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Securitization of research: Fieldwork under new restrictions in Darfur and Mali

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge on conflict-affected areas is becoming increasingly important for scholarship and policy. This article identifies a recent change in knowledge production regarding 'zones of danger', attributing it not only to the external environment, but also to an ongoing process of securitization of research resulting from institutional and disciplinary practices. Research is increasingly framed by security concerns and is becoming a security concern in itself, although the implications are not readily acknowledged. To illustrate these developments, we draw on fieldwork in Mali and Darfur.

Keywords: securitization, critical security, fieldwork, ethics, Mali, Darfur

Introduction³

On 25 January 2016, the anniversary of the revolution that five years earlier symbolized the spirit of the 'Arab Spring', Giulio Regeni – a 28-year-old Italian PhD student from the University of Cambridge who was a visiting scholar at the American University in Cairo (AUC) – was kidnapped in the Egyptian capital. Regeni was conducting participant observation on informal trade unions opposing the regime that had been installed following the military coup of August 2013. A few days later, Regeni's corpse was found near a construction site, with clear signs of torture. The 'Regeni case' sparked international controversy, due to Egypt's record of forced disappearances and widespread allegations of involvement of security officials.⁴ The tragedy also gave rise to broader questions about

Regeni's safety. Who had failed in their *duty of care*?⁵ Who was now supposed to respond: his university, hosting institution and/or country of citizenship? A statement from the AUC merely described Regeni as having 'passed away.'⁶ Several Cambridge scholars initiated a petition to demand that the UK government take a stand.⁷ The European Parliament passed a resolution very critical of Egypt,⁸ but in the end the Italian authorities received very little international collaboration in their attempt to find the truth and bring the perpetrators to justice. Pressured by a broad campaign organized across universities and civil society organizations, Italy withdrew its ambassador from Cairo and froze part of its military aid to Egypt. Accompanied by far less media attention, the Regeni case also triggered the adoption of stricter fieldwork rules at several European universities.

This tragedy speaks directly to the contradictions surrounding today's mechanisms of knowledge production. On the one hand, the demand for reliable information to underpin research and refine policies grows,⁹ and researchers are under heavy pressure to extract and produce evidence on topical issues. Research employing field immersion is seen as vital for developing a deeper understanding of the hows and whys of human and political interaction. Fieldwork helps in avoiding the pitfalls resulting from over-reliance on theory, causal models and assumptions made from afar. This is particularly important in conflict and crisis situations, where meanings are deeply contested. On the other hand, knowledge production is undergoing dramatic changes, and the type of research that Regeni was conducting is becoming increasingly difficult to undertake. Fieldwork is expected to subscribe to safety, security and ethical protocols developed remotely. Research today is subject to heavy scrutiny, caught in the tension introduced by new standards on safety, impact and transparency – but is ultimately left unprotected.

This article re-examines how we do research, focusing on activities in dangerous locations and reflecting on the requirements for producing scholarly knowledge on these. We indicate several transformations in research on danger zones and locate these not only in the external environment facing the researcher, but also in the ongoing process of securitization of research that is a result of internal institutional and disciplinary practices. Central to these transformations are the changing dynamics between researchers and their universities, institutes and governments. With the principle of duty of care increasingly being invoked to justify new safety and security protocols, we find ample grounds for speaking of the *securitization of research*. Securitization¹⁰ is understood here in two ways: research is increasingly framed as a security concern; and it is framed by security concerns.

In both cases, extraordinary means and procedures are invoked in the name of security. Additional resources are put into ensuring the physical safety of researchers, and into securing data along the research supply-chain.

While consideration of potential danger has always been a factor in studying conflicts and crises, until recently assessing whether and how to conduct research in zones of danger was primarily the researcher's responsibility. This is now changing, with much of the control over ethics and security taken out of the researcher's hands – resulting in what amounts to governing research at a distance. The security of fieldwork is caught in a process that obscures the underlying social relations that produce and give value to it, and transforms it into an independent material reality.¹¹ In turn, by subscribing to this independent material reality (that is, by following procedural requirements), the researcher performs her role in the securitization of her own research, leaving her with the impression that her work not only adheres to institutional and disciplinary standards but is also safe.

This shift in knowledge production has profound implications not only for the conduct of field research, which we explore here, but also for what is to be understood as 'knowledge'. We begin by problematizing the labelling of danger zones as such, noting the changing conditions for research and how scholars are responding to these. We then draw on our own fieldwork in two such zones of danger – Mali and Darfur – to highlight and, we hope, clarify the nature of new challenges. Finally, we offer some reflections on the implications for practice, scholarship and policy. While the full and systematic exploration of these implications is beyond the scope of this article, we hope to stimulate continued discussion on these ongoing developments.

Researching zones of danger

Zones of danger are understood as areas where Western travellers, including researchers, should not venture without adopting a proper code of conduct. They are also likely to be areas whose security dynamics attract the attention of the media and state security apparatuses. Proof of the existence of such zones is not to be found in statistics about researchers who have fallen victim to violence – although, as shown by the Regeni case, when fatalities occur, these can attract substantial public attention, in turn re-confirming the danger label itself. Far from constituting an objective reality, zones of danger, are socially constructed by a set of discordant practices and discourses. Recognizing them

requires indirect tracing of the regulations and rules governing research access and researcher conduct.

As a first layer – one that pertains to all travellers, not just researchers – zones of danger are codified by diplomatic practice and insurance clauses that tend to be linked to precisely these diplomatic designations. Such designation can differ from country to country, and embassies of different states interpret danger differently. That said, the designations applied by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, France-Diplomatique and the US State Department often serve as a template that other countries follow. The UK and French advice operates with three travel categories: green (no heightened threat), yellow (advise against all but essential travel), and red (advise against all travel), complemented by last-minute updates; the USA issues travel warnings (warning against all travel) and travel alerts (for short-term events that raise the level of threat).¹² If an area falls under the red (or even yellow) category or carries a travel warning, insurance can be difficult to obtain, or will involve a higher premium.

