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## Here be dragons: mapping an ethnography of global danger

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Andersson, Ruben (2016) Here be dragons: mapping an ethnography of global danger. *Current Anthropology*, 57 (6). pp. 707-731. ISSN 0011-3204

DOI: [10.1086/689211](https://doi.org/10.1086/689211)

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Available in LSE Research Online: November 2016

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## **Here be dragons: Mapping an ethnography of global danger**

### Abstract

For a brief post-Cold War moment, it seemed as if global division would yield to connectivity as marginal regions would be rewired into the world economy. Instead, the post-9/11 years have seen the spread of ever-larger “no-go zones”, seen as constituting a danger to especially western states and citizens. Contact points are reduced as aid workers withdraw, military operations are conducted from above and few visitors, reporters or researchers dare venture beyond the new red lines. Casting an eye on this development while building on anthropology’s critical security agenda, this article draws an ethnographic map of “global danger” by showing how perceived transnational threats – terrorism, drugs, displacement – are conjured, bundled and relegated to world margins, from the sub-Saharan Sahel to the “AfPak” borderlands. Drawing on fieldwork in Mali, it shows how a relationship by remote control has developed as western interveners seek to overcome a fundamental dilemma: their deep concern with threats emanating from the “danger zone” set against their aversion towards entering it. As ambivalent sites of distance and engagement, I argue, such zones are becoming invested with old fantasies of remoteness and otherness, simultaneously kept at arm’s length and unevenly incorporated into a world economy of risk.

*Keywords: danger; risk; anthropology of security; securitization; Mali*

Planning for fieldwork in conflict-hit Mali in 2014 from my London home, I clicked through Google Maps to search for Timbuktu. In a split-second I got car directions for that one-time epitome of remoteness – 3 days and 12 hours via the N-6 on a route that

“has tolls”, “includes a ferry” and “crosses through multiple countries”, as the map helpfully informed me. Yet that bright blue route curling down through Europe and Africa was but a thin, even illusory thread of connectivity. Timbuktu and northern Mali – an area that only a few years ago hosted festival-goers and researchers eager to tap into Mali’s rich culture – was by this time off-limits to most western visitors; it had become yet another re-blanked part of the world map at a time of rampant globalization.

*Hic sunt dracones.* Those Medieval maps may not have spelled out “here be dragons”, as we tend to think, yet they were often adorned with fantastical creatures, dragons and exotic beasts, serving as flourishes or as indicators of the limits of our knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Now the beasts are back, or so we hear on the news: vague threats are lurking in far-fetched corners of our maps, areas where the inhabitants of the western world no longer dare venture. Syria and Iraq’s embattled border zones, Somalia and Pakistan’s Tribal Areas, Afghanistan’s hinterland and the northern reaches of the sub-Saharan Sahel are all regions harboring a litany of contemporary fears. Terror and drug-running, disease and disaster, conflict and displacement: these dangers fester on the margins of our maps, vague yet distant to western publics, forever at a remove until they blip by on the newscasts, temporarily bringing news of distant atrocities and random tragedies.

[figref1]

For most western citizens, these new no-go zones are not of great concern; they are remote and rarely any of their business. Not so, however, for anthropologists, as our

discipline has long been intimately tied to the exploration of global margins. Starting with my own anthropological dilemma at the edge of the danger zone of northern Mali, I will in this article give an at times personal, at times political account of shifts in global insecurity – and what role our discipline may have in mapping and interrogating these shifts as we critically draw on our disciplinary heritage.

The “danger question” has become increasingly acute for anthropology as the discipline has had to face up to insecurity on both practical and theoretical fronts in recent years.<sup>2</sup> In *Fieldwork under Fire*, Nordstrom and Robben (1995) engaged with dilemmas that have lingered on our ethnographic field of vision ever since: how to research and write about violence tearing through communities with which we are deeply familiar, while adapting our methods and ethics to deal with situations of conflict and danger. Their volume moreover highlighted the growing interest among anthropologists in stepping onto “dangerous fields” (Kovats-Bernat 2002) since the 1990s (e.g. Besteman 1999; Daniel 1996; Sluka 2000). The increasingly serious engagement with violence, (in)security and risk is also evident in landmark ethnographies set within the West, whether in violent urban areas (Bourgois 2003; Feldman 1991) or inside the powerful security apparatus itself (e.g. Lutz 2001). In the post-9/11 era with its various iterations of the “war on terror”, this interest has flourished (Fassin 2013; Gusterson 2004; Masco 2014; Whitehead and Finnström 2013). As evident from Maguire et al’s (2014) volume *The Anthropology of Security*, building on Goldstein’s (2010) call for a “critical security anthropology”, anthropologists have started to take (in)security seriously as an object of study in its own right. As a result, they may no longer be likely to leave a war zone as journalists enter, as Malkki (1995:93) once put it – indeed, some have even gone as far as

advising militaries in the field, reinvigorating a much older co-optation of our working methods by those in power (Price 2011).

As the last sentence suggests, the problems with this move onto “dangerous fields” of (in)security are manifold: ethical, methodological, political. Politically, our academic endeavors are symptomatic of security’s broader “colonization” of ever-larger parts of social life, as Goldstein (2010:488) and Maguire et al (2014) have noted. Indeed, “security” is now everywhere. In a compelling study of the post-9/11 U.S. “counterterror state”, Masco (2014) notes how a catastrophic official orientation towards unlimited future (terrorist) threats has seen security practices extended into the global arena and novel fields, ranging from disease control to development aid and academia, where solid funding streams have emerged on “border security”, “biosecurity”, “cybersecurity” and “violent radicalization”. At this post-Cold War juncture, characterized by vicious cycles of ever-expanding security apparatuses and the constant generation of novel threats (Masco 2014), one key task for anthropology is to denaturalize security – calling into question how it is summoned, how it is put to work and given meaning in specific settings, as Goldstein (2010) has insisted. Indeed, anthropologists are already providing the larger fields occupying the security terrain – international relations, sociology, criminology, “security studies” in all its shapes and sizes – with a healthy dose of caution against putative “global” claims on the nature of security, as well as with methodological inspiration as security scholars shift focus from discourse to praxis (Bigo 2014). At this productive interface, Goldstein (2010), Maguire et al (2014) and Fassin (2013) have all rightly urged anthropologists to be attentive to “local expressions and meanings”<sup>3</sup> as the content and form of security shift across the world – from the terrorist focus of post-9/11 United States to the urban

policing of Fassin's (2013) French field site and the neoliberal unraveling in Goldstein's (2010) Bolivia. In this grounded manner, ethnographers can help unpack the "black box" of security, an urgent task indeed in our "dark times" (Fassin 2011) of deepening counterterror measures, taller border barriers and aggressive inner-city policing.

Yet problems loom on practical fronts once we step out of the West and enter the "red zones" of conflict, crime and instability of the kind I was preparing for in Mali in 2014, and which I will refer to in this article as the new global "danger zones".<sup>4</sup> In a critical historical note, Kovats-Bernat (2002:211) notes how the "stability in the ethnographic field" once guaranteed by colonial power no longer holds. Indeed, in an era of rampant insecurity and fragile postcolonial states, our quest for knowledge of the insecure Other is becoming intimately tied up with the insecurity of the anthropological Self.

Starting with this personal and political predicament, I will go down a complementary path to the localized route traced by Goldstein, Fassin and others in focusing on how *global* forms of insecurity and danger are conjured, mapped and intervened upon by western states, which remain the main funders and instigators of international intervention. As Masco recently put it, delineating such a field of inquiry:

Across a wide range of security concerns from climate change to infectious disease new modes of surveillance are offering a real time portrait of specific threats that transcend state borders. This technological expansion in how danger is constituted, how it is visualized, and how it is

tracked in everyday life has the potential to enable a new kind of planetary security discourse.<sup>5</sup>

What follows, then, is an ethnographic mapping exercise which traces the pathways and clusters of increasingly global dangers. While such an ethnographic effort will to some extent have to be “global”, too (Burawoy 2000), in the material below the focus will be on the sub-Saharan Sahel, and Mali in particular, as well as this region’s linkages in terms of risk and danger with control centers and capitals elsewhere.

