Received: 20 January 2025 | Accepted: 20 January 2025

DOI: 10.1111/1758-5899.13499

SPECIAL SECTION

The Safety of Strangers: The Realities and Politics of Protecting Civilians in Times of War

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ABSTRACT

Recent wars have brutally shown that civilians are not safe. This is despite high-level global commitments and multi-billion-dollar humanitarian spending to keep civilian strangers protected. The high civilian death tolls in recent armed conflicts are prompting new questions about how and if we can protect civilians in times of war, and what the real politics of such protection is. In this special section and its introduction, we argue that it is essential to pay attention to civilians' actual experiences of protection and their own strategies for staying safe. Normative schemes, including those that seek to offer safety to strangers, are always contested and negotiated and are always bound up in claims for legitimacy, power and public authority. We argue that it is in civilians' quotidian experiences of staying safe that we can best see and understand the local, national and international politics of civilian protection, as well as the forms of safety that are prioritised by civilians themselves. To do this, the special section draws together qualitative, ethnographic and ethnomusicological research in Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda to shed light on how the international community can keep civilians safe.

KEYWORDS

armed conflict, civlians, humanitarian, protection, war

1 | THE SAFETY OF STRANGERS

This is a dangerous age to be a civilian. A higher and higher percentage of those who die during war are noncombatants. In 2023, the UN reported a 72% increase in the number of civilian deaths in armed conflicts compared with previous years (UNHCR 2024). In the 1990s and 2000s, despite tensions easing between competing global superpowers, civilian casualties did not end and were mainly concentrated in 'civil'[1] and 'new' wars fought for economic gain (Kaldor 2013). Over the last decade, armed conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Sudan and the Middle East can, once again, be more clearly linked to geopolitical tensions. Yet, they have remained just as deadly, if not more deadly, for civilians.

Most striking is that civilian casualty figures are escalating despite global leaders and international organisations saying that they are committed to protecting civilians, and despite them spending political influence and vast resources to try to keep civilians safe. Indeed, since 1949's revision to the Geneva Conventions, there has been an apparent consensus around a commitment to protect civilians during conflicts, even if what 'protection' means remains ambiguous (Claire 2016). These commitments have built on much older philosophies from around the world that have morally commended helping strangers and being restrained during war. Furthermore, global public outcries over genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica in the 1990s re-energised commitments to protect civilians and led to a ballooning of the actors involved. For some, this era also centered human rights alongside physical safety (Kirk, Pendle, and Vasilyeva 2024).

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The reality that civilians are increasingly unsafe raises questions about the international community's ability to protect. Contemporary failures to protect have brought new reservations about the legitimacy of the rule-based international order which appears unfit for the challenges posed by the re-emergence of geopolitical conflicts. The United States and European countries' support for Israel's response to Hamas' October 7, 2023 attacks, condemnation of Russia's actions in Ukraine and perceived silences elsewhere, in particular, have led to calls for the international protection architecture to be rethought and reformed (Kucici and Boye 2024; Ungar 2024).[2] For many, business as usual would signal that humanitarian protection continues to be a 'fig-leaf' with which great powers deny the consequences of their policy choices (DuBois 2009).

Nonetheless, international actors do not have a monopoly on protection. Civilians act to keep themselves, their families and their communities safe. Many have grown-up in places shaped by violent protracted crises. Through brutal experience, generations have learned strategies to stay safe during times of conflict or while fleeing. This has not gone unnoticed by researchers who have documented 'civilian protective agency' (Krause et al. 2023) and civilians' practices, which often see leaders imparting knowledge of how to survive in adverse conditions, and communities carefully avoiding, negotiating or colluding with armed groups (Jose and Medie 2016; Rhoads and Sutton 2020; Krause et al. 2023). In long-running conflicts, these negotiations can take place with armed groups that are themselves intimately connected to or even part of the communities seeking safety (Terry and McQuinn 2018; Pendle 2021). Where they fail to prevent or halt violence, some communities choose to fight back, which may ultimately perpetuate violence.

Growing interest in 'self-protection' is useful as it reminds us of the agency and knowledge of civilians and refugees. A focus on self-protection also resonates with broader popular, contemporary humanitarian and donor policy discourses about 'resilience', 'self-reliance' and 'helping refugees help themselves'. There have also been some efforts to support civilians' self-protection strategies (Kirk, Pendle, and Vasilyeva 2024). Yet, the idea that civilians should look after themselves is nothing new. From the 1950s and the periods of independence in Africa, for example, there was an emphasis on collective, settlement-wide self-sufficiency. While a more individualistic focus on looking after oneself came to dominate humanitarian discourses from the 1980s (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018, 1460).

