Traversing the minefield
A professional humanitarian for a new world of risk

Today's humanitarian must enter a new kind of war zone, where aid operations are targets for raids, robberies, kidnappings, and killings. In past centuries, when most wars were waged between national rivals, there were roughly equal benefits in allowing relief. But modern conflicts see nation-states fight small armed groups, who rarely view foreign aid as a friend, and all too often as a foe. In this new conflict landscape, founding partner of Humanitarian Outcomes, Abby Stoddard, calls for a new humanitarian mindset to better navigate these risks. An ethics of professionalism in humanitarian action, she argues, can raise relief work above individual powers and agencies, whose narrow interests can create additional insecurity, and empower aid workers with the skills they need to stay alive while saving lives.

THE BOMBING IN BAGHDAD
On August 19, 2003, the dust had barely settled from the Iraq War's invasion phase, and yet security personnel guarding the entrance to the UN headquarters at the Canal Hotel had vanished, along with a US military rocket launcher that had been stationed outside. The sight of this armed post had long troubled the heads of the UN's humanitarian agencies for associating the mission with an invading force rather than a neutral source of civilian aid. Official reports of that day would not identify the reason behind the weapon's removal, but later that afternoon, a massive truck bomb detonated outside the hotel, killing 22 relief officers and wounding 150.

The tragic events of August 19 would come to mark World Humanitarian Day and are further explored as a case study in Abby Stoddard's new book, “Necessary Risks: Professional Humanitarianism and Violence against Aid Workers”. The publication explores the cracks in the humanitarian ideal that give way to attacks on aid workers, totalling hundreds of casualties a year in death, injury and abduction. These cracks run through the political, the organizational, and the personal realm – from the new incentives driving the behaviour of armed groups, to the agencies expending at the expense of security, and to the humanitarian themselves, who must navigate today's risks as a practical professional, and no longer an altruistic amateur.

Even the fiercest armed groups will attempt some form of governance, and allowing humanitarian aid signals their ability to provide for the local inhabitants and keep basic services running. In “Necessary Risks”, Abby Stoddard performs a dissection of non-state groups. She probes their ideas, material interests, and tactics, to provide a nuanced picture of the risks now faced by aid workers. “Global insurgencies” like Al Qaeda pursue a far-reaching ideological mission that pits them against the totality of the present order. Spectacular strikes such as the Canal Hotel bombing serve as propaganda for the cause and a tool for international recruitment, and these groups have little to gain from allowing humanitarian aid workers to operate safely. Other non-state groups, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, hold more modest and local ambitions. For these groups, attacking aid workers can be an easy way to flex their muscles and fill their coffers – but at other times it serves their interest to allow humanitarian aid to flow. Once in control of a territory, even the fiercest armed groups will attempt some form of governance, and allowing humanitarian aid signals their ability to provide for the local inhabitants and keep basic services running.

Humanitarians can find themselves in the crosshairs of states, as well as non-state forces. By feeding the hungry and treating the sick, relief work keeps a society afloat. For this very reason, when territories are contested, such as in civil war, aid operations become vulnerable to attack. The threat may come from armed groups that oppose the government, when they seek to undermine the social order by harming those who maintain it. Alternatively, states may tighten their grip on rebell ing populations by crushing the people who provide them with relief. What may be shared by all these actors, however, are the limited means at their disposal. Aid operations are a source of vehicles, basic supplies and cash, all

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The Professional Humanitarian

Who should the humanitarian strive to be? An altruist, driven by empathy to help people in need? Or a career professional with a mastery over a set of skills, who will carry out their duty in detached calculation? Abby Stoddard argues the latter represents a better direction for relief workers, enabling them to be as safe as possible, while consistently meeting the most critical human needs. The practice of the professional humanitarian would include systematic data collection to allow for the rigorous assessment of risk, and practical techniques for negotiating with armed actors that don’t simply rely on promoting adherence to international law and norms. For example, an essential part of negotiating with the aforementioned actors is to appeal to the interests of armed groups – be they religious, ideological or strategic. However, these security risk management tools do not replace human intuition and empathy, just augment them. Likewise, well-honed professional skills would not override individual judgement and initiative, but instead provide building blocks with which aid workers perform a necessarily creative endeavour. Meanwhile, a crucial element of the reformed profession would be the concept of “residual risk”. This is the recognition that there will always be some degree of risk in providing relief to the war-torn regions of the world. The point is to rationalise the response to this intrinsic danger, and always meet the most desperate needs while cutting the worst excesses of being caught in the crossfire.