Even in its regionally circumscribed version, such an ethnography of global danger does present several anthropological “dangers”: of context, of voice, of method. As anthropologists branch out methodologically to deal with conflict “at a distance” (Robben 2010), our approaches may uneasily come to mirror those of the interveners themselves – the drone-wielding soldiers, the headquartered aid worker managers, the bunkered embassy bureaucrats. However, I believe this is one “danger” we should be willing to face, and not just because anthropological insights will otherwise remain marginalized in larger academic and political debates, as Robben (2010:20-21) shows was the case with Iraq. In fact, the superficiality and “thinness” of contemporary international interventions itself presents an intriguing ethnographic challenge, as Feldman (2012:18-19) has asserted in a rather different context. Our methodological limitations link us into this larger field of intervention: they constitute one more window onto a distinctly global process of distance-making and danger.

I will argue, then, that anthropologists may be very well placed not only to embark on studies of the “microphysics” of (in)security – its intricate local workings and

manifestations – but that we may also venture into researching the very “globality” of insecurity and danger. I will suggest that one way of doing so, complementing Masco’s (2014) archival approach, is to mine a rather “traditional” ethnographic vein to its point of impossibility. In the “exotic” fieldwork tradition, anthropologists are canaries in the academic coalmine, poised at the very entrance to the insecure world “out there”. An ethnography of global danger, then, may start with reflexively accounting for our own fears and vulnerabilities at this threshold, as Kovats-Bernat (2002:217) has also suggested. Here, our individual sense of danger – rather than being a mere obstacle – may serve as a jumping-off point as we survey the production of insecurity and novel “security-scapes” (Gusterson 2004) in crisis-hit areas.

However, this reflexive turn is only the start. As will be clear in the preamble below, concerned with my fieldwork on Mali’s conflict, anthropologists’ ambivalent relation to the dangerous field is but one small symptom of a much larger withdrawal by international actors from the “danger zone”. Section one traces this trend towards growing global distance, showing how a new relationship by remote control has developed between (especially western) interveners and intervened-upon populations. Next, section two argues that this reorganization is itself indicative of a larger sociopolitical shift as the relationship between the richest and poorest parts of the world is becoming reframed through a set of clustered threats. The third section, finally, looks at how danger and threat scenarios are also increasingly mobilized as a *local* resource – that is, by institutions and inhabitants of the “danger zone” – often with considerable ambivalence and with counterproductive consequences.

How may we understand the growing geographical divides between “red” and “green”



zones today? In the conclusion, I will build on the literature on global risk to suggest that the increasing remoteness of “red” zones should not blind us to their function within a world economy of risk and insecurity. Anthropologists will have much to contribute to the understanding of this globalized role as we critically draw on our disciplinary heritage of studying “faraway” places. Authors such as Harms et al (2014), McDougall and Scheele (2012), Piot (1999), Saxer (forthcoming) and Tsing (1993) have in recent years radically reframed the old anthropological trope of remoteness, showing supposedly remote areas to be crisscrossed by intricate pathways linking them to global and national orders. This article will show how danger may serve as precisely such a pathway – yet it is a pathway of a particular sort. Danger is double-edged: it separates yet draws us near. In seeking to draw a distance between “ourselves” in the West and the new danger zones, the latter come to exercise a peculiar power over us and over what Trouillot (2003) has called the “western geography of imagination”. As risk and danger are being re-mapped and re-imagined at a time of supposed global connectivity, western interveners, citizens and anthropologists increasingly fear entering yet grow fascinated with the distant danger zone, with far-reaching consequences that we are only just beginning to understand.

### **Preamble: Ethnography and the withdrawal from danger**

“The one thing that we can be certain about this year, in a highly uncertain world, is that there is no longer any such thing as far away.” These were the words of an executive with Control Risk, a UK-based private security company, as he launched his company’s Risk Map for 2015 with an online video. Yet the map itself, set behind the executive, told a different story: on it, large swathes of the world were covered in

aggressive shades of red, indicating high or extreme risks – rendering the world as a patchwork of safe, rich areas on the one hand and impoverished, insecure no-go zones on the other.<sup>6</sup>

While the Risk Map targets large corporations – including those seeking to enter “frontier markets” in the red areas – similar cartographic representations abound elsewhere, too. During my research, I have come across the interactive maps used by security companies to track risks to their clients; visual depictions of blood-red danger zones in the media; sketched cartographies of risk in western foreign ministries; and the familiar maps of official travel advice. In this world of red and green zones, the trend is clear: U.S. no-go advice covered 12 African countries in 1996; by 2013, that figure was 18. The UK Foreign Office had 13 countries or parts of countries on its global no-go list in 1997; in 2012 that figure was 40, again with many new entries for Africa. Meanwhile, western victims of terror attacks in regions such as Africa in fact remain very low: only fifteen of the 1,005 Americans killed in terrorist acts worldwide in the past decade took place on the continent, for instance.<sup>7</sup> Yet the media impact of any attack, as seen from Kenya to Tunisia, far surpasses the actual numbers, triggering swift changes in official travel advice and usually the exit of westerners. In this politicized landscape of risk assessment, large areas of our maps are being painted in deep shades of red, turning them into zones that we enter – if at all – at our own risk and peril.

[figref2]

[figref3]

Mali, the case study in this article, has come to be emblematic of the global mapping of danger, not least as regards the speed by which it descended into the “deep red” category of extreme risk. For some time, this landlocked country was a haven of peace and democracy in West Africa. Moreover, the country’s “desert blues” festivals, blue-clad Tuareg (Tamachek) nomads and its deep historical heritage helped place it on a cultural map of interest to tourists and anthropologists alike (see Soares 2012 for a critical assessment). Yet all was not right. By the late 2000s, travel advice was painting northern Mali in a deep red owing to the growing jihadist presence. No-travel advice meant no insurance, and so budget flights from Europe were cut, festivals cancelled, contact points severed. By early 2012, a northern Tuareg rebellion – the fourth since Mali’s independence from France in the 1960s – had begun, followed by a coup d’état in Bamako. As northern Mali was taken over by a combination of Tuareg separatists and jihadist factions that spring, the simplistic donor notion of Mali as an “aid darling” (Bergamaschi 2014) was swiftly being transformed into something else entirely as security analysts started referring to the country as “Africa’s Afghanistan” (Solomon 2013). As the jihadists eventually began pushing south, the French responded by launching a military operation in January 2013, retaking northern towns. “Operation Serval” was eventually followed by an African peace force, integrated into the UN “Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali”, or MINUSMA, by mid-2013.

It was in this context that I had come to Mali in May 2014 for fieldwork on international intervention, building on earlier research in 2010-11 on migration and border controls. Descending onto Bamako’s Senou airport, one change from the pre-war years was already in evidence: on the tarmac stood seven black UN military

planes, lined up in waiting for the cargo and personnel making their way to Mali's war-scarred north. Inside the airport terminal, a western woman scuttled between the police booths, overseeing Malian officers grappling with newly installed biometric equipment. Police aimed infrared pistols at us, screening for Ebola. Mali, it was clear after only a few minutes back on its soil, was now a country under international tutelage, its security assured by foreign soldiers and its borders controlled by western devices and expertise. It was also a country marked by an edginess I had not experienced on previous visits, I thought as I finally found a taxi in a remote corner of the airport parking lot. As we bumped our way down empty streets towards central Bamako, I kept looking over my shoulder, as if on guard against an unlikely ambush.

Studying the international response to the Mali conflict, as well as its interaction with longer-running interventions targeting the chronic livelihoods crises of the Sahel – as I had set out to do – was to prove a challenge. As I had prepared for fieldwork in early 2014, the question of whether I would actually be able to *visit* the places of concern to my research had become increasingly acute. Going north, travel advice, the newscasts and my university kept telling me, meant exposure to unseen dangers. Along with an array of rebel groups, the region presumably still harbored al Qaeda affiliates who threatened kidnap and targeted attacks. The risk was such that, as I interviewed Control Risk officers in London, they acknowledged they had had to turn down a project in the region owing to “internal risk” to staff. If companies capitalizing on global insecurity would not go themselves, then who would? Was it not cowardly to stay away, though, and did not locals face much larger dangers? There I sat, in my London office, scheming and tallying and anxiously eyeing the news as “the field” receded ever further from full ethnographic reach.

Now that I had finally arrived, I would only stay in the capital; yet even this highly circumscribed visit had not been all that easy, despite Bamako being some 1,000 kilometers away from the northern “frontline”. While the north was still a no-go zone, colored red on UK travel advice maps, the capital had “none but essential” advice because of the kidnap and terror threat. As a consequence my university had asked me to complete a drawn-out risk assessment, fill in long forms, attend security meetings and read up on safe procedures: avoid taxis, change your routines, stay invisible, and so on. I had to provide the university’s private security contractor with code words in case I were to be kidnapped, and was given a security app through which I had to log in twice a day as proof of life. My top-up kidnapping insurance mounted to £1,000 for a month – discounted, after some hard bargaining, to £750 as long as I did not leave the capital. With such rates and procedures, none but the most dedicated would even attempt to arrive in Mali, precisely at a time when the country was thirsting for renewed connections.