This history helps us see that self-protection harbours a hidden assumption that people can protect themselves. This, as DuBois (2009) suggested for the 1990s' expansion of protection actors, risks letting higher authorities, such as armed actors and states, off the hook. Indeed it is these higher authorities, not civilians themselves, that have the ability and responsibility to protect. Additionally, these discussions can obscure the politics shaping who gets protected, from what and by whom. This includes how international organisations, states and more localized leaders often compete over who defines, denies or provides for the safety of strangers. The danger is that a focus on 'self-protection' comes close to implying that civilians can keep themselves safe irrespective of the circumstances of war. This is something which, in an era of weapons of mass destruction, shifting military technology, closing borders and decreasing flows of humanitarian aid, has never been farther from the truth.

With these concerns in mind, the collection of articles in this special section explores humanitarian protection and self-protection norms and practice. The collection emphasises the importance of the power and politics at play during efforts to protect. They show why protection must be understood as part of broader sociopolitical and economic dynamics. This is as true of the everyday, micro politics of protection in places affected by violent conflict, as it is of the ways international organisations and states seek to claim the authority to protect.

All the articles in this collection focus on war and protection in the interconnected countries of Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda. We focus on this region for three reasons: Firstly, because it has sadly experienced protracted violent conflict over decades. This means that, in some areas, generations of people have grown up learning to stay safe in war and during armed conflict. This has caused protection to be a public good that is central to leaders' claims to legitimate authority. Secondly, the region has often been used as a testing site for innovations in humanitarian protection. Since the 1970s, it has been a staging ground for new protection ideas and policies by humanitarian organisations, the United Nations, states and communities. This creates a set of valuable case studies for empirical contributions to debates around the practice and politics of protection, with a focus on how the local meets the international. Thirdly, this region is particularly interesting as, at least for some periods, there has been explicit international consensus about the need for protection and peace. Nevertheless, neither has been realised.

The collection of articles also shares a methodological commitment. Aside from the opening article by Kirk, Pendle, and Vasilyeva (2024), all the contributions utilise ethnographic methods that provide insights into the quotidian, fine-grained realities of the places they describe. Indeed, ethnography has a history of being used to understand humanitarian realities (de Waal 1997; Reynolds and Lewis 2019). Some of the articles' authors are visitors who have long worked in the places they write about. Others have themselves been civilians in wartime or have been humanitarians involved in the delivery of aid and protection. In this sense, the

collection is informed by autoethnographic observations and the everyday knowledge that is gained by working over time in these contexts. This knowledge shaped the research tools and questions addressed by the authors, as well as their interpretations of findings and policy recommendations.

The opening article explores what three large humanitarian organisations publicly claim to do in the name of protection in Syria, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Kirk, Pendle, and Vasilyeva 2024). Starting from the observation that many humanitarian agencies now derive legitimacy from their claim to protect, the authors show how a broad range of activities is now counted as protection even when they are far from what affected populations and global publics would understand as necessary or sufficient to keep civilians safe. The authors argue that, as this expansion has done little to actually protect civilians, there is once again a need for organisations to collaborate over a shared definition that better approximates what they are able and willing to do in its name.

The following article, *Community self-protection, public authority and the safety of strangers in Bor and Ler, South Sudan*, by Kirk, Pendle, and Akoi (2024) switches focus from humanitarian organisations to the self-protection strategies of communities in South Sudan. Drawing upon interviews with public authorities—from chiefs and women's leaders to community members working in the humanitarian system—they show how protection is connected to positions of power. This includes the ability to resolve conflicts that may spark cycles of violence and to ascribe the boundaries of the 'safety of strangers' when outsiders seek help or communities choose to fight back. The authors argue that humanitarians may find similarities between local norms and their own and should consider supporting those actors that have the legitimacy and means to protect where they cannot.

Switching focus again to refugees in Uganda, Mylan's (2025) study explores seemingly paradoxical containment policies during the COVID-19 epidemic. The state and its international backers framed refugees' health as both in need of protection and a protection threat. This led to restrictions on their movement, which ran up against commitments to process new arrivals and refugees' long-established practice of moving across borders as a form of self-protection. Mylan argues that 'National containment policies and lockdowns relied on particular understandings of "state borders" as solid, fixed and permanent' that were not shared. This effectively eroded political legitimacy as fear of the virus waned and food insecurity rose. The lesson for humanitarians is that singular health narratives cannot hope to capture the complexity of the lives of those they claim to help.

Storer's (2025) article, *Reshaping Faith through Protection: Learning from Displacements from and into Arua, North West Uganda*, also calls for humanitarians to honour complexity. It focuses on the 1980's flights of Ugandans from post-Amin reprisals and the 2013 South Sudanese flight from the young county's post-2013 wars. Storer questions humanitarians' use of generalised toolkits for integrating faith leaders into protection efforts and highlights how their authority to protect has always been carefully negotiated in specific contexts. Programmes that depoliticise faith leaders' protection roles may overlook both their potential to contribute to intangible activities such as social healing and the ways in which they can feed into exclusionary visions of nation building. Furthermore, Storer reminds readers that there is a need to recognise that religious leaders can put themselves at risk through efforts to protect, even when associated with well-meaning humanitarians.

