



Understanding Attacks on Humanitarian Aid Workers

There is an increasing demand for deploying humanitarian workers to conflict-affected areas. However, this need has expanded the risk of violent attacks against staff in insecure field settings. In this brief, we identify six country-level factors that can influence attacks on aid workers. These six factors help us to better understand the causes of aid worker attacks, and may ultimately guide towards their prevention in the future. This policy brief is the first from an emerging PRIO research program on Humanitarian Security.

Brief Points

- Violent conflicts see more aid worker attacks
- Countries with greater criminal violence do not have more attacks on aid workers
- International military forces do not add to aid worker risk, but International Peacekeeping Operations do
- Groups who actively target civilians do not attack aid workers more
- More democratic and economically developed countries pose fewer risks for aid workers

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A Golden Age of Humanitarian Aid?

The humanitarian aid sector has grown exponentially over the past two decades. Global aid spending by governments and private actors has increased 400% since 2000 to \$25 billion USD in 2014 as the number of international aid workers has also tripled.

Yet this international goodwill has also produced dangerous consequences. Aid delivery areas tend to be in conflict or crisis zones, increasing operational insecurity and at times blurring motivations for aid disbursement. 2014 was also the first year in almost three decades with more than 100,000 battle-related deaths globally, and an additional 58 million people were displaced in 2014 – the highest total ever recorded. Aid worker attacks have increased in tandem with the increases in violence. In 2013, 461 aid workers were attacked, representing the most violent year on record against aid workers.

The number of aid worker attacks from 1997-2014 are shown in Figure 1. The size of the bubbles correspond to the number of aid worker attacks recorded in the country over the period. For reference, all countries that have experienced armed conflict over the same period are in grey. Aid worker attacks occur disproportionately in some countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria, but many African countries have also seen high rates of attacks on aid workers.