My predicament was far from unique. Other academics, journalists, humanitarians and even soldiers and security contractors such as the Control Risk officers face the problem of no-go zones, although we rarely dwell publicly on our decisions about entering them. Yet the dilemma can no longer be ignored as whole chunks of the contemporary world, from Mali to Pakistan and beyond, are rife with dangers – at least if we are to trust our employers, newspapers, insurance companies and travel advice-wielding foreign ministries. As I spoke informally to academic colleagues working on Mali and the wider Sahel, I would sense the shift first-hand: researchers with long familiarity with the region were now staying away and finding other topics

and destinations, in part owing to personal concerns and in part because universities may refuse to give the green light to their trips. The same also applied to me: as I emailed my university's security provider to tell them the mobile app served little purpose in Bamako, I still followed their advice of not leaving the capital.

Again as for other researchers, my apprehensions cannot be blamed on institutional straightjackets alone. Terrorist risk may be limited statistically speaking, yet the specific insecurities besetting crisis zones such as northern Mali still do remain real. While the trend remains disputed, it is clear that armed groups increasingly see those who were once deemed neutral to conflict – reporters, aid workers, peacekeepers – as fair game. The killing of journalists worldwide remains high, with 61 confirmed deaths in 2014; 155 aid workers were killed in 2013, according to one count, by far the highest figure over the decade; and in peacekeeping fatalities are also rising, albeit still short of a spike in the early 1990s (figure 4). In Mali as in Syria and Libya, jihadist groups have come to see western hostages as a propaganda tool and source of income owing to large ransom payments, thus racializing risk in troubling ways.<sup>8</sup>

[figref4]

Grappling with high-risk areas, as researchers are now explicitly doing (e.g. Sriram 2009), we have a range of options at our disposal – yet all these options uneasily reflect the new global faultlines between safety and danger. As anthropologists, we may opt for “armchair anthropology redux”, bolstered by new communications technology (Gusterson 1997) and our lingering field authority – that is, of “having been there”, to paraphrase Hannerz (2003). Alternatively we may follow the freelance

reporters skirting roadblocks and boldly set out as “ethnographic explorers”, again reviving early anthropological approaches of engaging with the “dangerous Other”. More pragmatically, we may engage in “ethnography by proxy”, drawing on local collaborators, or start “field-hopping”, skirting the danger zone by visiting for short periods and restricting ourselves to relatively safe areas. These options, however combined, constitute pragmatic ways of retaining a hold on important research topics (Kovats-Bernat 2002; Körling and Hagberg 2014). Yet in their various trade-offs with insecurity, they also indicate some of the points of friction, conflict and ambivalence characteristic of a relationship between rich and poor increasingly framed by potential danger.

As for my own research, rather than persisting with gaining entry to Mali’s northern “danger zone”, I decided to stay away. A cop-out, perhaps. But it is the cop-out deployed by an ever-larger number of groups – including western militaries, which after all are equipped to face the deadliest risks. My aim became to understand the remote-controlled interventions increasingly engaged in by western powers at a time of supposed global connectivity. As a consequence, my field had to be reshaped around the means and sites used to draw distance towards, and intervene in, the danger zone. Travelling across an extended field site stretching from western government ministries to UN mission headquarters, online visuals and the aid world of Bamako, I started circling the danger zone, seeing it from above, scanning and mapping it somewhat like an anxious drone of the kind deployed by the U.S., UN and France to monitor (or kill) distant threats.

Seeing the Mali conflict through this reflexive risk lens, I thus came to treat my own ethnographic predicament as symptomatic of a larger shift in the landscape of international intervention. For instance, the mere detail of the security app on my mobile, provided by a competitor to Control Risks, linked me to an institutional and globalized framing of specific dangers while also serving as a nagging reminder that I was somehow detached even from the rather safe Bamako confines of my study.

Along with my insurance arrangements and fieldwork anxieties, the app illustrated how security risk was being mapped onto Mali in highly political ways, enabling some forms of connectivity – and some forms of risk-taking – while disabling others, just as was the case in other high-risk and conflict areas, from the Syria-Iraq axis to Somalia, Libya and the ‘AfPak’ borderlands. This geography of intervention will be the focus of the next section.

### **1. Distance to danger: A relationship by remote control**

Since my last visit of 2010-11, the international presence of Bamako had shifted radically. The only travelling *toubabs*, or white folk, who remained in the new Bamako were ragged adventurers of a familiar kind, including rough-hewn luck-seekers from France and the odd trans-Saharan bikers. From the terrace of my guesthouse, I and the bikers observed a new generation of punters stream past each night: young western humanitarian managers heading for the breezy rooftop bar; African mine-clearers with the UN Mine Action Service; freelance journalists, linen-clad and lanky; African peacekeepers in uniform. “Peaceland” – as Autesserre (2014) has called the self-contained world of UN missions – had descended on Bamako like an extraterrestrial ship unloading its cargo and personnel, and the capital’s



guesthouses had been repurposed to hold their spillover, throwing a lifeline to our Swiss host and her staff.

One night, I found one of Bamako's newcomers under the terrace fans. Monica was an administrator with the United Nations; staying in our guesthouse, she was about to be sent up to Mali's north. Such trips to far-flung danger zones had been her life for the better part of two decades; arriving in Mali, she had bumped into old colleagues from Kosovo. Monica's long experience should have prepared her for the dangers of Mali, yet there was something with this mission that unsettled her. "I don't feel calm here," she confided during one of the many nights when we spoke on the terrace.

"This is the first time that I have felt vulnerable, and it's not as if it's my first mission... It was different in Congo, there the mission was well established. Here they are not in control, they are not prepared. I don't feel safe." To make matters worse her grasp of French, Mali's old colonial language, as well as of the proliferating rebel groups in the north, was tenuous at best. "CNMA, what are they called?" she asked with a laugh, referring to the main Tuareg separatist faction, the MNLA, or the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (the name used by separatists for northern Mali). "I could in theory have said no to this, but it's what I signed up for, it's a peacekeeping mission."

Monica's apprehensions were shared by many of the "expats" I interviewed in Bamako, including at the UN mission, UN agencies, western embassies and NGOs.<sup>9</sup> To some extent these doubts reflected political tensions around MINUSMA. Some troop-contributing countries had in 2014 argued that this type of mission (authorized to use force, and deployed in parallel to the French military operations) dangerously

blurred the lines with counterterrorism; meanwhile, among humanitarian agencies, the mission's "integrated" character was seen as adding to the risks to staff, as they were perceived as being under the same UN "umbrella" as the soldiers. However, by spring 2014 not many successful attacks against the internationals had taken place, or as one UN officer collating data on these told me, "Mali's not Afghanistan." That was sadly about to change. In late 2014, amid growing attacks on peacekeepers, one high-ranking UN official would despairingly tell me in New York: "There is no enemy any longer, and who is the target? We are." The "multi-dimensional integrated stabilization mission in Mali" had a long name that tried to hide the fact it was a peacekeeping mission with no peace to keep, hostage to elusive dangers lurking on the horizon.

[figref5]

As it set up shop across Mali in mid-2013, MINUSMA had geared its operations towards these yet-to-be-realized dangers. In the northern towns of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal, peacekeepers and civilian UN staff lurked behind high walls, from where – or so locals complained – they all too rarely emerged to keep the people safe from attacks by either rebels, stray Islamists or the Malian armed forces. Yet even in Bamako, a thousand kilometres away from Timbuktu, Monica and her colleagues laboured at one remove from the locals. For its headquarters, MINUSMA had commandeered the five-star Hotel de l'Amitié in central Bamako. To Mali's government, the very decision to locate the mission HQ in the capital was a provocation, indicating the state's failure to manage its own affairs. To the UN, however, the reason behind a Bamako base was simple: insecurity in the war-scarred

north – that is, precisely the insecurity it was supposedly there to prevent. Amitié was off bounds to any locals behind its cement vehicle barriers, curls of razor wire and tanks manned by armed blue helmets. Its pool, on my last visit a favoured haunt of the local elite, now hosted restaurants serving up crisp pizzas to Danish soldiers and American political advisers. As UN staff drove up to the gates at lunchtime in their identical white four-wheel drives, they clogged up the busy road outside, frustrating local drivers – not least since everyone knew the Malian government had to pay a large subsidy for housing MINUSMA in the hotel.

