinctly negative security dynamics. As Friedrichs and Friesendorf (2009, 47) noted in post-invasion Iraq, aid organizations are 'damned if they do and damned if they don't' as the private security market extends its reach; without private protection they are now supreme 'soft targets', yet by using it they send 'a signal that somebody in the organization is important enough to be kidnapped or killed'. Besides close protection and bunkering, the social divisions of labour and the concomitant distancing from 'the field' delineated above serve a very similar function as insurgents know that an attack against scarce Western targets will serve as spectacular 'propaganda of the deed', spreading fear through global audiences and media outlets at the click of a button (Bolt 2012).

Third, distancing feeds local anger. In our interviews, national staff often expressed resentment towards the much better-paid, fully insured yet risk-averse foreigners who managed them. Such complaints indicated an awareness of how risk-based divisions also save money: in Mali, nationals were vastly cheaper to hire and much easier to fire, with few if any insurance obligations should the worst happen.[15] While increased distancing has thus generated organizational dividends, in the form of savings and less media attention should staff be attacked, it has also entailed a deepening divide between categories of staff, justified by recourse to security risk. For instance, many national employees of international organizations have been kidnapped or killed in Afghanistan in recent years. But such cases are often not even published in the Afghan media— let alone international outlets. These points square with Fast's (2014) conclusions that international agencies' focus on managing *external threats* has led to their neglect of their own *internal vulnerabilities*, as their organizational modes impact upon local perceptions (see also Duffield 2012, 478 on the 'crisis of consent' in aid).

Staff concerns are but one example of how negative local perceptions of interveners take hold as distance grows. Amid lack of oversight over peace-keeping and aid in Mali's north, reports about predatory behaviour by African

troops have hit the image of the international interveners, along with widespread concerns over the lack of genuine security provision or the distribution of assistance, as mentioned above (see Tham Lindell and Nilsson 2014 on reports of attacks on local communities by peacekeepers bereft of resources). Another aspect of negative perceptions concerns how foreigners, as they become increasingly detached, forget or do not care about culturally appropriate behaviour. In Kabul, besides the clothing issues mentioned above, foreigners sometimes get driven home drunk after a party and may even throw up in the car. Even if the drivers of international organizations may be very tolerant and experienced in handling foreigners, such behaviour does not help to sustain an image of useful international organizations, particularly in a city such as Kabul where rumours spread quickly. Similar complaints were also being voiced in Mali, as already discussed briefly above.

The consequences of growing local resentment have been dire, particularly for the mission in Mali. Large protests against the French and UN presence took place in May 2014 in Bamako and Gao, putting the international presence in peril. In early 2015 such protests were yet again staged, and three people were killed outside a MINUSMA compound in Gao. By attempting to avoid security risks and getting pulled into the lingering conflict, the UN had by this time been drawn right into it, as resentment at its perceived inaction in the field had come back to haunt it.[16]

Conclusions

The above sections have delineated how security and risk management concerns have contributed to the re-wiring and re-mapping of international interventions in fields as diverse (yet deeply entangled) as humanitarian aid, development assistance and peacekeeping. We have noted the counterproductive effects of an official focus on 'external' security risks, and how this focus may contribute to further vulnerabilities and novel risks, thus reinforcing points made in studies by Fast (2014), Duffield (2010) and Shaw (2005). We have noted how attempts to enforce distance yet to remain in control 'remotely' have not led to meaningful proximity—rather, it has generated an often counterproductive 'risk economy' in which novel risks, separations and resentments are stirred. This economy crucially depends on *risk transfers*: as powerful and rich actors seek to protect their personnel and installations, others are left exposed—feeding into a vicious cycle of further security arrangements, which in turn makes the provision of genuinely public or 'human' security all the more difficult. Finally, we have noted how the withdrawal remains selective, as counter-terrorist and intelligence functions remain present on field level—adding a potentially poisonous 'presence' to the larger 'absence' of softer policing, aid and political sectors. Distance here feeds further distance, and so contributes to re-mapping intervention into remote danger zones that become ever more intractable and impossible to enter.

In these ways—from the development of a risk economy to the re-mapping of remoteness and the retention of a violent, poisonous presence—risk and insecurity, usually seen as wholly negative in character, are in fact proving highly *productive* of new realities, economies and relationships. To put this key point in the spatial language of this article, the various forms of distance we have shown in Afghanistan and Mali necessarily co-exist with, and help produce, new 'proximities'. Most important, growing distance between international interveners and locals has entailed increased rapprochement among the internationals themselves, and their often conflictive sectors. Security staff and procedures have gone 'in-house', or else have tied NGOs to corporate or nonprofit security providers; insecurity 'outside the gates' has paradoxically tied humanitarians closer to the UN system through security briefings and updates; and the creation of social 'bubbles' has achieved new levels of informal connection among aid, development, political and security professionals. With this in mind, an ethnographic focus on the seemingly simple fact of distance that we have proposed here may reveal how the politics of humanitarian and UN 'integration' plays out in practice. (In)security here emerges as a key driver of such integration, much as O'Reilly (2010) has shown as regards the 'state–corporate symbiosis' on security.

