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AID IN DANGER

The Perils and Promise of Humanitarianism

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Introduction

Humanitarianism is in crisis. More than a decade after 9/11 and the advent of the “war on terror,” the dangers to aid workers have increased, as has the complexity of their operating environment. The humanitarian impulse to provide lifesaving assistance is under fire, literally and figuratively: literally, as aid workers from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe are attacked, injured, kidnapped, and killed, and aid agencies are prevented from accessing vulnerable populations; and figuratively, as the essence of humanitarian action—to provide life-sustaining assistance to those suffering as a result of war or natural disaster—is compromised by those who link such assistance to foreign policy or security goals. While many have analyzed the figurative challenges of conflating humanitarian action with other agendas, few have devoted attention to the literal challenge of violence against aid workers and its implications for providing aid. This issue and its attendant consequences provide a neglected yet essential lens through which to examine the state of the humanitarian system. Doing so exposes the practical and analytical challenges of providing assistance, crystallizes its ethos, and offers a pathway for reforming the system.

In 2011, 86 aid workers died, 127 were severely injured, and 95 were kidnapped in 151 incidents worldwide, representing the highest number recorded since researchers began systematically tracking such incidents in the mid-1990s (Stoddard, Harmer, and Hughes 2012). Humanitarian aid operations have evolved in complexity throughout their history, but following the “war on terror” after 2001 they changed more visibly, with an increasing sophistication and fortification in the provision of security for aid workers. These changes are both symptom and cause of the crisis in the humanitarian system. By delving into these changes, I seek not to explain why incidents

are increasing but instead to explore the rhetorical constructions of explanations for violence against aid workers and the responses they engender. This project therefore entails examining from a multidisciplinary perspective the assumptions that underlie these constructions. At heart, aid work is a moral and practical good, that is, a compassionate and *relational* response to the suffering of others. Unfortunately, certain conceptualizations of the causes of the violence and the strategies to protect aid workers inhibit the effectiveness of those strategies, contribute to the normalization of danger in aid work, and undermine precisely those values they are supposed to uphold.

Those who manage security for aid operations must take into account a range of possible causes of and responses to violence against aid delivery. In some cases, local, national, or global political and social conditions sow the seeds of security incidents. From Libya to Sri Lanka, providing assistance in the midst of war and deadly conflict is inherently dangerous work. In Pakistan and Somalia, the politics of terror shapes the operating environment and augments the risks for individual aid workers and aid agencies. In Chechnya and the Democratic Republic of Congo, aid agencies have evacuated staff or suspended programs for security reasons. For some organizations and in some contexts, the concern for security trumps other considerations about where and how to operate. Others pay less attention to managing risk, calculating threat, and mitigating the effects of threats and actual safety or security incidents.

In all contexts, however, the risks to aid workers are also ordinary, even mundane. They are embedded in everyday decisions about whom to hire or where aid workers eat and live. Hiring practices can play into long-standing grievances and cause resentment between parties to a conflict or even among those with or without gainful employment. Lifestyle choices—for example, when aid workers frequent restaurants or entertainment establishments offering fare that exceeds the means of the local population—can magnify perceptions of the aid world as the domain of the “haves” in a sea of “have-nots.” These actions can feed into stereotypes and perceived injustices that create the conditions that may result in security incidents. Obviously not every decision and program, whether individual or organizational, affects local perceptions of aid workers and organizations. Those who ignore these factors, however, do so at their own peril.

In analyzing threat and risk, it is tempting to rely on myopic explanations that emphasize the politicization of aid, the rise in global terror, or the

increasingly blurred boundaries between civilian and military actors. Indeed, these oft-cited and compelling explanations have become axioms, accepted at face value and virtually unquestioned as the primary causal mechanisms of violence against aid workers. These factors undoubtedly complicate access to vulnerable populations and compromise the safety and security of aid workers and agencies. An exclusionary analysis of this kind, however, promotes an image of humanitarians as exceptions, operating outside of the conflict dynamics that surround them, and as exceptional, part of a special category of civilians deserving attention and protection.