This bunkering was in itself indicative of a trend towards fortification since the 1990s, whether by the UN or by the U.S. in post-invasion Baghdad (Chandrasekaran 2006). As noted by a growing body of studies (e.g. Duffield 2010; Fast 2014; Author et al 2015), such bunkering and buffering has increased distance to local society in a dangerous spiral that risks generating novel dangers as contact points diminish and resentment stirs, as was to be the case in Mali in 2014.

As I walked Bamako's darkened alleyways at night, joining streetside *grins* (friendship groups) for tea or meeting with friends, it was soon becoming clear that the foreign interveners – recently welcomed as liberators – were no longer all that popular. The international party scene, the seemingly excessive pay and talk of rising prostitution stirred resentment, but the main cause of anger was the impression that the UN was not providing security in the north.

Critique was voiced internally, too. In the words of one peacekeeper, MINUSMA was a “giant with a bloated head and clay feet,” teetering precariously on the northern

frontlines as the bunkered headquarters of Bamako grew ever larger. Indeed, the north was mainly patrolled by African soldiers who carried out this task without armored cars, with scant protection and with little preparation for the dangers ahead.

Unsurprisingly, they would also end up being the largest takers of casualties as attacks kept mounting. By February 2015, there were 46 dead in the mission. Unlike 1990s missions such as UNOSOM in Somalia, which saw a fairly equal division of fatalities among Asian (44%), African (22%) and western (34%) peacekeepers, among the 46 fatalities in Mali five were Asian and 41 were African, with 18 of these from one single country – Chad, whose soldiers manned both the French counterterror frontline and the riskiest regions covered by MINUSMA.<sup>10</sup> The “Africanization” of peacekeeping, held up as a goal in powerful quarters (Tardy and Wyss 2014), has here entailed a risk transfer away from well-prepared western soldiers towards the ragtag brigades of the Africans, as European officers readily recognized in interview.

A similar trend was besetting non-military operations, with Malian and regional African workers manning the operations of UN agencies and NGOs up north. The reason given for this division of labor between frontline Africans and headquartered westerners was the terrorist and kidnapping risk, as it had been already in the pre-conflict years when Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) started extending its reach. By 2015, this security-based division had been replicated in other parts of the region, or as one NGO emergency coordinator told me, speaking of Boko Haram-threatened areas in northern Nigeria: “If your complexion is anything less than a Nigerian’s, you won’t really be going.” The map of intervention was here not only being divided into safe and unsafe zones – it was also being racialized in inverse relation to the jihadist strategy of targeting white-skinned westerners.

Aid workers, like UN officials, lived under intricate rules on what transport to use and which areas were safe to visit even in Bamako. One embassy I visited was relocating away from a route close to the presidential palace because of fears of becoming a target of irate demonstrators; yet as one resigned embassy employee told me, “you can’t be 100% prepared all the time, you must get on with work and life as well”. One NGO had plastered maps of no-go areas on its wall, including neighborhoods within Bamako as well as all areas outside the city limits. Meanwhile EU military trainers, whose hotel-based offices were set behind tall fences, were not allowed to venture into the north. Instead they trained their Malian counterparts and waved them off towards the northern frontlines, where brutal clashes were to occur during that May of 2014, as the following field account illustrates.

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The trouble started with a visit by the Malian prime minister to Kidal. The northern town had been left as the MNLA rebels’ bastion after the French intervention, much to Bamako’s chagrin. The French were playing a double game in the north, keeping the MNLA as allies while routing jihadists in the hinterland, and the premier now wanted to give this arrangement a push as he arrived in Kidal on 17 May with the intention of showing support for patriotic locals and state administrators.

He failed. As the prime minister tried to make it into central parts of Kidal, armed men took officials at the town’s governorate hostage. Then, as Malian forces attacked and French and UN soldiers stood by, the hostages were executed.

Soon, protests began. On our grainy guesthouse TV, I saw protesters screaming into the night in downtown Bamako: rumours had it a UN vehicle had been torched. The next day aid workers were scrambling to exit the north, but no flights were leaving. Anger against perceived UN and French inaction in Kidal was mounting – as well as against northern Tuaregs and Arabs, seen as partial to the separatist cause. Mali was yet again a tinderbox about to ignite; yet the Kidal events were but the parting shot in the cruellest week Mali had seen for some time.

*Have you heard the news?* I was in a plush hotel in northern Bamako on the night of 21 May when a European researcher broke the latest developments to me. Malian forces – some of them recently trained and equipped by the EU – had attacked the rebels in Kidal without informing the French or MINUSMA; then MNLA had routed them. Kidal had fallen, followed by Menaka further south. “The Malian soldiers just ran away,” the researcher said; they hid in the UN camp while the rebels stole their EU-provided vehicles. We walked upstairs to the hotel restaurant, set on a terrace brimming with soldiers and UN workers, to dine with an NGO friend of ours. What would the implications be down here in Bamako?

Over dinner our friend looked out over the gathered men in uniforms. “I shouldn’t really be here,” she said, but let it be. Bamako’s expat humanitarians tried to keep separate from the military, yet socially speaking this was proving impossible; they mingled on the same circuit, stuck in the same high-end haunts. Our researcher colleague was nervous, too; she was not allowed to go anywhere by foot, according to new security instructions from somewhere (her embassy? Intelligence? She would not

say). Instead she borrowed our friend's designated driver and left, as the NGO worker confided that she, too, was not really allowed to move around this area after dark.

After a nervous journey back that night, the next day I awoke to a Bamako in lockdown mode. Angry crowds gathered outside MINUSMA's HQ and the French embassy's anti-blast barriers. My meetings were cancelled. International organisations told their staff to stay indoors and away from the centre. An interviewee from the EU training mission could not meet with me, he explained, since they were in "alternative planning" for the foreseeable future – military officers could not leave their barricaded hotel without security escort, and their barracks outside the capital were under curfew. Up north, further protests were brewing and aid workers started evacuating the city; the situation was swiftly getting out of hand.

The protests and the rekindled northern troubles – eventually quelled as the Malian government softened its tone – revealed the fragile hold of international interveners on the north. Having failed to capitalise on initial local trust, the UN and France had instead built more distance to local society, paving the way for a spiral of negative rumours and resentment. Meanwhile, the Malian state was withdrawing its scattered presence up north, including its forces. The efforts towards breaking the northern deadlock had taken a big hit, and the divide between south and north – and between operational headquarters and northern hinterland – was growing deeper than ever.

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This brief account of Mali's troubles, and the internationals' role in it, may recall what Lianos and Douglas (2000:110-111) in a prescient piece called "dangerization", or the growing western "tendency to perceive and analyse the world through categories of menace". Their focus is criminological: as an example they give a middle-class driver speeding past a housing estate because of the potential danger therein, and ask whether a new "norm of distance rather than proximity" is being forged in our societies. The speeding driver is however an apt metaphor, too, for the wider western engagement with global danger, as seen in the bunkers and four-wheel-drives of Mali, as well as in the anxieties on show once such physical protections fail. "Dangerization" and distance-making went hand in hand in Mali: risk aversion opened a gap between interveners and "intervened-upon", as well as between foreign and local workers. The result was not the quelling of danger, but rather its proliferation, as seen outside the bunkered confines of the UN and the French embassy that May and in later protests over 2014-15.

This trend towards distance is evident well beyond Mali, as already noted. In the UN sphere, western withdrawal from dangerous peacekeeping missions may be said to have started in the 1990s – after the deadly UNOSOM mission to Somalia and the highly planned killings of Belgian troops in Rwanda on the eve of the genocide – yet it has accelerated in recent years. In non-UN military interventions a similar pattern has evolved: instead of the mass deployments of yesteryear's Afghanistan, western governments are now supporting proxies and dropping bombs, as in Syria or in Libya; deploying drones, as in Pakistan or Somalia; and training local soldiers to do the hard graft, as in Somalia or the Sahel-wide "Flintlock" exercise of the U.S. military's Africa Command. Security is also being outsourced to a private military industry of



multi-billion-dollar revenues – a trend matched by the surging market for remote-controlled weapons and surveillance systems. As for aid interventions, powerful western funders have in recent years leant heavily on NGOs and the UN to enter, stay and “deliver” in distant danger zones, rather than exit them – yet as noted these operations too are increasingly managed at arm’s-length, through local partners and staff. After Iraq, western powers no longer want to put “boots on the ground”, except for their most violent special operations, and they are not willing to risk “their” aid workers or journalists coming into harm’s way. Western powers and international agencies increasingly face an “interventionist’s dilemma” of ambivalent engagement and anxious withdrawal: stuck on the margins of danger zones, seeing them through the eyes of local helpers or the latest surveillance machinery.