Blackmore's (2025) research, *Seeking Safety: Identifying Protection Gaps for Artists in South Sudan*, among South Sudanese artists that have fled the country, reminds us that culture and creativity are often targeted during times of conflict. Although international law has much to say about sites of cultural heritage and the symbolic harm that can be done to them, there is a lack of shared understanding among international actors and, as with other civilians, limited physical protection for artists. This gap has led artists to devise ways of seeking safety, while international and state actors hope that 'more laws equate to more security'. This is shown to be a particular problem for South Sudan and its creators due to its status as a new nation with cultural heritage that does not clearly fit within interpretations of the existing rules. In the meantime, Blackmore suggests that part of the answer lies in better understandings of how artists in young nations define their work and how they seek protection by making themselves visible using online platforms and forming transnational networks.

Arkangelo (2025)'s article, *Safety among Displaced South Sudanese in Khartoum: The Role of Christian Faith Communities*, provides a pertinent discussion of self-protection strategies among displaced South Sudanese communities in Khartoum (Sudan). She opens by discussing how their rights and vulnerability have not only been shaped by the politics of the Sudans, but also by UN policies and categorizations. Her article highlights how South Sudanese churches have been key institutions offering support to South Sudanese in Khartoum, including providing them with aid, advice, advocacy and empathy. Plus, importantly, the churches provide spiritual communities and protection—a key part of how people feel they need protecting. At the same time, divisions between the churches can undermine their united ability to advocate to humanitarian organisations and the international church for support.

Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Pendle (2025)'s article, *Singing Safety: understanding South Sudanese protection strategies through song*, makes a practical suggestion that humanitarians should pay more attention

to music as a way to better understand civilians' own protection priorities and the moral and political reasons behind them. They advocate for ethnomusicology—the critical study of the dialogical relationship between music and the contexts that define it—to understand civilians' self-protection strategies. While music can provide powerful insights into people's safety strategies, music also needs to be understood in context, through ethnographic work, to understand how music is embedded in local political and social meanings. The article draws on ethnomusicology research in Warrap State (South Sudan).

Janguan and Kirk's (2023) final article, *Hiding in Plain Sight: IDP's Protection Strategies after Closing Juba's Protection of Civilian Sites*, starts with the aftermath of a UN peacekeeping intervention to keep civilians safe. When large-scale fighting erupted in Juba (the capital) and other cities in December 2013, tens of thousands of people ran to UN bases for protection. Yet, due to fear of the government and ethnic targeting, many did not leave, turning the camps into 'protection of civilian sites'. Janguan and Kirk explore the situation a decade later as the UN peacekeeping mission decided to withdraw protection from many of them and handed them to the government. They describes the precarious safety situation that people were left in, as well as the strategies they devised to stay safe. Worryingly, the article documents how some of these are harmful, restricting peoples' freedom to express their identities and participate in political life. The authors suggest that this indicates that the international community's decision to close the camps when they did was, at its root, political.

We are at a moment in humanitarian history when people are again questioning the ability and legitimacy of humanitarians and the UN's ability to protect. The first years of the 2020s have brought a new wave of armed conflicts that have shocked the world largely because of their extreme and deadly violence towards civilians and their disregard for the lives of ordinary people who just want to get on with living. Social media has meant that global publics have watched these horrors unfold in real time and with an unedited brutality, prompting outcries against the failure to protect. Watching these conflicts has not only shown people that armed groups do not consistently protect civilians, but also that the international community can be very limited in what they do. Civilians are not safer even when there has been a significant UN, humanitarian or diplomatic presence. In this moment of questioning and likely policy reform, we must centre civilians' experiences. This special issue brings together a rich, ethnographically and qualitatively informed collection of articles that shed light on the realities and quotidian experiences of protection. It is in civilians everyday lives in conflict contexts that protection strategies will gain meaning and show success, so we must start with these everyday experiences as we consider what needs to change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are incredibly grateful for the time, effort and dedication that the authors of this special section have shown over time, as well as the research participants that contributed to their studies. Their research for these articles was not only interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also by continuing and new armed conflicts. Some of the authors in this special section, since the start of their research in 2020, have even had to flee with their families from war and have themselves experienced the realities of being unprotected civilians. Despite this, their articles are published, and we are so impressed.

We are also incredibly grateful to Professor Tim Allen (London School of Economics and Political Science) who conceived of the project that funded this research. He remains a key advocate for demanding that we pay attention to the real, micro politics of protection as it is actually experienced by those civilians whom people and institutions claim to protect. We are also thankful to the Safety of Strangers grant funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/T007524/1).

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The use of the term 'civil' to describe these wars has been contested because these wars continued to be shaped by international and transnational economic and political dynamics. However, Dorronsoro, Baczko and others make a convincing case for the continued use of 'civil wars' (Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2017).

[2] See also the special section in *Global Policy* volume 15, issue 4, September 2024, entitled 'Policy Insights Special Section: Postliberal Order Making: The 'Global South' and the war in Ukraine'.

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How to cite this article: Pendle, N. & Kirk, T. (2025) The Safety of Strangers: The Realities and Politics of Protecting Civilians in Times of War. *Global Policy*, 16, 64–68. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13499