The second layer of securitization, justified through the governmental regulations but detached from researcher nationality as such, applies especially to scholarly research. It can be seen in the ethical conduct and safety/security plans imposed by donors and research institutions themselves. This rapidly evolving body of frameworks and regulations for, e.g., securing of data, permissions procedure, departure precautions, insurance and debriefing, differs between national and institutional contexts and is most dense in the North American and Northern European research environments. Interpretations of the duty-of-care principle vary considerably, depending on levels of security alert, budget constraints, location of the institution, type of research, and micro-management practices of individual institutions. An unexplored and seemingly incongruous, but increasingly standardized, admixture of policies and practices is emerging via inputs from governments, grant-giving agencies, universities and research centres.

The practice of designating particular areas and regions as dangerous was first problematized by political geographers, who drew heavily on Edward Said's formulations of *Orientalism*.¹³ A critical approach to political geography emerging in the mid-1980s launched a powerful critique of the Cold War geopolitical imagery.¹⁴ Not only did it critique the homogenizing labels imposed upon diverse regions and their conflicts, which marginalized the context-specific nature, causes and effects of violence, but it also

contended that these labels act as an intellectual rationalizations for Western intervention.¹⁵ Likewise, the recent debate on the problematic usage of the notion of ‘failed states’ and ‘fragility’ has exposed how such discourse reduces complexities and contributes to neo-colonial interventions.¹⁶ In addition, and of practical relevance for the researcher, these labels also subsume very diverse threats under one category (red or yellow), making it seem as if threats encountered in, for example, the Central African Republic are similar to those in Syria. Moreover, such labels often fail to discriminate between different sub-national areas, and fail to indicate the potential risks of travelling, for example via European airports or infrastructures that have been targeted by terrorist attacks.

Despite the scholarly criticism of the usage of such designations – and precisely because these designations are employed and thus trigger the related bureaucratic procedures – researchers venturing into danger zones must face several dilemmas. Many of these are beyond their control: researchers have become and perceive themselves as becoming potential targets in (post)conflict and instability scenarios.¹⁷ Irrespective of their research conduct, the presence of foreign researchers may be perceived as driven by counter-insurgency imperatives of their states. Therefore, much recent literature on zones of danger does not engage this topic reflectively, but takes a practical approach focused on field safety, and can be considered part of the securitization enterprise itself. In response to these developments, a growing number of researchers have started taking up theoretical and methodological questions that arise from studying topics in locations that involve personal danger, with most attention being given to external constraints on fieldwork.¹⁸

There is little new about situations where scholars cannot have direct access to the reality they study. Research work has constantly been marked by a ‘fundamental and constant tension between trying to obtain empirical data and avoiding taking unnecessary risk.’¹⁹ Likewise, researchers have always ‘competed’ for policymakers’ attention (and funding) alongside ‘stakeholder advice’, intelligence reports and professional expertise, whose rules of field engagement, ethical standards and processes of knowledge validation differ significantly from academic standards. However, today’s situation is unprecedented. The proliferation of sources of information, increasingly blurry dividing lines, and the growing awareness of security concerns have all contributed to the multiplication of duty-of-care standards the researcher is expected to follow, while competing with other stakeholders to demonstrate impact. Instead of individual researchers assessing what is possible and what is too dangerous in view of developments in the field, standardized

protocols developed outside and often poorly connected to these zones of danger now determine the boundaries of research work.

A new research reality

Donor, disciplinary and institutional practices are much subtler in affecting researchers and their work than, for example, host-state restrictions on their movement: however, the influence on research may be far-reaching. These practices are still in the making, and a single instance like the Regeni case can influence the policies of many research institutions.²⁰ In the following we identify some changing conditions for research in danger zones, indicating how this might restrict plurality in research. These changing conditions emerge not from one source, but from a combination of disciplinary, grant-making and institutional stimuli. These transformations can be broadly categorized as transparency, impact and safety precautions.

Quest for transparency. Aiming to ensure ‘the highest standards of research integrity and engagement’ and ‘legitimacy, internally and externally’,²¹ the social sciences have ventured on a quest to guarantee the transparency, data access and interpretability of empirically-based scholarship. The expectation is that researchers will make their data available for replicability purposes: for example, in 2012, the American Political Science Association (APSA) Council adopted new policies guiding Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT) in political science and integrated these principles into the APSA Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science. While such disciplinary moves have come under heavy criticism,²² the fact that more and more dissemination outlets are underwriting them has clear implications not just for ethnographic sensitivity but also for the actors and processes that researchers might wish to study. This seems particularly relevant for research in danger zones, where the researcher must confront many uncertainties and contested meanings: the openness and the rigid protocols developed for quite different environments and less-sensitive topics are likely to prove problematic.

Similarly, grant-giving institutions are increasingly requiring grantees to make their evidence publicly accessible. These requirements tend to tighten ethical approval and data management procedures. One such practice is emerging in connection with EU Commission grants, which now emplace an additional hurdle before a grant agreement can be signed for selected projects. This phase includes careful elaboration of steps of

possible relevance for the security and safety of researchers, collaborators and interviewees. Similar requirements are increasingly implemented by universities and institutes with the dual purposes of ethics (security of sensitive data) and safety (researcher security) often pursued simultaneously. Data-management plans and ‘informed consent’ procedures for field interviews are put under preliminary scrutiny, requiring researchers to make advance decisions on what areas to venture into and thus whom to include and exclude from research.