The relationship by remote control put in place here is on some levels a pragmatic response to both growing risks and cost-cutting demands, yet it is more than this too. It involves the exercise of a detached kind of power, one aspect of which is the active *transfer of risk* down the social scale, towards regional peacekeepers or national aid workers, strengthening a trend in evidence from earlier post-Cold War conflicts and crises (Shaw 2005). Almost nine out of ten aid worker fatalities are now national staff; meanwhile in Somalia alone, some estimates list about 3,000 dead African Union peacekeepers in the AMISOM operation, funded by the U.S., the EU and the UN to the tune of billions of dollars.<sup>11</sup> A relationship by remote control also leads to growing “blank spaces” on our maps, from where little reliable information emanates. These blank spaces, as the next section will show, can easily be “colonized” by a complex constellation of dangers in an expansionary trend with troubling consequences for local society.

## **2. Mapping danger: Bundling and placing the threats**

Back in December 2010, I stood looking out over a smog-hazed Niger river from the offices of the EU Delegation in Bamako, where I had come to interview a diplomat about irregular migration. By this time, things had not yet gone wholly downhill for Mali: Bamako roared with thousands of imported Chinese motorbikes; its skyline was graced by Libyan-owned hotels. On street level, posters of Colonel Gaddafi next to the Malian president, Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), showed who was bankrolling Mali's political class. What was missing, however, was the western presence of earlier years as travel advice had cut tourist numbers. On the surface, the reason for the changed advice seemed quite simple: worsening insecurity as jihadists had started kidnapping westerners in Mali's north. However, there was a catch, as I heard during my interview at the EU offices.

The travel warnings were "pure politics", according to the diplomat. Rather than based on actual threats, they were meant to force Mali to cooperate in crackdowns on terrorism, drugs and irregular migration in the vast desert north – Europe's top three priorities, with migration in particular a key concern. "You hit people where it hurts, and that's tourism," the diplomat said, adding: "You could go and tap-dance naked in Kidal and nothing would happen."

Three years later, in November 2013, two French journalists were kidnapped and killed outside Kidal. By then, the political posters of downtown Bamako and the world they represented were gone: Gaddafi dead following the NATO air campaign, ATT in exile after the spring 2013 coup, the country haltingly recovering from war.

The north had become what European governments had pre-emptively announced in 2010: a no-go area of nebulous risks and dangers.

The idea of a danger zone may seem straightforward; if in doubt, just don't go. If you do, you only have yourself to blame – as the UK and U.S. governments have repeatedly shown as they refuse to budge when kidnappers threaten to murder their hostages. Yet in fact, the mapping of insecurity and danger – that is, *naming* and *placing* the threat – is itself a highly complex and controversial political act.

Those 2010 days in Bamako, Malian tourist officials were fuming as a lifeline for the country's economy was being pulled away. Visiting the town of Djenne that winter, whose mud mosque was once a must-see on the Malian tourist trail, I would myself notice an anger I had not felt on previous visits: children pulling faces and blank stares from adults where before Mali's famous hospitality would have promised warm greetings and long discussions over pungent green tea. The withdrawal of tourism had not forced Malian cooperation, as the Europeans had wished: instead it was simply ruining local livelihoods and stirring resentment against the meddling foreigners.

African politicians have often raised red flags over blanket travel advice, arguing that curtailing tourism may in fact fuel terrorism as local employment chances recede.<sup>12</sup> There is no space to delve into this debate here; rather, by citing the EU diplomat I simply wish to highlight how western states have sometimes *deployed* the seemingly apolitical tool of travel advice in a bid to force cooperation on key political objectives. Moreover, his assertions reveal the “danger” of the danger zone to be a slippery signifier indeed. Instead of being simply “about” security risks towards (western)

citizens from terrorism, the diplomatic strategy for Mali bundled such risk with quite distinct “risks” (drugs, migration), all the while placing this bundle in a discrete geographical space. There is in addition a peculiar temporal timeframe to this as future probabilities of danger are projected into a rather generic spatial “distance”, as the following citation from a UK House of Commons report on North Africa and the Sahel also illustrates (my italics):

[In] Mali, an al Qaeda-ruled rump state was a reality for some months, and some of our witnesses considered that Mali’s neighbors were potentially vulnerable to a similar fate. Niger and Mauritania were singled out, and Mali itself was not yet seen as being out of the danger zone. It is reasonable to assume that an Islamist statelet *somewhere in north-west Africa* would be a centre of smuggling, people trafficking and kidnapping; activities that already go on in the region [...] A rump state would have the potential to disrupt or destabilize its neighbors and – although this point is speculative – launch attacks on more distant enemies. (FAC 2014:38)

*A center for smuggling and people trafficking:* the French defense minister echoed these concerns in May 2014 as his Mali-based forces were regrouping into the regional counterterror operation Barkhane. “There will be 1,000 soldiers that remain in Mali, and 3,000 in the Sahel-Sahara zone, the danger zone, the zone of all types of smuggling,” he told reporters. “We will stay as long as necessary. There is no fixed date.”<sup>13</sup> As he indicated, cross-border flows – drug trafficking and especially irregular migration – are here besides terrorism coming to function as key drivers of intervention; moreover, they are part and parcel of the constitution of certain areas as

“danger zones”, taken (in both the UK and French examples) as no-man’s-lands rife with criminal activity.

Northern Mali – like much of the rest of the Sahel-Sahara belt – has in this sense come to play host to a potent “threat cluster” in the eyes of western interveners. There is certainly a long colonial and postcolonial history to this construction. The Sahara, McDougall and Scheele (2012) have shown, has long been seen as a space of dangerous remoteness in the western imagination, portrayed as “a deserted place, where the permanent struggle of humanity against nature has deprived people of one of their most human characteristics, namely, the ability to change and to creatively influence the course of events” (2012:9). Against this putatively empty, romanticized and dangerous space conjured by the colonizing West, McDougall and Scheele assert the intricate connections linking different parts of the region. Focusing on these connections makes the Sahara come alive socially, or as they emphasize: “The only way we can fill the emptiness of the Sahara while avoiding long-standing stereotypes and misleading categorizations is by conducting research locally” (2012:16). Much the same can be said for other forms of engagement, from aid work to diplomacy and peacekeeping.

Yet here is the rub. Instead of gaining a local perspective, peacekeepers, aid workers, journalists, researchers and UN officials have increasingly come to draw distance to the danger zone as the default option, thus reinforcing the region’s remote and risky character. The desert danger zone of official imaginations here appears as a peculiar kind of “non-place” (Augé 1995) ripe for *certain kinds* of intervention – that is, interventions focused on the overlapping threats to the West.

Besides the historical context of the Sahara, a more recent global frame is just as important in understanding the mapping of danger onto northern Mali. In the post-Cold War era, policymakers grappled with how to define the West's new geopolitical "others", and the most abject of these came to be known as the "failed state". Since the 1990s, the failed state have kept rearing its head in "gray" policy and academic literature, despite a substantial critique of its application as "mainly reflecting Western powers' policy concerns" (Nay 2013:328) and of its diagnosis as flawed. When, in the midst of the French deployment to northern Mali in early 2013, the UK prime minister referred to the area as an "ungoverned space", he resurrected the failed-state paradigm in new garb – ignoring how *too much* state meddling, especially in northern Mali's drug trade, was at the core of the problem (Guichaoua 2013).

It is worth backtracking a little to see these superficial models of "political otherness" in their earliest, crudest forms. In an (in)famous piece, *The coming anarchy*, Robert Kaplan (1994) set the tone for post-Cold War anxieties over the poor non-western world. His words sound rather prescient two decades hence, even though the anxieties he spells out have since modulated away from urban crime towards jihadism:

West Africa is becoming the symbol of worldwide demographic, environmental, and societal stress, in which criminal anarchy emerges as the real "strategic" danger. Disease, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations, the increasing erosion of nation-states and international borders, and the empowerment of private armies, security firms, and international drug cartels are now most tellingly

demonstrated through a West African prism. [...] To remap the political earth the way it will be a few decades hence—as I intend to do in this article—I find I must begin with West Africa. (Kaplan 1994, no pagination).