Therefore, these explanations serve to perpetuate the lauded role of aid actors in the public imagination and to maintain an analytical lens that preserves the *exceptionalism* of humanitarian actors. Moreover, it privileges *external* factors, which are largely beyond the control of humanitarian actors, as responsible for an increase in violence against them and serves to silence those *internal*, micro-level factors over which humanitarians do exercise influence, such as personal behavior and choices, security protocols, or the hiring and firing policies of individual agencies. When providing aid in contexts of danger, this is not and cannot be enough. Instead, an analytical framing of these issues that challenges the axiomatic discourses and that seeks to more accurately capture the complexity of the interrelated dimensions characterizing aid in danger is necessary.

While focusing exclusively on internal vulnerabilities negates the contextual dimension of attacks, organizations that calculate risk and vulnerability by focusing exclusively—or even primarily—on external threats place themselves in a reactive mode to the violence around them. Addressing external threats privileges high walls, alarms, guards, and even counterthreats, such as armed escorts for aid delivery. Of course, humanitarians must anticipate external threats and prepare to mitigate the likelihood and impact of an attack. Equipping vehicles with blast plates on the undercarriage and covering windows with protective film that minimizes flying glass shards, for example, limit the impact of an explosion, should one occur. Such measures offer a degree of protection and address the symptoms, if not the causes, of attack. Unfortunately, a priori decisions to react and harden against attack create humanitarian fortresses that further separate aid workers from the populations they assist and help to create a situation in which fear threatens to eclipse the humanitarian imagination. These mechanisms may save lives, but at what cost? By contrast, providing assistance in ways that privilege the relational element

of humanitarianism offers an antidote to exceptionalism and a way to reassert the humanitarian ethos in the midst of war and violence.

Exceptionalizing Aid

Humanitarian assistance has long been contested. Depending on the eye of the beholder, it is seen as an individual, compassionate response to the suffering of others, as altruistic (if paternalistic) charity from rich to poor, or as a symbol of a manipulative desire and intention to remake the recipient of aid in the image of the provider. These interpretations generate competing visions of who provides aid, how they provide aid, and what is their ultimate purpose.

By “aid,” I refer to the emergency/relief and development assistance that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as CARE, Oxfam, and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) and international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) provide, and not to the bilateral and multilateral aid that governments provide and receive. At the risk of furthering the existing terminological confusion, however, I use the terms “humanitarian” and “aid worker” interchangeably throughout the book, employing them in a specific and limited way to refer to aid workers living and working in violent contexts. My focus, therefore, is on violence against aid workers and aid agencies that provide aid in the context of violence or insecurity. This approach necessitates

an analysis of those actors that operate from a narrow and principled humanitarian approach, such as the ICRC, as well as those operating from a stance that expands or modifies these principles. The latter include relief and development NGOs that espouse a solidarist or faith-based stance and those that provide both emergency, short-term relief and long-term development assistance. In doing so, I join those seeking to move beyond the traditional debates that have defined the analysis of humanitarianism (Barnett 2011; Domini 2012), such as whether humanitarian action is political or apolitical in nature or how the transition between providing relief, on the one hand, and reconstruction or development assistance, on the other, should be managed. By contrast, I do not intend to conflate emergency relief with development or reconstruction activities or to equate these types of assistance, since their purposes and circumstances differ.

I use the terms “humanitarian” and “aid worker” synonymously for three interconnected reasons. First, most “humanitarians” are in fact aid workers.

