

## Securitization

Securitization within the humanitarian lexicon refers to the ways in which states use humanitarian assistance to further national security or foreign policy objectives. It assumes a mutually reinforcing association between conflict and poverty, and the resulting security threats that emerge from refugees and failed states. Securitization in the humanitarian sector is built on a “fear of underdevelopment as a source of conflict, criminalized activity and international instability” (Duffield 2001: 7). It is precisely these assumptions that link violent conflict, security, development, and humanitarian action. More generally, processes of fear are used to justify the exceptional security measures put in place to deter or prevent the movement of internally displaced within or refugees across geopolitical borders, whether in the midst of civil war (Hyndman 2007) or, more recently, in the context of refugee movements in Europe and the United States (USA), and the criminal prosecution of those who assist them.

While the extraordinary efforts to secure borders from migration and the manipulation of aid in support of political, military, or security aims are not new phenomena, the term “securitization” gained prominence in the humanitarian sector after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in the USA. The 9/11 attacks ushered in an era in which counter-terrorism aims have altered the context within which humanitarian actors operate (O’Leary 2018). Securitization is commonly justified as a way of making foreign assistance more effective and coherent. Critics, however, object to securitization on two grounds. First, it compromises neutral, independent, and impartial humanitarian assistance (Williamson 2011), and second, it increases risk and danger for those providing such assistance (Fast 2015). In post-9/11 Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) comprising military and civilian members engaged in diplomatic, development, and humanitarian activities, often designed to “win the hearts and minds” of the communities in which they operated. The integration of these activities not only blurred the lines between civilian and military actors, but it also complicated efforts to distinguish principled humanitarian assistance from the political action and security agenda of the PRTs and the states that championed them. These blurred lines and the erosion of principled humanitarian action, in turn, are often used to explain attacks on aid workers.

Yet the contributions to securitization are not entirely one sided. Humanitarian agencies adopt security risk management approaches to protect staff

and programs and to ensure access to conflict or violence-affected populations. The most common of these approaches are consent-based, in which humanitarians seek the tacit or negotiated consent for their presence and programs, in contrast to “hardened” measures, in which they aim to either deter attacks through the threat of counterthreat (armed escort or withdrawal of services) or to decrease their vulnerability through the use of policies, devices, or other measures (e.g., restriction of movement, use of perimeter fences). In adopting a visibly fortified architecture to protect their staff and compounds in the most dangerous places, humanitarian actors more closely resemble the military actors from whom they aim to distinguish themselves, further blurring the lines between them (Fast 2014).

Evidence related to securitization is mixed, however, both in terms of the efficacy of counter-insurgency operations (Fishstein and Wilder 2012) and in their effects on the security of aid workers. Nevertheless, securitization remains a potent narrative for states and a complication for principled humanitarian action.

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## References

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