Another important step in this radical “remapping of the political earth” was taken a decade later by an influential American geostrategist. Setting out a roadmap for U.S. military interventions, Thomas Barnett (2004) divided the world into its developed “functioning core” and the “non-integrated gap”. The latter referred to regions beset by instability which may breed future terrorists (Masco 2014:187), and Barnett emphasized the need to focus military interventions in this “gap”. As areas “where people still go medieval on one another” (Barnett cited in Keen 2012:188), here any means were allowed, he argued, including pre-emptive war. Barnett’s (2004) theories have given intellectual gloss to new counterterror tactics, mapping “the everywhere war” against terrorism (Gregory 2011) onto discrete and distant sites. One example of such mapping concerns what Barnett and many others (including diplomats) refer to as the global “arc of instability”, which in one of its various versions extends from the Sahel-Sahara region to the Horn of Africa and onwards, to the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands.

[figref6]

Official worry about the “gap” or the “arc of instability” and its multifarious dangers was central to international interventions in Mali, as I noticed in interviews in western ministries during 2014-15. One high-level French diplomat, for instance, reframed

and “renamed” the wider geographical region in terms of danger. To him, “when we speak about Sahel it goes from Nouakchott [Mauritania’s capital] to Mogadishu. For me Somalia is Sahel, it is one world.” His reason for this redesignation was that the armed groups active there – from al-Shabaab in Somalia to Boko Haram in Nigeria and AQIM in Mali – shared the same ideology and so the same “culture”. A highly placed European military officer offered a similar regional re-mapping. “We have to see Mali in the larger picture... MINUSMA is part of an entirety that starts in the Gulf of Guinea and ends in Somalia,” he said. However, he added a different emphasis as he drew a mental map, plotting one existing military or humanitarian intervention after another along this arc. He continued: “Which risk is it really that we are trying to handle in Mali?” The unspoken answer was principally (though not exclusively) migration. Elsewhere, in one northern European foreign ministry, a map drawn on a paper whiteboard for an internal meeting showed how these multiple threats converged as they approached Europe: on it, arrows pointed outwards from Libya’s conflict, representing “IDPs” [internally displaced persons], “migration” and “terrorism”. One UK diplomat, meanwhile, talked of his country’s rising interest in the Sahel in terms of “turning off the tap” of migration, as well as about the risk of the arc of instability expanding. This “arc” has become so commonsensical that it now even has its own moniker: the “banana of badness”, as the diplomat admitted with a giggle.

In sum, western states are increasingly mapping out a discrete field of intervention defined by bundled and overlapping dangers – a “threat cluster” in which one kind of threat may nest within another, and so generating and reinforcing a generalized sense of danger and a concomitant will to intervene. In this way, *systemic* issues and risks –



terrorism, migration and criminal activity, driven as these are by global dynamics of supply and demand, of mass-mediated imagery and worldwide financial flows – are projected outwards, away from the (western) “core” in Barnett’s term. While this process may seem to work in western officials’ favor, as it shifts the debate away from complex (domestic) policy areas towards a distant geographic space, a grounded perspective complicates this top-down view somewhat.

In interviews with frontline officers dealing with the danger zone, I came to see how they were ambivalently positioned between the political priorities on risk and the challenges of carrying out their daily tasks in a region beset by uncertainty and overlapping agendas. To take one example, Anders was the chief of one of the two European peacekeeping contingents eventually sent up to northern Mali, the Swedish one (the other was Dutch, based in Gao). As I met him before deployment to a new Timbuktu “supercamp” in January 2015 in the Swedish Armed Forces Headquarters, he was the rising star of the military: news stories had feted the Swedish deployment and Anders’ role, even as the reporters’ questions mainly concerned one topic – the risks to Swedish soldiers in the field.

Anders downplayed such risks, however. He and his troops were special forces whose skills had been honed in Afghanistan, like many other soldiers and contractors who were now arriving into Mali. “We are not half as worried as any enemies would be; in firefights I think no one is capable of defeating us,” he said. He had reason to be calm: like their Apache-helicopter-equipped Dutch counterparts, the Swedes were extremely well-equipped and well-prepared, unlike the African peacekeepers. Moreover, their task was intelligence-gathering, including via drones, rather than patrolling and

securing areas, a much more dangerous task again largely left to the Africans. Intel is normally “cold, wet, boring and monotonous,” Anders quipped, “and now it will be hot, dry and monotonous.”

Anders’ mission was mapping of a tactical sort: to trace and pinpoint elusive insurgents and foil their growing attacks on UN peacekeepers in Timbuktu’s tense hinterland. One key obstacle here was the narrow national remit of UN intervention. Anders drew a map with arrows (representing terrorist groups) branching out across the Sahel, similar to those I had seen in European foreign ministries. “We can squeeze the Coke bottle a bit here,” he said, adding a squiggle, “but then the problem just bursts out somewhere else.”

Unlike the ministries’ conceptual maps, however, Anders’ was more pragmatic and tactical. He knew time was of the essence, and that “if we don’t take risks, we end up facing a much larger risk”: the UN camps sucked scarce water out of Mali’s northern soils and the soldiers’ heavy trucks ground down fragile roads – and local patience would not last forever, as I had seen during the protests in Bamako. Aware of local discontent, Anders deplored the lack of aid interventions, seeing these as a crucial part of rebuilding the north. As for his men, he was after many years on external missions mindful of political risk aversion once casualties were taken. Instead of withdrawing at first sign of danger, he hoped that “everyone will be patient and recognize that this will take time.”

Such concerns, similarly expressed by peacekeepers and aid officials I met in Bamako, showed some of the limits of the western “cartopolitics” of danger. Despite the

official talk of a “single reality” of the Sahel/Horn of Africa belt – a “banana” ripe with “badness” – practicalities and politics constantly got in the way. The UN machinery was creaking and local resistance too fluid, while the French, British and Americans were still to some extent ensconced in their geographical silos. Grand visions for the Sahara – much as in the French early colonial times – were blurring amid the shifting sands of Mali’s rebel politics and the limited resources at the interveners’ disposal. As Monica, the UN administrator, was eventually sent up north, she told me by Skype how she was almost single-handedly being tasked with managing a military camp attacked by rebel missiles, hamstrung by a lack of provisions and protected only by risk-averse and ill-equipped African peacekeepers. “Remote control”, Monica and others on the frontline knew, did not offer much control at all.

To conclude, crisis-hit and chronically neglected areas such as northern Mali and the wider Sahel-Sahara belt are from interveners’ point of view coming to constitute a peculiar object of intervention. They are principally of concern as host to a set of bundled dangers – a threat cluster – yet that cluster becomes increasingly hard to address thanks to our very aversion to assuming risk. As has been seen, this interventionist’s dilemma is increasingly resolved by recourse to remote controls, whether via technologies such as drones or via reliance on regional forces, national aid workers, and other groups willing or forced to shoulder risk. Yet such measures often dramatically implode, or simply fail to deliver – leading to novel dangers and further withdrawal, and so more reliance on local or regional eyes, ears and hands. Such reliance in turn opens up new avenues for local engagement with the apparatuses of intervention, as will be seen in the next section.

### **3. Mobilizing danger: Reflexive (in)securitization in the danger zone**

The Sahel is host to chronic and underfunded crises – food insecurity, recurrent droughts, climate change, high population growth and gloomy economic prospects. Yet these are increasingly addressed by western donors, if at all, as “root causes” of immediate “threats”. In the UK Foreign Affairs Committee report on the Sahel, for instance, the FCO warned that Islamic extremism in the region “is an increasing threat to UK interests” and “that a failure to increase engagement would carry greater risks”. Increased engagement here means not just traditional security, as UK Defense Secretary Michael Fallon has made clear when discussing defense versus development spending:

The biggest problem we are facing now, in Libya, in Liberia, even in Nigeria where they have lost control of the northern province, in Sudan, in Yemen ... is that these states are starting to fail and that’s where in the end – sadly –you end up having to intervene with armed force. So these aren’t opposites. [UK Development Secretary] Justine Greening’s budget and mine you should add together, they are security budgets.<sup>14</sup>

Such assertions are not new; in fact, they significantly pre-date 9/11, as Gupta (2015) has shown in a recent review on the construal of poverty as a security threat. Duffield (2001:4-5), in his seminal work on the securitization of development, has put this trend in relation to changes in global capitalism, much as Goldstein (2010) does in relating security discourse to neoliberalism. As capitalism has shifted from a logic of

(unequal) inclusion to a logic of exclusion since the 1970s, Duffield argues, development programs have been reshaped and “securitized”. Global exclusion, he insists, does thus not involve the complete closing of doors – rather, the “strategic complexes” of global liberal governance (involving intergovernmental organizations, donor governments and other powerful actors) have fomented a “subordinating social relationship” with target populations and nations, shaped around the notion of underdevelopment as a threat (Duffield 2001:5).