They are employed by agencies that do not espouse, either in language or in practice, all four of the core principles of humanitarian action. The first of these, *humanity*, is central to my argument. Throughout the book, I use *humanity* to refer to the universal and inherent dignity and equality of the person, refined by an acknowledgment that humans are social, and therefore relational and interdependent, beings. The remaining three core principles are those of *neutrality* (not taking sides in a conflict), *impartiality* (providing assistance according to need and without discrimination based on characteristics such as religion or ethnicity), and *independence* (possessing autonomy of action). Aside from those who care deeply about terminological precision and its theoretical and practical implications, most people observing or benefiting from such assistance (and arguably the perpetrators of violence against them) do not distinguish one category from the other. Nevertheless, the principles remain analytically and operationally relevant. Humanitarians (in the principled, narrow sense) pursue their activities differently than do many development or multimandate agencies, with both reflecting their respective guiding principles and organizational missions. Irrespective of their principled stance, I propose that all aid actors operating in conflict zones need to reassert humanity as their central guiding principle.

Second, my area of inquiry in this book is the context of violence and the provision of assistance in situations of danger.¹ Thus, recognizing that aid workers in contexts of violence work both in a purely humanitarian capacity and on traditional development programs, I endeavor to move beyond the dichotomy of political and apolitical humanitarian actors to focus on the contexts in which they operate. Violent contexts are, more often than not, places where emergency humanitarian assistance prevails in scope and amount over other types of assistance. Moreover, violent contexts are high-stress environments in which international organizations tend to employ hardened security strategies and more expatriate staff, ratcheting up the importance of internal vulnerabilities, which are rooted in individual and organizational actions and inactions. This potent combination complicates the provision of aid in violent situations.

Third, all aid agencies, whether operating from a principled or politically engaged platform, experience security incidents as part of their operations in natural and human-caused, complex, emergency as well as nonemergency, “safe” contexts. To focus solely on the narrowly defined humanitarians misses a significant population for whom the issues I discuss in this book are or should be of central concern.

In what follows, I argue that a “humanitarian exceptionalism” characterizes conceptions of aid actors as a special category of actor in the international system, with particular implications for both the analysis of the causes of and the responses to the violence they experience. By exceptionalism I mean that aid actors are seen as outside of (as opposed to within) the conflict systems in which they operate, and that they are categorized as a special category of civilians deserving attention and protection. The implications of exceptionalism are threefold: as exceptions, aid actors are or should be immune from the violence within which they operate, while their exceptional nature creates hierarchies of ascribed internal (foreigner over national) and external (aid worker over other civilians) values that simultaneously privilege external threat as the primary cause of violence against them. I recognize that in writing this book, I am equally (and perhaps more so) guilty of exceptionalizing aid workers. Yet it is precisely this issue that I wish to interrogate further, even if to do so emphasizes the exceptionalism I hope to dismantle.

This humanitarian exceptionalism derives from images of aid workers as helpers and rescuers, and from the principles of neutrality and impartiality as well as from the legal mechanisms that codify aid workers as separate. In this way, the laudable purpose of the humanitarian endeavor serves to silence explanations that may attribute responsibility to aid actors themselves. These “silent” or hidden dimensions of cause, which I term “internal vulnerabilities,” are underconceptualized and inhibit a more complete theoretical understanding of the causes and dynamics of violence. They are apparent in the reluctance to tarnish the hallowed image and admirable intentions of aid workers and agencies, exhibiting the “moral untouchability” and hierarchies of humanitarianism (Fassin 2010b), and in the tendency to foreground the objects or recipients of aid while neglecting the actions and lifestyles of the givers of aid and their attendant practical and ethical implications (Fechter 2012; see also Autesserre 2014). For a sector that depends on the generosity of donors to support their work, this image is valuable; the cost of a tarnished reputation can be significant. The result is the maintenance of a public silence about the internal vulnerabilities that contribute to security incidents and an analysis that sees aid actors as outside of and not embedded within the complex and interdependent worldwide system of actors and relationships.

The roots of this exceptionalism are manifested through an examination of dichotomous and competing visions of aid. These binaries serve as heuristic devices (as opposed to absolutes) to capture archetypal discourses and

images that describe how the essential character of aid is framed as a matter of either principles or politics, and how the aid system is depicted as instrument of empire or tales of rescue. Aid workers themselves typically are characterized either as heroic-mythical figures or greedy neocolonials, when in fact they are ordinary people. In addition, aid agencies must navigate between an idealized and informal past, which is often set in contrast to an institutionalized and professional present.