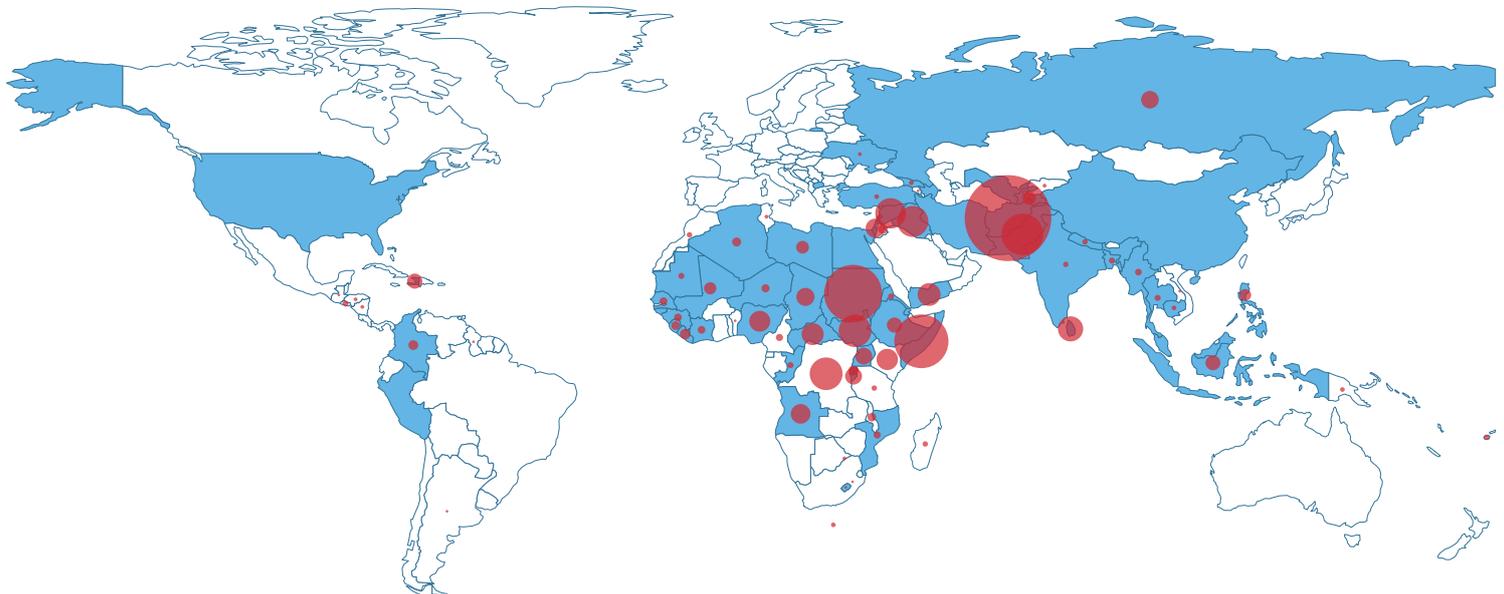


Figure 1: Aid worker attacks by country, 1997–2014

Figure 2 shows the total number of aid worker attacks globally from 1997 to 2014, and the number of battle-related deaths globally over the same period. Here, the dashed vertical line marks the start of the current conflict in Syria that has coincided with a substantial increase in both aid worker attacks and battle deaths.

Greater Humanitarian Insecurity?

These figures support the assertion that attacks on aid workers are increasing. Two factors in particular are responsible for the increase. First is the increasing number aid workers in the field, with the 1997-2014 time period covered here having seen a dramatic increase in the number of aid workers deployed. The dual increases lead to the finding that per capita attacks on aid workers are in fact stable. Second, the increased number of total attacks are driven by a small number of countries that register many more aid worker attacks than what is commonly seen, led by, in particular, Afghanistan and Syria.

Why are attacks on the rise? Scholars and practitioners are increasingly trying to understand where, why, and how aid workers become targets of violent acts. For many, the key message is simply that it has become more dangerous to be an aid worker in the field, particularly in conflict-affected regions. However, we lack systematic evidence explaining where and why aid workers are attacked. This knowledge gap

has important implications for security and risk protocols in aid organizations; for donors and researchers seeking to understand humanitarian insecurity; and in understanding how humanitarian agencies could and should engage with the world today.

In addition, given the changing role of humanitarian engagement in conflict, aid organizations are working much more extensively in remote field settings, doing more sophisticated work, and undertaking a much wider variety of development tasks than just a decade ago. This has required INGOs to employ new strategies to attempt to reduce operational risk by leaning more heavily on national partners, presenting a less-visible local profile, and increasing staff security mechanisms. In response, some have raised concerns about how the links between aid actors and donor governments in the Global South and the business-like actions of humanitarian aid agencies may be potentially eroding the value and neutrality of humanitarian space. Other scholars believe that this places INGO staff at greater risk, and that increasing institutional politicization and deeper ties with governments and/or militaries is considered a key factor motivating violence against INGO workers.

But do these critiques have merit? It is possible that aid workers are indeed targeted much more than before, but the improvement of security by INGOs for their field staff may have

reduced the number of attacks to below what they would otherwise have been without such improvements. Moreover, it is also possible that aid worker attacks are less of a 'special' phenomenon that may be assumed, and merely reflect levels of overall violence in a given country. As such, aid workers operating in more dangerous regions may simply be attacked with greater frequency due to the underlying regional insecurity – either in the form of criminal or political violence.

To better understand the causes and drivers behind these attacks, we combined existing datasets on aid worker deaths, violent conflict, security and development to more systematically assess why aid worker attacks occur, and what national-level conditions place workers most at risk. These findings both undercut and corroborate existing conventional wisdoms.