Pressure to show impact in a competitive market. Scholars are under increasing pressure to show that their research has impact beyond academia. In the past this was connected to obtaining funding from governmental and private sources, but the requirement features increasingly also in research council funding and broader higher-education policies. These measures are introduced with the aim of providing ‘accountability for public investment in research’ and producing ‘evidence of the benefits of this investment’.²³ In the UK, for example, the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), regularly applied to all institutions of higher education, introduced an impact element requiring researchers to demonstrate the effect or benefit of their work to ‘the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’.²⁴ In preparation for the next REF round, universities are already calling for internal ‘impact cases’. Research on danger zones, where data are often scarce, has a high potential for such impact. For most researchers, this need to influence the non-academic world by means of direct involvement and ‘stakeholder’ activity raises questions of co-optation of their work in policy processes. However, with research on danger zones there is an additional concern: obtaining data and publishing on current and on-going developments, which would show societal impact, may present problems as regards transparency and replicability, if researchers want to ensure security for themselves and their subjects. This makes the two goals of transparency and impact potentially incompatible.

In addition, research in and on danger zones should be understood not as individual acts of exploration and explanation, but as an organized effort: ‘an iterative, professionalized and increasingly saturated practice’ that amounts to a form of ‘systematic intervention’.²⁵ To conduct research and to show impact, academia is increasingly not just competing but also collaborating with non-academic actors who operate with different research standards. Academics may themselves collaborate as consultants to obtain access and funding. All this calls into question whether the researcher is entirely able to follow

individual and disciplinary research ethics and security procedures. Strategic interaction and understanding of the work of other actors, who may operate with different criteria for knowledge validation, becomes as important for producing academic knowledge as interaction with the local context and one's own discipline – but, to follow disciplinary standards, it is advisable to hide these interactions.

Enhanced safety precautions. As part of ensuring security for themselves and their data, researchers are increasingly required to undertake greater preparations for conducting fieldwork. To avoid future liability under their duty of care, universities and research institutes want to make sure that staff-members sent abroad are informed and prepared. In the UK, research security is broadly regulated by the 'Guidance on Health and Safety in Fieldwork,'²⁶ prepared by the Universities Safety and Health Association (USHA) and the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). In line with these broad guidelines, individual research institutions are introducing pre-approval processes, screenings of proposed fieldwork by university ethics committees, requirements for threat analysis, restrictions on travel/funding, emergency response planning, etc. While the evidence is still anecdotal, it is increasingly felt that researchers try to circumvent the difficult processes of obtaining such approvals by *not* including interviews with 'sensitive subjects' as part of their research – which will necessarily influence their findings.

Similarly, skill certification is emerging as part of fieldwork preparation. This certification has less to do with sensitizing a researcher on how to conduct himself in a contested environment than with how to avoid danger and take remedial steps. Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT) for staff who will operate in unstable and insecure environments is becoming a pre-deployment standard for civilian officials, increasingly for researchers as well. Often with the 'C3MC label' – indicating that the course satisfies the minimum standards of ENTRI/EU Civilian Crisis Management²⁷– these training modules include topics as diverse as stress management, organized crime, theft, assault and hostage-taking. Classroom work is complemented with intensive simulation by armed forces and police corps. The underlying philosophy is that ensuring the safety of personnel is 'the single most important duty of care of states and organisations sending their staff to hazardous or hostile areas.'²⁸ Such courses confer a certificate stating that the researcher is deemed fit to operate in a dangerous zone – documentation which might be needed for insurance purposes. As Duffield argues in his research among the aid community, such field-security training normalizes risk-aversion and the necessity of

defensive living.²⁹ It seems highly plausible that the implications for research are similar, especially for a generation of researchers whose formative years included these precautions.

Similarly, growing attention is paid to researchers and their use of the Internet. Social media contacts (and digital ethnography) make it possible to organize online focus and discussion groups – but also to track direct sources, exposing them to stigmatization and possible danger. Anonymization and encryption are increasingly recommended to protect the storage and transmission of sensitive data between the field and the research institution/employer, and among research partners.³⁰

Research solutions

In response to these transformations, researchers have developed various workaround measures. Some of these have a longer history but are increasingly utilized, others are new solutions. As above, deeper elaboration of these and their implications is beyond the scope of this article, so here we simply highlight some emerging practices.

Remotely managed research. This practice, well established in the humanitarian sector and media, involves contracting local researchers to gain access to dangerous areas in order to circumvent travel restrictions. Local researchers are used for data acquisition and processing, with principal researchers often conducting only quick research training of their local team. Such reliance on locally recruited research assistants introduces gatekeeping issues that are difficult to address if the principal researcher never experiences the context he is studying. The emergence of a ‘don’t-ask–don’t-tell’ area might be in the interest of everyone along the research supply-chain. Moreover, problems of local researchers’ qualifications and safety must be recognized, and are probably inadequately addressed through short training sessions. Such practices also contribute to the peacebuilding economy, and redirect valuable human resources to cater to internationals.

Embedded research. To gain access to danger zones, researchers may travel with international or local security forces, for example by conducting fieldwork while benefiting from the security architecture of an international organization. Embeddedness comes in many forms, but a research team dependent on escort by armed guards will encounter limitations in interaction with ‘the locals’, while also inevitably becoming oriented towards a set of priorities dictated by the security protocols and organizational interests of

the security provider. Such arrangements often entail a certain *quid pro quo* not always made clear to wider audiences. The controversial aspects of conducting embedded research and the dangers of it being utilized for problematic purposes were highlighted during the debates surrounding the US Army's Human Terrain System Project in Iraq and Afghanistan. While independent scholars were struggling to negotiate access to their research areas, the US Department of Defense programme employed social scientists to provide military personnel with better understanding of local populations. Anthropologists, sociologists, linguists and political scientists were embedded in army units, to conduct research and feed it into military strategies and tactics. Scholarly reactions amounted to an outright disciplinary rejection of such practices.³¹ However, while academic work directly feeding into military strategies is a clear-cut case for condemnation, fieldwork today does not always involve clear choices about how to relate one's work to other actors in the field. As shown in the Darfur study below, negotiating access to the field is often ridden with compromises beyond the control of individual researchers.