In particular, I explore how the aid world and its commentators have accepted certain explanatory discourses of the violence as social fact. The humanitarian exceptionalism narrative explains both the prevalence and the persistence of certain causal explanations, which in turn privilege security-management responses based on separation and fortification. The discourses of principles and politics and of empire and rescue encapsulate the externally focused factors that have dominated the theoretical framing of the causes of violence against aid workers. These discourses emerge from the dominance of certain disciplinary lenses, particularly that of political science, in explaining attacks against aid workers. These lenses privilege the primacy of politics in relation to humanitarianism and the changing context within which humanitarian actors operate. In this literature, violence against aid workers figures as part of the changing context, but is often seen as epiphenomenal. Together these lenses hamper attempts to develop a more nuanced and complete theoretical understanding of the violence itself and to unpack some of the resulting ethical dilemmas inherent in the system. A full accounting of causes requires interdisciplinary analysis.

In giving voice to the competing images of aid workers and aid agencies, I render visible the silent, internally focused dimensions and make possible a more complete theoretical understanding of the causes and dynamics of violence against aid workers and agencies. It is precisely because of the growth and power of the humanitarian system and the dominance of “security,” particularly in a post-9/11 environment, that these issues deserve further scrutiny. Indeed, the ways by which aid agencies provide security implicitly communicate the values inherent in the system. Thus, through a narrow focus on violence against aid workers and responses to security concerns, we gain insight into the broader aid system as a whole.

Aid in Danger, then, conveys the need to reckon with two intertwined challenges, namely how to deliver aid in perilous and fluid settings, and how to hold fast to the fundamental ethos of humanitarianism. Examining the aid system through an analysis of security incidents offers a new interpretive

lens on humanitarianism and aid. It suggests pathways to reform the current system that reflect and sustain the relational basis of the endeavor and thereby hold the aid industry more accountable to the fundamental principle of humanity.

A Relational Approach

The antidote to exceptionalism, I suggest, lies in a *relational* approach to humanitarianism that sees aid as embedded within an interdependent system of actors and actions, which both remedies the theoretical silencing of certain causes and suggests a way forward in reforming the system. The relational approach is best embodied in the principle of humanity.² In a relational approach, however, this concept of humanity is tempered by the notion that humans are social beings who exist within a complex web of interdependent and often unequal relationships. For humanitarians, these relationships involve, among others, co-workers, local and national officials, donors, belligerent forces, host populations, as well as the recipients of aid. A relational approach forces critical scrutiny upon the relationships that aid actors create and neglect, which, in turn, demands attention be paid to the internal vulnerabilities, and not just the external threats, that must be part of a full accounting of the complex causes of violence against aid workers and agencies.

The relational and compassionate mission of aid is epitomized in the early stories of modern humanitarianism and in the founding of the ICRC along with its cousins in the world of relief and development organizations. For most aid actors, the core principles of impartiality and independence are the foundation upon which to build and preserve the relationships that enable a humanitarian response to have meaning. Service to suffering humanity, understood and acted upon without regard to constructed markers such as race, religion, clan, or class, should remain at the core of humanitarian action.

It is precisely the relational nature of aid that is absent from discussions about humanitarianism and the aid system. Placing the relational character of aid work at the center of thinking about security and security management will transform the latter. Such re-centering enables the development of a nuanced and complex explanatory framework of the causes of violence and suggests an alternative lens through which to assess security responses based upon the principle of humanity. Analyzing the causes and dynamics of conflict and intervention in this manner offers a way to recast humanitarian

action and aid work more generally within an interdependent and complex set of relationships, actors, and actions. Moreover, in doing so, I am making a normative argument that providing aid in danger can serve to challenge and counteract the dynamics of violence that cause suffering in the first place: By reaffirming the inherent value of individuals through a relational approach to aid and security, it is possible to interrupt the cycle and ameliorate the effects of violence.