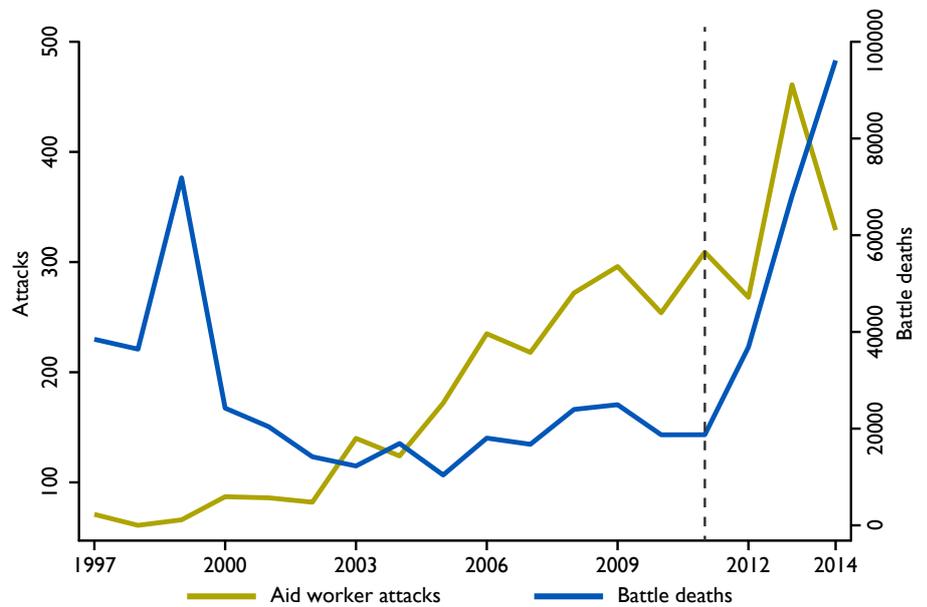


Figure 2: Trends in armed conflict and attacks on aid workers, 1997–2014

Explaining attacks on aid workers

Drawing on a cross-national sample between 1997 and 2014, we used a quantitative approach to test over one dozen factors to better understand the spatial and temporal distribution of attacks on aid workers. Our research examined the nature of conflicts that humanitarian agencies operate within; the structure of humanitarian operations; and political factors economic conditions that may motivate attacks. We offer six key findings that help to understand attacks on aid workers.

The conflict context of the country matters – to an extent

We find, not surprisingly, that aid workers are much more likely to be attacked in countries experiencing conflict than in peaceful countries. Somewhat surprisingly, though, the difference between minor and major conflict setting is not that large measured in the absolute expected count of attacks. An average country with a major conflict is likely to see double the aid worker attacks than a similar country with a minor armed conflict. This relationship holds when we measured conflict intensity through the number of battle related deaths as well. We found a strong and significant effect of conflict intensity on the expected number of attacks. An increase of battle deaths from around 400 deaths per year, a medium intensity conflict, to 2000 deaths a year, a high intensity conflict, roughly doubles the expected amount of aid worker

attacks – from 20 attacks in a year to more than 40 attacks per year. This relationship holds when we differentiate between different types of attacks on aid workers, with one exception: Kidnappings are much less common in low intensity than in high intensity conflicts. For aid organizations the lesson here is fairly clear: the more intense the conflict, the more attacks are to be expected. Unfortunately, these are often precisely the conflicts where aid workers are most needed.

General levels of insecurity don't appear to influence the risk of aid worker attacks

Yet unlike the clear risk of civil conflict to aid workers, insecurity and criminal violence is not a factor related to the number of aid worker attacks. Attacks do not appear to be influenced by the homicide rate in the country, a measure that captures the generalized level of insecurity and violence, the relative presence of criminal groups and other 'everyday' threats to humanitarian workers. Instead, countries with high homicide rates see just as many aid worker attacks as those with low crime rates. This could potentially be good news for aid organizations, perhaps meaning that their extra precautions when deploying to countries that have high levels of homicides have been effective. Note, however, that the data for homicides is quite poor; consequently we have much less data

available for analyzing this hypothesis than for most of the others.

An international military presence does not add to aid worker risk

Contrary to much existing analysis suggesting an international military presence may increase risks for aid workers, we find no effect of a NATO presence on the estimated number of attacks on aid workers. Comparative areas in which NATO deploys forces see just as many (or as few) attacks on aid workers as those where NATO is not present. The estimated effect cannot be reliably distinguished from zero, but if anything, it is negative – countries with NATO forces see fewer attacks on aid workers.

We do find, however that countries that have large UN peacekeeping operations (PKO) deployed, i.e. PKOs with large budgets which we assume to be highly correlated with the size of the force, see more attacks against aid workers.