Outsourcing of logistics, fixers. Following all the procedures and regulations makes travel to dangerous zones a time-consuming enterprise. In line with state and aid-sector practices, travel-security services are often outsourced to private providers for trusted-traveller programmes, consular facilitation, logistical service, etc. Depending on the level of saturation in particular sites, also field assistants might be professionalizing, with some merging their logistical assistance with what might be seen as research assistance. Fixer agencies that interact through social media and offer field-facilitation services are mushrooming. Kosovo Fixers, for example, advertises that it will 'provide transportation, guide, services of translation and interpretations in local languages, accommodation arrangements, set up interviews', in addition to offering insights on political, social, economic issues, through its 'wide range of local connections and contacts'.³² The role of these fixers in knowledge production is often unclear to the broader audience.

Case studies: Mali and Darfur

Empirical insights were developed from two field-research missions conducted in Mali (Bamako region) in November 2013 and Sudan (Darfur) in November 2014, by Francesco and Mateja respectively. These cases seek to capture and exemplify fairly common

situations in which the researcher is either warned against all travel, or against leaving an area deemed relatively safe (often the capital city). In both cases, our fieldwork was funded through governmental grants and we were expected to provide topical reports to our funders. While risk perceptions and travel warnings differed, we had to comply with the same mission authorization procedure, and commit to a 'secure conduct'. Discussions with other researchers doing fieldwork in the same period helped to corroborate our insights. Neither author is a citizen of the state where our research institution is located, a circumstance that decoupled questions of consular protection and institutional duty of care.

The cases touch upon slightly differing dimensions of transformations in researching danger zones. In both cases we observed the salience of emerging security regimes put in place in the name of protection, and had to rely on a combination of research solutions. We use these cases to demonstrate how external conditions (host-state restrictions, terrorist threats, UN security protocols) interacted with restrictions emplaced by our own institution, further limiting our options. Many of the research constraints in Darfur were imposed by the host state itself, seemingly trumping those of our employer. However, even without Sudanese restrictions, internal security procedures for 'red zone' travel would have necessitated embedded work with the UN, similar to what was contemplated for Northern Mali. The cases thus show a largely predetermined path of research. They also indicate that much of the work we conducted would have problems complying with the 'scientifically rigorous' transparency procedures proposed in the broader social sciences.

Mali

The 2012 Mali crisis – *les événements* – started with an armed Tuareg rebellion in January. In less than two months, the rebels expelled the Malian army from the North and declared the territory independent under the name of Azawad; a coup d'état in Bamako deposed President Amadou Toumani Touré. However, the Tuareg 'liberation' of the North did not last long: the forces were soon driven out by Islamist groups. The collapse of Mali's political regime ushered an unprecedented crisis that still threatens regional stability. When Islamist groups began moving towards the capital city, France intervened militarily (Operation Serval, January 2013). Subsequently, an African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) came to the defence of the fragile interim institutions.

Operation Serval and the AFISMA deployment reconquered the Northern cities, chasing the rebel groups into the massifs and deserts in the borderlands of Mali, Algeria and Libya. This area became a basis for their continued attacks. In April 2013 the UN deployed a Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), tasked with supporting the political process and conducting security-related stabilization tasks.³³

In November 2013, our research team entered what was undoubtedly perceived as a danger zone: although the fighting had been confined to the North of the country, the shooting of a French military advisor in Bamako had raised the alert levels. Importantly, sporadic clashes in the North heralded a new insurgency, whose terror attacks would not spare the capital in the following months.³⁴ Our fieldwork coincided with the electoral campaign and the arrest in Bamako of the leader of the 2012 coup. Given the rapidly evolving situation, our local contacts within MINUSMA and local NGOs³⁵ advised against planning a mission longer than a few weeks. However, unlike in Darfur, return to Bamako for research purposes was possible: our mission thus became an exploratory one.

The team included three Western researchers: one focusing on UN peacekeeping, who conducted most interviews within the MINUSMA headquarters; a field assistant; and myself, mostly working on organized crime, army restructuring, small arms and ongoing tensions in North Mali. Both my colleagues underwent HEAT training. My own institution was at the time developing a policy on fieldwork conducted in high-risk countries, where HEAT training was 'highly recommended'. The same training would have been undertaken by many Western intergovernmental and non-governmental personnel whom we were interviewing. This development produces a remarkable situation, where interviewer and interviewee alike undergo the same socialization process that teaches them how to understand safety and security in danger zones, a subject often the focus of research in these areas. This might facilitate communication, as both sides operate with the same frames of reference, but also produces particular and partial knowledge. Despite being a Westerner, but having not undergone the HEAT training myself, I realized that my own understanding (and vocabulary) of security was less technical than that of my colleague and our interlocutors. Many answers where I requested further clarification seemed obvious to others, probably because of shared referent points.

At the time, Western consular advice on travel to Mali was far from consistent, but travel to Bamako usually fell into the yellow zone: 'advise against all but essential travel'. This also meant that commercial airlines were still flying to Bamako, making access

relatively easy, albeit expensive. Our field assistant, a PhD researcher based at an institution which at that time had no formal travel-approval procedures,³⁶ was able to conduct some reconnaissance while my own travel awaited approval. Accomplished by keeping a low profile and developing local relations in connection with everyday matters, this work proved extremely important. Even then I saw this whole situation as somewhat paradoxical; had this field assistant not had solid experience in the region, it would have been irresponsible for me to ask him to conduct what was arguably the more dangerous initial work, while I waited at home. Here we assessed our own safety precautions as being more sensible than the institutional ones. Eventually I received institutional approval, after documenting that the security assessments offered by the diplomatic agencies of several countries deemed travel to Bamako possible. As part of the approval procedure I was requested to inform not only UN diplomatic offices, but also the military component of the country where my institute is based, and I had to agree to undertake no trips outside Bamako.