Such re-centering would also address the unfortunate fact that some current approaches to security management are undermining the core principle of humanitarian aid. The typical post-9/11 responses of fortification and separation as means of addressing the dangers of the work are part of the problem, in that the securitization of aid and the militarization of humanitarian security are not geared to addressing the root causes of the violence aid workers experience. Moreover, the physical and emotional distances they embody serve to further undermine the relational foundations of aid and feed the narrative of humanitarian exceptionalism. Rather, fear and the anxiety to provide security of a certain kind, at all costs, are displacing humanitarian principles when humanitarian principles, including their relational orientation, should be guiding approaches to providing security.

The chapters that follow contextualize the problem of aid workers and agencies as targets of violence, deconstruct the competing discourses and images of aid, critique and expand the rhetorical and explanatory frameworks commonly used to explain the violence, and offer recommendations based on a more realistic and nuanced analysis. Given this analysis, I contend that the humanitarian response has been hijacked and that aid agencies have lost their way. The goal of the reforms I propose, then, is to place security in service of humanity. In turn, this requires taking seriously a relational interpretation of humanitarianism, its principles, and its implications for action. Reclaiming humanity makes it possible to counter exceptionalism and assert an alternative vision of humanitarianism more consistent with its founding principles.

Genesis and Organization

This book is the culmination of over a decade of research about violence against aid workers. First motivated by the question of effective protection of aid workers (Fast 2002, 2007) and experiences as an aid worker, consultant,

and researcher, my inquiry expanded over time to the causes of violence against aid workers. In particular, I found perplexing the question of why some organizations experienced security incidents and others did not. In exploring that question, it became apparent that some answers gained explanatory traction while others remained in the shadows, neglected or underemphasized in the dominant narratives reported by journalists and internalized by academics, commentators, and aid workers themselves. The chapters that follow are an attempt to understand why this is so.

In writing this book, I have been influenced by hundreds of conversations with aid workers and NGO security officials in the field, at conferences, and at NGO security-management seminars and workshops over the past decade.³ I cite some of these conversations explicitly in the text. Beyond my own experience, the book is based on data I collected more systematically through three research projects. The first project, funded by the U.S. Institute of Peace, involved a survey of aid workers about their perceptions of the threats they face (Fast and Wiest 2007) and semistructured formal interviews. The interviews, conducted primarily in 2006 and 2007, took place in Boston, Geneva, London, and New York with academic experts, aid workers, aid policy experts, and security directors/managers of NGOs, UN agencies, and international organizations, such as the ICRC. The interview protocol included questions about interpretations of humanitarian principles, the challenges to and evolutions in humanitarianism, and their influence on conceptualizations of the causes of security incidents and on security management. To maintain confidentiality, I cite these individuals in the text by category (e.g., aid worker, aid official, security director) and provide additional detail only as relevant to the point I am making. A list of these interviewees appears in the Acknowledgments.

A second, related piece of research, for which I conducted fieldwork in the occupied Palestinian territory, was published as one of a series of case studies for the Humanitarian Agenda 2015 (HA2015) project of the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University. The HA2015 project examined four challenges to humanitarian action: the universality of humanitarianism, terrorism and counterterrorism, coherence (referring to linkages between humanitarian and political and military agendas), and security issues. For this research, I conducted semistructured interviews on these four topics with aid workers from NGOs, UN agencies, and other international organizations, and with two focus groups of Palestinians living in Bethlehem about their perceptions of aid and aid agencies (Fast 2006).