Is there a different way? Some humanitarian groups have certainly sought to move beyond the security risk management straightjacket. To some extent they have done so by reviving old acceptance-based strategies combined with political savviness and professional risk awareness. In addition, some humanitarian organizations have realized the benefits of information exchange despite being competitors in the same market. In Afghanistan, representatives of many humanitarian organizations meet regularly as the 'Project Support Group' to talk about their experiences in terms of access and risk management. In a similar manner, people take security into their own hands, for instance by channelling information via social media where the borders dividing locals from foreigners are not as distinct. This is the case with the initiative 'Kabul Security Now' on Facebook, which allows each of the almost 25,000 members (July 2015) to exchange real-time security updates. These more low-key forms of risk awareness are consciously trying to retain a sense of local proximity while building ever-closer networks among peers.

To conclude, we are calling for practitioners and scholars to attend in a fine-grained manner to the new spatial, personal and socio-political distances that have been produced in the unequal market in security and its transfer-based risk economy. By investigating the concrete mechanisms and materialities through which 'security' is enacted, we may come to spot glimpses of a different approach in which novel, non-violent 'proximities' may be generated. Further studies are needed to flesh out both entrenched negative dynamics and positive openings in a range of comparative settings—an important task indeed at a time when ever-larger parts of the world are officially out of bounds for international visitors. By focusing on the interplay between distance and proximity, we have argued that such studies need to take into account the interlinked dynamics of risk on political, economic, geographical and psychological levels. In this manner,

the seemingly clear-cut and prosaic issue of risk management may provide a privileged methodological and ethnographic window onto much broader developments in international interventions in contemporary crisis zones, as well as onto the shifting relationship between interveners and intervened-upon in a world characterized by chronic crises and deepening global divides.

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Notes

1   The material presented here builds on our larger research projects at LSE. For Ruben Andersson, this has involved fieldwork in Mali in May–June 2014 (building on research visits

to pre-conflict Mali), as well as interviews 'off-site' during 2014–15: to date, interviews have been carried out with more than 100 respondents active in humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, political support, donor bodies and local organizations. For Florian Weigand, it has involved ongoing fieldwork in Afghanistan that began in May 2014 (building on several research visits between 2011 and 2013). He has conducted more than 250 interviews on the community level, with Afghan authorities as well as with international stakeholders in various parts of the country.

2   Our findings from Bamako and Kabul square with Duffield's (2012, 485) assertion that insurance policies, duty of care, staff anxiety and political pressure are all contributing towards more rather than less 'bunkerization' and distancing in the field, despite sophisticated risk management attempts to 'stay and deliver' (on some of these, see e.g. Avant 2007).

3   In Afghanistan the UN often uses Nepalese Gurkha soldiers as guards for their compounds (see Boone 2009; Lynch 2010).

4   This was the case, for instance, with the Swedish contingent deployed with MINUSMA, as well as with military trainers working with the EU military training mission.

5   For the quote and more on the Mali attacks, see Associated Press (2015).

6   An extensive literature has by now emerged on the Mali conflict and its causes and consequences; for key events see Charbonneau and Sears (2014); for the backstory of failed international intervention see Bergamaschi (2014; see also Galy 2013).

7   For some detail on the behind-the-scenes pressures by France on Mali over intervention, see Jauvert and Halifa-Legrand (2013).

8   The protective measures could be justified on the basis of attacks occurring since the early days of deployment, even though we should recall that the spike in fatal attacks would come at a later stage, in 2014.

9   Interview with an employee of an international organization in Kabul, March 2015.

10   For more on these logistical problems—ranging from food provision to equipment and salaries—see Tham Lindell and Nilsson (2014).

11   In March, two Dutch peacekeepers died as their helicopter crashed in an accident. Figures from DPKO website, http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/fatalities.shtml

12   The policy on using non-white staff was rarely formalized as such, but was common to all the UN agencies and NGOs that we interviewed.

13   Until May 2014, the fear of attacks on aid workers did not correspond with the limited number of such attacks that had thus far taken place: as one UN officer collating this data told us that May, 'Mali's not Afghanistan'.

14   This is a long-standing problem in humanitarian aid (de Waal 1997), which was, however, compounded here by the risk-based division of labour and the lack of oversight this generated.

15   'Regional' West African project staff, at a higher level in NGO hierarchies, fell somewhere in between Bamako expats and national staff, yet were considerably cheaper —and came with fewer strings attached, often being on short-term contracts—than other 'internationals'.

16   For reasons of space, the specifics of these protests will not be explored here: both were informed by the perception—however untrue—that the internationals were supporting the northern rebels. Underlying this complaint, however, was resentment over perceived inaction by peacekeepers to secure the local population, which itself was fed by the frequent complaints about the interveners' distance from local society and their behaviour in the field and in Bamako, as discussed earlier.

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