Facing this constraint, and given my research focus, I contemplated outsourcing some data-collection in northern Mali to local researchers. Given the exploratory nature of my trip I decided to forego that option, not least since I felt that selecting and training local researchers to acceptable standards would take most of my time in the country. For a while we contemplated flying north to the city of Gao, embedded with MINUSMA, which I could have reconciled with our institutional safety procedures. However, under UN internal security protocols, we would have been confined to the UN camp, without access to 'the locals'. Traveling via land north of Segou by keeping a low profile was theoretically possible but strongly discouraged by everyone consulted. Above all, this was also contrary to what I had committed myself to in our institutional procedures before departure. On a subsequent field mission to Mali, the research assistant again tried to arrange embedded work (flight and escort) to Gao with MINUSMA. However, initial contacts soured and principal agreement was rescinded when it became clear that his research topic could be sensitive: an incident that highlights the limitations of embedded work in Mali. Access problems could not be entirely obviated, but I tried to compensate by making special efforts to include interviewees who returned to Bamako straight from the 'northern front'.

To navigate the post-2012 crisis terrain, we also opted to engage a local facilitator to act as a transport organizer and fixer. He proved central in gaining access to institutions,

organizing our appointments on a daily basis, which enabled us to conduct an impressive number of interviews. His familiarity with security protocols and his status as a former parachute officer helped to shorten our waiting time. Although I never felt that he was altering our agenda or manipulating the trajectory of our interviews, his familiarity with the terrain and his reputation were such that his gatekeeping role was undeniable. Cognisant of this limitation, we attempted to organize some interviews in addition to those he had arranged for us. But moving around Bamako and knocking on the doors of local security officers without local facilitation proved difficult. We quickly realized that our ‘fixer’ was not only able to arrange interviews and introduce us, but also – by talking authoritatively to the troops standing guard – to ‘simplify’ the security procedure of car inspection at the entry to governmental buildings.

Although all our interviewees agreed that an attack in the city was unlikely, our research team faced daily choices regarding personal safety – in particular, what type of security warning we should take into consideration. Bamako might have been designated as ‘yellow’ in a scale of risk, but we soon found out about the existence of red lines. We received many tips regarding no-go areas and red-alert days from various international contingents, and also realized that the expatriate community was divided. Consular recommendations regarding off-limits spaces and times were often contradictory. In the end, we failed to achieve informal exchanges with French officials, due to stricter security provisions governing their movement. While inherently contradictory and based on hearsay, such security precautions were infinitely more valuable for our safety than any advance decisions we were asked to take.

Contacts with locals suffered from spatial segregation. Top-level interviews in formal institutions had little substantial value, but helped us to understand hierarchical structures as well as perceptions and attitudes vis-à-vis security.³⁷ In contrast, access to other local actors proved problematic, as areas deemed safe for international workers to reside and move around, were *de facto* off-limits to locals, unless accompanied by internationals. Even local taxis came no further than the roadblock. I resorted to conducting interviews in remote peri-urban areas at night, keeping as low a profile as possible. This information was of key value to my work; but while I employed all personal safety standards developed through years of research, I admit to disregarding the pre-travel commitment not to travel outside the capital.

Fieldwork was conducted while other international research teams were active in Bamako, where the precarious situation led to a high degree of comradery and research cross-pollination. Our team made deliberate efforts at liaising broadly. A local branch of an international NGO had just released an in-depth study conducted in the North, and we engaged in fruitful discussion of methodology, risks and responsibility. In another case we invited an NGO team, conducting their own background research, to join a focus group we had arranged with a local police brigade. For obtaining information on the North they relied on their pre-existing project terminals in the region, and specially hired local researchers employed for data collection. (They were vague as to what kind of training these local researchers had received.) We also met a few Western researchers who had managed to reach Gao and Timbuktu in the North: again, safety-related questions were discussed with them, but the details of their research methods were not disclosed to us.

It quickly became apparent that different, possibly competing, forms of knowledge were being produced about the 'Mali crisis'. Informal exchanges of information on the margins of formal interviews were clearly aimed at directing us towards a certain reading of a given phenomenon. With the entire country off-limits to us, the role of our fixer in guiding our understanding across informal exchanges was magnified. Reports of international organizations, research articles and policy papers discussing the evolving situation not just in Bamako but also in the North followed differing research standards and were apparently in competition – but large grey zones and silences about research standards seemed admissible, given the 'security constraints' under which we were all operating. On the other hand, had I complied fully with formal security protocols, I would not have come even close to the findings obtained by the end of my fieldwork.

Darfur

The Darfur region in western Sudan has experienced decades of conflict due to a complex set of post-colonial dynamics at the local, national and regional levels.³⁸ The current cycle of violence started in 2003 as a result of political and economic marginalization of the predominantly African pastoralist population by the Arab central authorities in Khartoum. The dissatisfaction led to attacks on government forces by two main rebel groups, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudanese Liberation

Army/Movement (SLA/M). In response, the Sudanese armed forces and government-supported militias, including the Janjaweed, targeted the civilian population of Darfur, who were seen as supporting the rebellion. The brutality of the war led to what the UN has called one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. More than 2.6 million people have been displaced, most of them to squalid camps in Darfur and neighbouring Chad.³⁹ The ensuing conflict was initially addressed through a regional attempt to mediate a peace agreement, and the deployment of a small African Union peace-support mission (AMIS) to monitor the ceasefire agreement. The ceasefire soon broke down, and the mission shifted its focus to protection of civilians and support for humanitarian efforts.