A third project examined how NGOs conceptualize and implement acceptance, a consent-based approach to security management. The project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, used a collaborative learning approach and involved aid workers and security personnel from thirty-seven NGOs. Save the Children served as the primary implementing agency. The project involved two daylong workshops (one in Geneva and one in Washington, D.C., in fall 2010) with headquarters-level security managers and directors; a week-long training of national and regional staff of international and national NGOs from Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda; and field research in these three countries in April 2011. Three teams of researchers, for which I was team leader in South Sudan, conducted semistructured interviews with NGO staff, members of international organizations, and local officials and organized focus groups of beneficiary and nonbeneficiary communities to explore perceptions and the relationships between aid agencies and communities (see Fast, Patterson, et al. 2011 on South Sudan; Fast, Freeman, et al. 2011 and 2013 on acceptance).⁴ The third research project proved especially influential in shaping my overall argument and discussions of security management.

My starting assumption is that aid agencies and the security managers, directors, and field officers, as well as the human resources and other staff charged with security, are generally doing their best to manage security and risk in fluid, often dangerous circumstances. Some manage better than others. Yet it is impossible to protect against or prevent all incidents. Individual aid workers, and the strategies they consciously or unconsciously choose to cope with the danger, moral dilemmas, and suffering they witness and experience, are not to blame for the incidents many unfortunately experience, nor are the capricious circumstances of context uniquely responsible for the violence. Security managers and aid workers themselves are often acutely aware of the complexity of cause.

With this in mind, the following chapters hold up a mirror, with which individual aid workers, agencies, commentators and academics, and the system as a whole can examine and reflect on their analyses, actions, and inactions. In challenging the exceptionalism that characterizes much of the humanitarian discourse, I contend that aid workers and agencies need to go deeper in their analysis of the patterns and causes of the violence that afflicts them and hinder or forces the closure of their operations; in their self-understanding and reflection, refined by a sober analysis of the inescapably political dimensions of their various presences on the ground; in their self-scrutiny, especially of

the character and architecture of their on-the-ground presence, as reflected in the behaviors and attitudes of aid workers as well as in agency policies, operations, and infrastructure; and finally in their responses to situations unfolding in a setting affected by local, regional, and global dynamics, at least some of which are beyond their control. The key will be to discern which events are within their control, how to influence events that can be influenced, and how to respond to those that cannot be shaped.

Two sets of questions serve as organizing frames for the book. First, why are aid workers and agencies attacked? What do we know about this type of violence, and how do we explain it? Second, what are the mechanisms of protecting aid operations and aid workers, and what are the (unintended) consequences of employing these mechanisms? The answers to the former address the analytical challenges of aid in danger which feature in Chapters 1 to 5. Replies to the latter appear in Chapters 1, 2, and 6, which lay out the practical and operational challenges and implications of my analysis.

Chapter 1 contrasts three stories of aid in danger: the bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad, Iraq, in 2003, which served as a watershed for the fortification of aid; the murders of seventeen national staff members of the Action Contre la Faim in Muttur, Sri Lanka, in 2006, which illustrate the public silencing of internal vulnerabilities; and the mythical origin stories of modern humanitarianism from the nineteenth century, which showcase its compassionate and relational foundations.

Chapter 2 describes the practical and analytical challenges of contemporary humanitarianism, which appear in the stories of Baghdad and Muttur and underscore the need for a multidimensional analysis of the violence. This analysis lays the foundations for an analytical framework that recognizes the complete landscape of cause. This framework, outlined in the chapter, encompasses the structural and global to the personal and relational dimensions and embeds humanitarian actors within the systems they inhabit, thereby transcending the bifurcated analytical perspectives that too often characterize conceptions of the causes of violence against aid actors.

Chapter 3 pokes holes in the accepted wisdom about violence against aid workers, providing a historical analysis of the danger of working in war zones that debunks the myths of the inviolability of aid workers and the recent genesis of targeted attacks. It scopes the dangers that aid workers face and describes the evidence base in order to expose the gaps in our collective knowledge and to illuminate the ways in which existing evidence helps to create social fact and supports the underlying assumptions of exceptionalism. Together Chapters

1, 2, and 3 set the stage on which competing visions of aid, and the causes and responses they champion, are enacted.