While the securitization debate has generated prolific writings (for one recent intervention, see Pugh et al 2013), the process is rarely discussed from “the other side” – that is, from the perspective of aid recipients and intervened-upon populations in the danger zone. A key question arises in this interaction, namely: What happens when your main asset becomes the risk that you constitute to others?

In Mali’s north, jihadist groups have certainly exploited the risk aversion of western states through spectacularly violent acts against kidnapped victims, disseminated as “propaganda of the deed” over social media (Bolt 2012) much as in other settings such as Libya or Syria. In this sense, violence and insecurity are highly interactive as our imagining of catastrophic threats is increasingly realized in real-time through murders perpetrated for political gain.

However, this section is principally concerned with the more subtle effects of western donors’ catastrophic imagination of the danger zone and its non-insurgent inhabitants. During fieldwork in Mali in 2010-11 on migration, I would see how actors positioned themselves in direct response to European priorities. The police, for instance, used the

“risk” of irregular migration through the Sahara as a way of pushing for more development money. “Europe needs to help us with projects in villages, that way people can become sedentary,” pleaded one border police chief as he complained that EU money was only for “fighting illegal migration”. Then he proceeded to ask for funds on both fronts. “If you want to fight effectively against illegal migration in the north [of Mali], you have to create a system in the style of Frontex [the EU border agency],” he said, invoking European border patrolling operations at sea. “But we too,” he exclaimed, “we have an internal sea, our sea is the Sahara!”

The Malian gendarmerie expressed similar sentiments as they called for more resources to patrol Mali’s long borders: new border posts, computers, generators, vehicles, and even petrol for these vehicles. These demands were justified, again, by recourse to the threat cluster delineated above. To the gendarmes, Central and West African migrants – suspected of migrating irregularly to Europe, deported by Algeria into the desert and then left stranded in Mali – incarnated Europe’s concerns. “We need to have a transit center [for deportees] in Kidal or Gao and another in Bamako, it’s what we told [the European partners],” one high-ranking gendarme told me. “If not, once they arrive here they have nothing, they’ll steal, rob, even kill, or they can be recruited by AQIM. It’s a big problem.”

As the Malian forces’ “securitization” of migration indicates, the best way to have the ear of western donors was to invoke the terrorist threat. This was the case not just for local forces, but also for civil society groups, as one humanitarian association in Gao exemplified to me in 2011. The association, set up to care for migrants deported from Algeria, aimed to reinsert deportees socio-economically and to create local

development projects in order to “keep the youth” from leaving. The youngsters of Gao, one of the association’s leaders explained, “have nothing to do and so they risk heading off on migration, or they risk becoming drug traffickers, get involved in prostitution and all that, or what is even more serious, they risk becoming co-opted by local militias or assimilated into organizations such as al Qaeda. They [AQIM] are ready to come into town nowadays, to take these youngsters and insert them into their structures. This is our big fear.”

On official levels, the same pleas were in evidence. In April 2014, to give one example, the Malian president signed an agricultural accord with Morocco at a UN-sponsored conference by which Moroccan investors could exploit a large tract of fertile land around the Niger river. “The development of agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa will certainly prevent these young Africans from emigrating or joining terrorist cells operating in the wide and vast desert of northern Mali,” the president said, motivating the controversial decision.<sup>15</sup>

These statements are but some examples of how a reflexive (in)securitization of the self is taking hold in the danger zone, as I would also see to some extent with friends active in Senegal and Mali’s associative sectors.

As I had returned to Bamako in 2014, one of my first ports of call was the southern neighborhood of Magnambougou and the home of a friend and earlier research participant, Djibril. As I called on him, I knew times were tough. Djibril was a deportee from Spain, and had been involved in one of the associations of “returnees” set up after his and other migrants’ expulsion from Europe and Morocco. Through

this association, Djibril had managed to ensure on-off work on projects funded by international organizations. Yet as the 2012 conflict began, donors and western NGOs took flight, leaving Malians such as Djibril without employment. As I called on him, I knew I was expected to bring solace of some kind: my proposition was that he could work as my research assistant.

Djibril's frustration was palpable as we spoke, sitting in his communal courtyard around a brewing teapot as his children came and went. "You see, there are no jobs, what can we do? We have to leave, don't we?" I nodded yes, but told him not to forget the dangers on the road. He equivocated; perhaps he did not actually want to leave again. The sun set over the yard as Djibril kept talking; a strip light flickered to life atop his door and his children gathered on the bench underneath, schoolbooks in hand. "So this is why the youth go and join Mujao (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, one of Mali's jihadist groups), or go take a boat to Spain, or die in the desert," Djibril said, continuing along the lines of his earlier argument as I shifted awkwardly in my seat.

As a marginal participant in the aid nexus of Bamako, Djibril had bought into the mobilization of danger so present in the relationship between Malian authorities, NGOs and their international partners. He was in a not-so-subtle way using the risk of his own potential to migrate in order to make sure that I kept to my word and "employed" him. However, he was also critical of this remaining pathway to engagement. Another day, we had lunch together after meeting an IDP leader who had frustratingly talked to us about the lack of support for the displaced in Mali while false beneficiaries "ate all the money". Pondering this pilfering, Djibril said with a flat



laugh: “In order to be rich, you have to threaten. In our [deportee] association we have 1,000 members; we buy some arms, make a [black Islamist] flag, take a westerner hostage and we’ve solved it!”

I might have let this statement pass as simply a one-off show of sarcasm, if it wasn’t for its resonances with what officials such as those above were saying, or indeed with similar arguments from other underemployed aid brokers. In my research on irregular migration in 2010, I had been told by members of Senegalese deportees’ associations similar to Djibril’s that they were the ones who were *really* “fighting migration”, unlike the police or the NGOs running risk-awareness campaigns with European development funding. One day, for instance, I was walking along the beach with the leader of one association, Mohammadou, as he pointed towards a vessel at sea. “Look at the boat out there! It’s the *garde espagnole*.” The Spanish Guardia Civil’s patrolling vessel came every day, he said; its principal task was to deter any departures towards the Spanish Canary Islands, which Mohammadou had once tried to reach. “It can’t stop us,” he insisted. “If no money comes soon from Europe we will set off again... This time we’ll be 100,000, or thousands of 12-year-olds.” It sounded like a warning from someone aware of both the depiction of migrants as a threatening force and the legal constraints in deporting unaccompanied children. The deportees’ effort to convince impatient youth to bide their time was the reason no one was leaving, Mohammadou made clear. “We are waiting now for any development projects to come through from Europe,” he insisted. Their patience would not last forever.

These brief vignettes are simply meant to indicate some of the more overt ways in which danger or specific types of risk may be mobilized reflexively by those seen as being both risky and “at risk”: the youth of West Africa who Kaplan (1994) once described as “loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid, a fluid that was clearly on the verge of igniting”. Approached systematically, such self-fashionings may open a window onto the new relationship forged between the inhabitants of designated “danger zones” and the “international community”. Besides showing an acute awareness of western priorities, they also serve as commentary on the local effects of the mobilization of danger and the reorganization of intervention. Djibril, along with many other Malians I spoke to, insisted on the erosion of the country’s much-celebrated culture of trust, generosity and welcoming (*djatigiya*) since the time of the conflict. Yet in bemoaning this apparent erosion, locals such as Djibril were simultaneously reasserting their shared values of dignity, joking relationships and national identity at the heart of post-independence Malian society (see Whitehouse 2013). In the equivocations and ambivalences, an opening may be found for alternative pathways for engagement – mobilizing local opportunities, rather than catastrophic imaginations of clustered threats. Here anthropologists will have plenty to contribute to larger debates on international intervention as we grapple with the reflexive nature of global danger and its local contestations and mobilizations, and so “returning the gaze” (Charbonneau 2012:7) onto powerful systems of intervention that have all too rarely faced such ground-level scrutiny.