From the beginning of the conflict, Sudan was firmly opposed to greater UN involvement, seeing it as a pretext for Western intervention. However, in 2007, a compromise UN–AU hybrid operation in Darfur (UNAMID) was established. UNAMID, which became the largest peacekeeping operation in UN history, was tasked with supporting the fragile peace agreement, protecting civilians and facilitating humanitarian efforts. In 2009, in response to an International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant for Sudanese President al-Bashir for war crimes and crimes against humanity, several international agencies were expelled from the country and the region. After a brief improvement in security, the situation deteriorated considerably again in 2013. Since then, UN peacekeepers and the remaining humanitarian personnel have been focusing on the areas of Darfur that present the highest security threats, notably the camps of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Travel to Darfur is notoriously difficult, and for years the region has been designated as a complete no-go zone (red category, 'advise against all travel'). Access is heavily restricted by the Khartoum authorities. Obtaining Darfur travel permits is (almost) impossible for Western travellers, especially since the ICC indictment of President al-Bashir. According to my interlocutors in UNAMID, even some of their staff failed to obtain permits. Similarly, goods and supplies underway to the mission in Darfur are often seriously delayed in clearing customs. Logistically, travel to Darfur is no less complicated. The only flights to or near Darfur are UN flights, for which permission is required. In addition, at every stage of travel the individual Sudanese police officers examining the documents are authorized to refuse permission to board the plane. The entire process left me with the impression that, unless one was willing to cross the border between Chad and Sudan illegally and be escorted by local fixers (essentially militias), the only way to gain

access to the region was to go through an international organization. When such an opportunity presented itself in 2014, I embraced it. From the beginning it was clear that obtaining repeated access would be extremely difficult.

My fieldwork was organized around an existing relationship between a network of research institutes in Africa and Europe and the UN–AU mission in Darfur. In return for the invitation, we undertook to prepare an independent study on the police component.⁴⁰ The primary report focused on the UNAMID mission and its activities, with my own research examining broader questions of protection of civilians. The team consisted of five researchers: one researcher and I had an academic focus, while the others concentrated more on policy and training inputs. Two of us travelled on Western passports, three on African passports; I was the only one working for a European institution. While most constraints on my research came from Sudanese authorities and because of arrangements we had made with the UN, it was clear that as a Westerner working for a European institution I was subject to an additional layer of regulations.

The institutional pre-approval processes varied substantially, with my own process far more elaborate than that of African institutes. I had to fill out a detailed risk-assessment form regarding travel advice, possible evacuation plans, medical facilities etc. This created an initial hurdle, as many of the mandatory security procedures could not be put in place. For example, there were no hospitals of the required standard nearby. I could also anticipate problems with the requisite daily communication with my designated home institution contact, due to poor infrastructure. However, after two extended meetings, my research trip was approved. There were three interconnected reasons for the decision: my Darfur travel was to be arranged and secured by UN peacekeepers; I committed myself to conducting research primarily within the compound where I was to live; and armed UN security escort would be provided whenever I left the compound. Even without external constraints, the policies of my institution would have necessitated embedded travel to Darfur. As the state where I hold citizenship had no diplomatic representation in Sudan, I was also to inform the ambassador of the country where my research institute is based. The ambassador replied promptly, urging me to get in touch if any problems should arise. However, as the Regeni case shows, had things gone seriously awry, the duty-of-care issues for institutions employing non-nationals are more complicated than institutional procedures might suggest.

While the process itself struck me as perfunctory at times, my institution fortunately had extensive experience with similar research and had developed a flexible pre-approval process. My arrangements required approval only from the head of my research group and the institute director. As I had only a fortnight between receiving an invitation and leaving for Sudan, making all the necessary arrangements was possible only within such a flexible system and with the full cooperation of everyone involved. Had I been employed in a different environment, for example a British university, where such applications must proceed through committees, I might well never have made it to Darfur.

Despite the challenge of obtaining permission from the Sudanese authorities to enter Darfur, the travel permits arrived quite quickly. My interlocutors attributed that to the close working relationship between the Sudanese Ministry of Interior and the UNAMID police component, who submitted a request on our behalf. These travel permits do not take form of a normal visa stamp; they are issued in Arabic, making it complicated to board flights to get to Sudan. One of the researchers got stuck at the airport, joining us only after an additional intervention from the UN. This process, together with the Khartoum airport facilitation, where at times my UN escort seemed to be personally vouching for me, made it abundantly clear that if I wanted to follow my institutional risk-management policies and not engage in illicit activities, embedded research was the only possible way of getting into the region.

Despite the sensitivity of the conflict and the negative perceptions of most international actors in the region, there were no outright restrictions on our research. This was something that we previously discussed with the UN mission. We were never asked not to write about anything or not to be critical of our host, although we were repeatedly made aware of the tenuous relationship between the UN mission and the local authorities. The implicit message was to ‘tone down’ our criticism of local authorities. But there were also various subtler ways of controlling the flow of information – like constant ‘escorts’, escorts scheduling our appointments, and total reliance on our ‘research subject’ infrastructure. All these impacted how I could obtain information, and I had to constantly re-evaluate the quality of my data.