This somewhat surprising finding is tempered by the result that the type or mandate of the PKO matters crucially for understanding attacks on aid workers. PKOs with a traditional mandate (observing the terms of truce or peace agreements, or policing a buffer zone and assisting in negotiating a peace agreement) are associated with more attacks on aid workers, whereas PKOs with transformational mandates

– those designed to address the roots of the conflict, such as economic reconstruction and institutional transformation (i.e. reform of police, army, judicial system, elections) – are not associated with a greater number of attacks on aid workers. This result is in line with recent research that shows that only PKOs with transformational mandates are effective at reducing the intensity of conflict in a country. In contrast, traditional peacekeeping forces are not equipped to use lethal force to protect either themselves, civilians, or aid workers.

The type of conflict – and degree of civilian targeting – matters less than expected

We found no evidence indicating that countries that experience one-sided violence (i.e. countries where either the government or insurgents are actively targeting civilians) have higher rates of attacks on aid workers. The effect of one-sided violence on aid worker attacks is essentially zero. This is encouraging, as periods of one-sided violence are situations where civilian populations are especially vulnerable and needing aid the most. That these situations do not appear to be more dangerous to aid workers may further encourage the international community to provide more extensive support for vulnerable populations.

Regime type and rebel organizational structure matter less than expected

A long-standing literature has found that autocracies and democracies are roughly as good at containing violence within their territories – they have roughly equal levels of armed conflict. Semi-democracies, often called hybrid or inconsistent states, in contrast have much higher rates of conflict. We expected this to hold for attacks on aid workers as well. If semi-democracies are unable to protect themselves

from conflict, surely they will not be able to protect aid workers either. But in fact, this does not hold. We find a tendency towards more aid worker attacks in the most authoritarian countries, yet surprisingly, we do not find any evidence to support our hypothesis that inconsistent states see more aid worker attacks. This is especially interesting considering the abundance of evidence showing these countries in general to be more conflict-prone and unstable or experience greater rates of criminal or social violence.

While some have argued that particularly ‘brutal’ or ‘humane’ types of insurgencies may influence attacks on humanitarian actors, we found no evidence indicating that the aims of the rebels significantly influence the degree of aid worker attacks. Conflicts where rebels seek secession or regional autonomy, which in turn are often conflicts in which rebels have a strong regional presence and compete with the government for service provision, do not have more attacks on aid workers than conflicts where the rebels are primarily seeking to overthrow the government.

More developed states have fewer attacks, and country risk is important to consider

In general, we find that the more developed the country, measured in terms of GDP per capita, the fewer aid worker attacks. The same pattern holds for other measures of state capacity and state consolidation, namely ‘time since regime change’ and ‘time in peace’. We find that higher capacity states see dramatically fewer attacks on aid workers, presumably as they are better able to protect aid workers present in the country.

The same holds where countries are assessed by international organisations as being of lower political risk. This indicates that countries

that have functioning state institutions, and therefore have a lower likelihood of experiencing government instability, are also associated with lower levels of risk to aid workers.

Limitations and forward research

Our study is among the first to analyze the determinants of attacks against aid workers. As such, there is scope for refinement.

First, data improvements could improve the quality and extent of reporting of attacks, agreeing on what constitutes an incident, and more accurately defining and determining the number of workers in the field. With these improvements, a better understanding of the risks involved at the sub-national level and of the specific types of humanitarian initiatives and deployments could be made. As aid agencies continue to expand across the globe – and to new areas of conflict and insecurity, such as in urban settings – the evolving and contested role of humanitarian space is of high priority for further study.

The next step in the study of aid worker attacks is to dig deeper into the micro dynamics of attacks. We have the data on conflict dynamics to do such an analysis, but the crucial missing ingredient is fine-grained information from aid organizations themselves about who, where, and what aid workers are doing. Regardless, by further refining the conditions for violence against humanitarians, aid organizations of all types can better prepare for and prevent humanitarian attacks. ■

Further Reading

Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygård (2015). Understanding Violent Attacks against Humanitarian Aid Workers. PRIO Working Paper.

THE AUTHORS

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THE PROJECT

The Conflict Trends project aims to answer questions related to the causes of, consequences of and trends in conflict. The project will contribute to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and works to produce thorough and quality-based analysis for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.