## **Conclusion: Anthropology among the dragons**

This article has delineated some salient aspects in the emergence of “danger zones” of the kind seen in Mali, with clear parallels elsewhere – from the Somalia conflict to Libya’s post-Gaddafi chaos or the remote “war on terror” in the “AfPak” borderlands. In all these settings, new models of intervention premised on distance and bundled dangers are emerging. However, as has been seen, these models are not easy to impose. From the perspective of powerful states and actors, it should be clear how *difficult* it is to withdraw in an otherwise wired world, and how large efforts have been expended on various levels to achieve this objective. Distance is physical: international interveners withdraw key humanitarian, political and even military staff from the frontline; build bunkers in the “field”; and develop new technologies of “remote control” via drones, satellites and surveillance. Distance is social: interveners outsource risky tasks to local staff, mercenaries or freelancers, deepening the divide between “local” and “expat”, former colonizer and colonized. Distance is conceptual: donor governments and international organizations promote new buzzwords and theories that end up acting as metaphorical containers for “others” affected by insecurity. And, finally, distance is psychological: as “we” in the West withdraw from danger zones, we are paradoxically tied more closely than ever to these new no-go areas. Insurgents, knowing this, may then tap into our fear with the help of a simple pocketknife and a webcam. For as the Control Risk executive said at the launch of the Risk Map mentioned above: “There is no longer any such thing as far away.”

There is much else to be said about the mapping and making of danger zones; of how, all else failing, western states concentrate on simply *containing* “threats” emanating

from these zones through ever-tougher border controls; of the psychological pull of danger on certain chance-takers, from daredevil freelance reporters to volunteering fighters; or of the brutal connectivities generated by supposed distancing devices, as seen in the “voyeuristic intimacy” of drones (Power 2013). However, I will end this piece with a brief overview of the larger global picture of risk, hinted at by that Risk Map citation in the preamble.

“As the bipolar world fades away,” Beck (1999:3) wrote in his *World Risk Society*, “we are moving from a world of enemies to one of dangers and risk.” This may now seem rather prophetic; yet as danger and risk are gaining salience, we need to recall that risk should not be seen exclusively through a negative prism. Risk is rather double-edged, source of both fear and gains, as seen for instance in speculative global finance. Ever since the 1970s oil crisis and the financial revolutions that followed it, the global economy has thrived on risk – engendering a fundamental contradiction between increasingly risk-averse citizens and politicians and the premium put on rampant risk-taking not just in banking (financial risk), but also in sectors such as private security and mercenary activity (security risk).

Risk is not just unevenly appreciated by different social groups and sectors; as this article has shown, it is also distributed unevenly across our world map. In her work on the global geography of capitalism, Sassen (1991) has shown the financial world to be condensed into “global cities” functioning as one-stop shops for speculative capital. Standing in sharp contrast to these are similarly “extreme zones” for “new or sharply expanded modes of profit extraction” (Sassen 2014:18): manufacturing hubs such as China’s Shenzhen, or the land-grab terrains of swathes of sub-Saharan Africa. These

specialized sites in the world economy, Sassen (2014) shows, depend on a transfer of risk from costly western laborers to poorer counterparts; from bluechip companies to subcontractors; and from mining groups to the villages or habitats they destroy. With this global map of risk distribution in mind, the remote “danger zones” of concern here may be seen as similarly specialized, but not in producing goods or forging out credit default swaps. Rather, they serve as sites for the manufacturing of one important “product” in contemporary world markets: insecurity or danger. They also serve as zones in which the risk transfers prevalent elsewhere in our economies are taken to their most extreme, as the powerful withdraw from view and leave more vulnerable groups to deal with the dangers.

“Dangerization”, in short, has gone global in uncontrollable ways. As anthropologists, we may investigate this process along many overlapping vectors, as this article has shown. We may explore how risks are apportioned and transferred socially, geographically and through new technology; how dangers are conjured, clustered and spatially mapped out; or how locals subvert or reinforce these impositions. We may also take a broader view, critically returning to our disciplinary beginnings in the marginal territories of the early colonial world, as well as to the pre-colonial fears and desires that steered early explorers’ quest for the unknown.

If we do so, we may see that unlike in early colonial times, the rewards that entry into the danger zone hold up are no longer (or not only) the putative riches that once led explorers such as the Frenchman René Caillié (1992) towards Timbuktu. Even though oil, gas and minerals do retain their lure, today’s gains are principally negative in kind; they are not about conquest, but about control. For here, in the heart of the

danger zone, lies the promise of converting uncontrollable danger into manageable (countable, containable, “killable”) risk. Much like Caillié’s frustrated quest to discover Timbuktu’s long-lost riches, this dream of global power is however a losing prospect, as this article has shown – and a rich one to explore for an anthropology critically attuned to its past and open to its tense global present. Those Medieval monsters with which I began have yet again come to infiltrate the edges of our Google-era maps; worse, a growing western fear of venturing into their domains is now steering intervention and involvement, creating a spiral of negative dynamics from which it becomes increasingly difficult to extricate ourselves. Here anthropologists, thanks to our legacy of studying the remote and the marginal, may play a trickster role in weaving back and forth between the inhabitants of the danger zone and international interveners, and between executive headquarters and the new blank spots on the map – straddling the danger zone and its manifold contradictions.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am very grateful to Ana Gutiérrez Garza for very helpful feedback; to Florian Weigand for sharing findings from Afghanistan; to Mary Kaldor and the team at LSE for encouragement and inspiration; and to Martin Saxer for very fruitful discussions and ideas on remoteness and connectivity. I am indebted to the anonymous peer reviewers of this article, who provided invaluable comments, and to the Current Anthropology team for seeing it into print. Finally, I am grateful to the AXA Research Fund for my Postdoctoral Research Fellowship, 2014–15, which has enabled me to carry out the research for this article. The views expressed are mine and not those of the funder.

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## Captions

Fig1. French media depiction of the global ISIS presence.

Fig2 and 3. UK travel advice, 1997 vs. 2012. Countries with no-travel advice in red; no-travel advice for part(s) of country in pink.

Fig4. UN peacekeeping fatalities by year.

Fig5. MINUSMA deployments by December 2014.

Fig6. The arc of instability, from Alexander (2013).

## Notes

All links below were last accessed on 21/07/2015.

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<sup>1</sup> See Van Duzer (2013).

<sup>2</sup> A note on terminology: *Risk* here refers to the projected impact and likelihood of a *threat*; *danger* or *insecurity* designates the state above an acceptable risk threshold, and *fear* is often the psychological/emotional corollary of such danger.

<sup>3</sup> Citation from *Cultural Anthropology* online special on security, [http://www.culanth.org/curated\\_collections/14-security/discussions/13-security-a-conversation-with-the-authors](http://www.culanth.org/curated_collections/14-security/discussions/13-security-a-conversation-with-the-authors).

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<sup>4</sup> The link between western, urban ‘high-risk’ areas and foreign, distant danger zones cannot be elaborated on here for lack of space: compare Lianos and Douglas 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Masco in conversation, [http://www.culanth.org/curated\\_collections/14-security/discussions/13-security-a-conversation-with-the-authors](http://www.culanth.org/curated_collections/14-security/discussions/13-security-a-conversation-with-the-authors)

<sup>6</sup> Video (Top 5 for 2015) available at <https://riskmap.controlrisks.com>

<sup>7</sup> Public Radio International has crunched the U.S. figures on no-go zones and fatalities: <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-07-07/us-travel-warnings-out-africa-more-strategy-summer-read>. UK travel advice data compiled from national archive material available at [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/\\*/http://www.fco.gov.uk/](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/*/http://www.fco.gov.uk/)

<sup>8</sup> Figures respectively from Committee to protect Journalists, <https://www.cpj.org/killed/>; the Humanitarian Outcomes database, <https://aidworkersecurity.org/incidents/report/summary>; and UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations online database, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/fatalities.shtml>

<sup>9</sup> My Bamako and Dakar (regional HQ) research has involved about 60 interviews with UN staff, aid workers, peacekeepers and local associations.

<sup>10</sup> Figures from DPKO website, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/fatalities.shtml>

<sup>11</sup> Ratio on humanitarians from Humanitarian Outcomes. The figures for AMISOM are disputed; the African Union has given a much lower figure, at about 500.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. The New York Times on coastal Kenya, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/24/world/africa/as-tourism-sags-on-kenyan-coast-terrorists-could-lure-the-unemployed.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/24/world/africa/as-tourism-sags-on-kenyan-coast-terrorists-could-lure-the-unemployed.html?_r=0) or The Guardian on Tunisia, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/10/uk-tourists-fly-home-tunisia-criticises-travel-advice-sousse>

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<sup>13</sup> BBC report, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-27327759>

<sup>14</sup> The Spectator, September 27, 2014:

<http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9322432/we-shouldnt-be-ambiguous/>

<sup>15</sup> Morocco on the Move website, April 25, 2014:

<http://moroccoonthemove.com/2014/04/25/morocco-mali-boost-agricultural-collaboration-magharebia/#sthash.CUNiwNfL.dpbs>