Some interviews were conducted with the whole team in the room, others in smaller groups, some individually. While this was somewhat unorthodox, I never felt restricted in any way by my co-researchers. In fact, it gave me the opportunity to observe the differing standards and foci of my policy colleagues, who were primarily interested in

helping with the training. Our escorts were relatively junior UN personnel and did not assume the usual 'fixer' roles: they scheduled our meetings around other people's commitments and arranged our transport. Their presence was generally unobtrusive, although their approach occasionally collided with scholarly standards. For example, they scheduled relatively short meetings, which led to awkward situations where my academic colleague or I would inevitably need to request a follow-up meeting with the same person, or would simply drop the next appointment in order to finish the interview.

Similarly, some of the interviews arranged as focus group discussions proved problematic as these participants were uniformed personnel of differing ranks – and discussions ended up replicating the associated hierarchies. It was clear that our escorts were accustomed to arranging interviews for internal evaluations and UN reports, an observation that speaks volumes about differing validation standards in scholarly and policy reports. As a result, I saw any information from junior personnel obtained in these interviews as problematic. My own way of dealing with this was to follow up with the more junior personnel during unstructured time, especially over meals, where 'informed consent' standards would have been difficult to follow.

More consequentially, our access to the local population was severely limited and managed. Due to security considerations and logistical arrangements, we needed special permission to leave the compound. Travel to all meeting sites was with a heavily armed escort – standard UN protocol in Darfur, which some of our civilian interlocutors also saw as interfering with their own work with the local population. Our local interlocutors were brought to us by our escorts, and the interviews were conducted in the presence of armed UN personnel. When the problematic aspect of this was mentioned in a meeting with an IDP women's group, it was pointed out that our armed escorts were under strict instructions to never leave us out of sight. If we had not done embedded work with the UN but could choose our security providers, it would have been easier to develop our own security protocols and ask our armed escorts to wait outside the building. This episode re-confirmed the problematic acquisition of sensitive data found in UN reports.

Given all these limitations, it should not come as a surprise that very few international researchers have been able to conduct fieldwork in Darfur. Several interlocutors expressed great surprise at seeing us at all. Independent research on Darfur based on field knowledge is extremely hard to come by and will entail various compromises. Moreover, many international NGOs, including the most critical ones,

were expelled from the region after the ICC warrant on al-Bashir. Most UN programmes operate with extremely limited capacity in the region, organizing their operations from Khartoum and relying on local implementers. Security for UN and NGO workers is provided by UNAMID peacekeepers, in forms similar to ours. After several attacks just before our visit, all international personnel were relocated to the UNAMID compounds. This meant curfews and further restrictions on contact with locals. In contrast to Mali, where research data may be produced by various local and international actors with competing and overlapping agendas, information on Darfur with insights from the ground comes primarily from the UN mission and the few local sources. Any research access, even when as heavily restricted and ‘compromised’ as ours, should be seen as valuable for academic work – but its limitations need to be acknowledged and discussed openly.

Conclusions

Calls are increasingly heard for putting formal research to active use in evidence-based policy-making (EBPM), intended to bridge the gaps between research, policy and practice. Pressures for knowledge mobilization are multiplying, as states and international organizations have ambitions of operating in knowledge-based societies. Maintaining a strict division between science and policy is increasingly difficult, and parallel standards are proliferating. For scholarly endeavours, awareness of this development and reflective reading of academic and non-academic work is becoming as important for knowledge production as the direct interaction with the subject of study. This holds particularly for research into ‘zones of danger’, where funding must often be procured from governmental and intergovernmental sources.

Research is also increasingly framed by security concerns. Choices are often made at a distance, by ethics and ‘security and safety’ committees on behalf of researchers in the name of their protection. Several studies have warned how similar processes have impacted humanitarian and peacekeeping work, raising fundamental issues for their core principles of impartiality, independence and neutrality.⁴¹ Our case analysis has emphasized how such processes surround contemporary research. While part of a broader development in social sciences, the trend towards securitization of scholarship is particularly evident in fields of inquiry where ‘evidence’ is beyond reach, as in danger zones. Both cases reported here illustrate the functioning of two distinct but mutually

reinforcing logics affecting research: a modern form of intimidation linked to state repression (Darfur) and/or threats from anti-state armed groups (Mali and Darfur), and a subtler mode of disciplining research via emerging safety and security regimes. Indeed, the emergence of a new set of constraints may have impacts precisely where ethnographic approaches are likely to be most useful and needed: in explaining changes in times and spaces of uncertainty.

The combined effect of these ongoing transformations is hard to measure. One immediate tangible consequence seems to be the rising cost of fieldwork, as researchers must overcome a range of bureaucratic hurdles before venturing into danger zones. Another implication highlighted in discussions about data transparency is increasing project standardization. The proliferation, formalization and centralization of risk management procedures, combined with the introduction of rigorous data management and transparency standards and stronger emphasis on ethical guidelines regarding field research, work to minimize pluralism in approaches. There is a growing isomorphism among research projects, due partly to the propagation of project templates via competitive macro-funding schemes, and partly to disciplinary practices. Resources rarely trickle down to those research components that actually qualify the project as ‘empirically rich’. Perhaps the most perverse impact is that the riskiest part of fieldwork is increasingly entrusted to first-time and local researchers who work under uncertain contracts, have greater mobility and thus may manage to circumvent the web of regulations that governs contemporary research.

Both our field missions illustrate the salience of the problem of access – in particular access to local people – in danger zones. In a way, this situation is eerily reminiscent of when researchers were studying the ‘dangerous peripheries’ of the colonial world: the protection offered by ‘big men’ was a precondition for fieldwork. Today, however, much of the decision-making power is removed from the control of individual researchers, located instead in a hotchpotch of security rules and regulations that have to do with governing at a distance. The increasing bureaucratization of risk-management practices, but also researcher self-regulation through disciplinary socialization, entails various restrictions that tend to place the researcher in a safety bubble (security as protection), and remove her from the locals (security as relationships).