Chapters 4 and 5 analyze why aid workers are attacked, lay out the central discourses, perceptions, and rhetorical constructions of the causes of violence against aid workers and agencies, and construct a foundation for the notion of a “humanitarian exceptionalism” on which conceptualizations of causes and responses are built. Chapter 4 sketches competing discourses of aid: humanitarian action as principled or political, and aid as extension of empire or as embodying a tale of rescue. These constitute the macro-level explanations that dominate the collective discourse and emphasize external threats. Chapter 5 discusses competing images of aid seen through the lens of the players in the aid drama: aid workers, seen as both inheritors of confining mythologies and ordinary people, and aid organizations caught between an informal and idealized past and an institutional and professional present. The images constitute the micro dimensions of cause, or the internal vulnerabilities that usually reside in the shadows. In both chapters, I return to the theme of exceptionalism and begin to build the case for a relational approach.

The penultimate chapter deconstructs the paradigms of security management, framing the conceptualization of security as a challenge to the aid system and a clarion call for reform. This chapter begins with a description of the evolution of security management, including the professionalization and fortification of security-management strategies. It explores the three basic paradigms—the assumptive, legal, and operational—of providing protection for humanitarians, examining the implications and unintended consequences of employing these measures and how they emerge from the competing visions, and contrasts each with a relational approach. The first, the assumptive mechanisms, frames a normative argument and relies upon the symbols and principles of humanitarianism and the protective qualities of outsidership to render humanitarians inviolable from attack. The legal mechanisms are both customary and codified, such as UN Security Council Resolution 1502, which declared attacks against humanitarian workers a war crime, the Geneva Conventions, and the 1994 Convention and 2005 Optional Protocol on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel. The third, the operational measures known as deterrence, protection, remote management, and acceptance, capture the practices that most organizations employ in the field. In remaining tied to the assumptions of exceptionalism, I argue, aid agencies privilege certain kinds of professional knowledge and expertise and

contribute to the fortifications of the aid enterprise that further separate the givers of aid from those who receive it, which undermines the fundamental compassionate and relational nature of humanitarianism. Instead, I propose that aid agencies must embrace a relational approach that counteracts the unintended consequences of the fortification of aid and supports rather than undermines the fundamental purpose of the humanitarian endeavor.

In the concluding chapter, I offer recommendations for recapturing the original ethos of humanitarianism. The conclusion revisits the theme of exceptionalism, describes a typology of danger and reviews the multiple dimensions of cause. Finally, it reiterates the implications of a relational analysis for systemic reform of the humanitarian enterprise in recommending reforms designed to harness both the symbolic and real power of humanitarian principles while encouraging practical approaches by which to analyze and address internal vulnerabilities and external threats.

CHAPTER 1

Three Stories of Aid in Danger: From Baghdad and Muttur to Solferino

The history of humanitarianism is peppered with incidents of violence against aid workers and aid delivery. The deadliest and highest-profile security incidents, however, have occurred since the mid-1990s. Two of these, the bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, Iraq, in 2003 that killed twenty-two people and the murder of seventeen staff members of Action Centre la Faim in Muttur, Sri Lanka, feature in this chapter. Together these and one other earlier story compose three stories of aid: one of the challenge of providing security in environments rife with violence, one of the dominant discourses that explain the causes of security incidents, and a third that encapsulates the founding values of contemporary humanitarianism.

As two of the most lethal examples of violence against aid workers, the events in Baghdad and Muttur are not illustrative of the more typical and everyday incidents in scale or type. They nonetheless demonstrate the complexity of security incidents that compel a closer look at causes, responses, and the power of the humanitarian exceptionalism narrative. Each is emblematic of the analyses that tend to dominate contemporary security challenges, in which security management is portrayed as a choice between constructing a fortress or relying on the protection assumed from the principles and symbols of humanitarianism. In these analyses, the causes of incidents are represented as the result of politicized aid and thereby mask internal vulnerabilities. Therefore, they typify the central tendencies and tensions explored throughout the book. Neither story, however, is as simple as it might first appear.