Given the importance of knowledge on ‘danger zones’ – not just for policy but also for core concepts in social sciences – the academic world has been remarkably slow in

adapting its scientific standards. The ongoing disciplinary transformations make it difficult for research on danger zones to follow a ‘scientifically rigorous’ methodology. By showing willingness to embrace ‘good enough research’, individual researchers might feel fewer pressures to hide the inherent problems in studying danger zones. Open discussion of problems and workarounds would improve not only the quality of scholarship but also the actual security of researchers travelling to danger zones. However, the trend within the social sciences seems to be in the opposite direction.

That said, individual research responsibility cannot be neglected. Self-reflexivity is needed, in relation to the subject and to the methodology. Awareness of the limitations of one’s research extent is crucial when working in and on zones of danger. Our experience indicates that access to various groups of locals is by far the most problematic aspect, implying limitations not just as to what researchers can do, but also as to what they, as Westerners, can say. As Dauphinee⁴² points out, the researcher is not a vessel to be filled with unproblematic data and knowledge. How the researcher relates to the object of study contributes to defining the object itself.⁴³ Unless we can be aware of and open about our own limitations as to what we can say about the subjects we study, we may inadvertently contribute to essentialization of the research subject – at worst, leading to the systemic Othering of the ‘great unknown’.

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⁴ For example, Walsh 2016, 'Italian Student's Brutal Killing'.

⁵ Developed mainly in common law legal systems, the concept of duty of care (or 'duty of protection', or 'due diligence') presumes that '[i]ndividuals and organizations have legal obligations to act towards others and the public in a prudent and cautious manner to avoid the risk of reasonably foreseeable injury to others' (see de Guttry, 'Duty of care'). This obligation may apply to actions and omissions and may give rise to claims for damages.

⁶ El-Din 2016, 'AUC remembers Giulio Regeni'.

⁷ Pyper and Waddilove 2016, 'Why the UK government'.

⁸ See 'EU Parliament passes resolution to suspend military cooperation with Egypt following Regeni's murder'.

⁹ Valverde and Mopas 2004, 'Insecurity and the dream'

¹⁰ Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998, *Security: a new framework*.

¹¹ Meger 2016 'The Fetishization of Sexual Violence'

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- ¹² See the following websites: <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>;
<http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/conseils-aux-voyageurs/>;
<https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/alertswarnings.html>
- ¹³ Said 1978, *Orientalism*
- ¹⁴ O’Tuathail 1986 ‘The language and nature’
- ¹⁵ Ó’Tuathail 2010, ‘Localizing geopolitics’; Dalby 2008, ‘Imperialism, domination, culture’
- ¹⁶ Gruffydd Jones 2008, ‘The global political economy of social crisis’; Morton and Bilgin 2002, ‘Historicising Representations of “Failed States”’; Hill 2005 ‘Beyond the Other?’
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- ¹⁸ Nordstrom and Robben 1995, *Fieldwork under fire*; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000, *Danger in the field*; Jennings 2007, *The War Zone as Social*.
- ¹⁹ Hoffmann 2004, *Doing Fieldwork*: 5
- ²⁰ Russo and Strazzari 2016, ‘Sovereignty vs. biopolitics’
- ²¹ <http://www.politicalsciencenow.com/data-access-and-research-transparency-initiative-da-rt/>
- ²² For a symposium on this decision see special issue of the PS: Political Science & Politics (2014), with the introductory article by Lupia 2014; and a symposium edited by Buthe 2015.
- ²³ REF 2014 Impact Case Studies, available at <http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/FAQ.aspx>
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Tapscott and Desai 2015, ‘Tomayto Tomahto’
- ²⁶ USHA/UCEA 2011. ‘Guidance on Health and Safety’.
- ²⁷ See ENTRI webpage: <http://www.entriforcem.eu/training/pre-deployment-training-courses/> (last accessed March 2016).
- ²⁸ Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT)
- ²⁹ Duffield 2010, ‘Risk-management and the fortified’: 461
- ³⁰ Controversy remains as to what may constitute ‘personal sensitive data’. For example, the EU’s ‘Guidance: How to complete your ethics self-assessment’, to be used in applying for research grants to all EU macro-funding schemes, includes ‘political opinions’ under the category of ‘sensitive data,’ forcing interpretive creativity on the part of all researchers working on political affairs.
- ³¹ CEAUSSIC, *AAA Commission on the Engagement*
- ³² Kosovo Fixers: <https://www.facebook.com/kosovofixers> (last accessed March 2016).
- ³³ On the background to the Mali crisis see Lecocq, Baz, et al. 2013, ‘One hippopotamus and eight’; Whitehouse and Strazzari 2015, ‘Introduction: Rethinking challenges’.
- ³⁴ A restaurant, a hotel attended by ‘internationals’ and the headquarters of the EU military training mission were hit in Bamako, respectively, on 7 March 2015, on 20 November 2015, and 21 March 2016.
- ³⁵ My research during this fieldwork built on contacts in the region that were established prior to the 2012 crisis by other researchers in my institute.
- ³⁶ New fieldwork safety protocols were introduced in 2016 following the Regeni case: the same low-profile work would be forbidden today under the same PhD programme.
- ³⁷ On one occasion we were diverted to a clueless head of police when a sudden visit by the US ambassador to discuss ‘security matters’ imposed an improvised schedule reorganization at the Ministry of Interior.
- ³⁸ For background see Flint and de Waal 2009, *Darfur: A new History*; Mamdani 2010, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur*.
- ³⁹ Reliefweb 2016, ‘Sudan: Humanitarian Bulletin’.
- ⁴⁰ Caparini et al 2015, ‘The Role of the Police’
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- ⁴² Dauphinee 2010, ‘The ethics of autoethnography.’
- ⁴³ Law 2004, *After method*.