STABILITY

Beyond the Bunker: How Anxiety Shapes Humanitarian Security Practice

PRACTICE NOTES

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ABSTRACT

Humanitarian organisations invest a lot of resources in security risk management but many practitioners report frustration with approaches that manage anxiety more than they mitigate risk. Drawing on personal field observations from high-risk environments and survey data from 60 security professionals, I argue that "bunkerisation" is rarely just a technical choice. It serves a deep, often unconscious, psychological function alongside its protective role. Using a systems psychodynamics lens, which examines how unconscious group dynamics shape organisational practice, I demonstrate how the intolerable anxiety of humanitarian work in conflict zones generates defensive organisational structures. Rigid protocols, fortified compounds, and risk matrices help contain organisational anxiety, but they potentially increase actual vulnerability. The survey results indicate that anxiety is not uniform but varies by organisational architecture. Respondents from international and inter-governmental organisations – primarily United Nations agencies – report significantly higher anxiety levels than respondents from the Red Cross Movement or international non-governmental organisations. These findings suggest that bunkerisation serves a dual logic. While physical measures respond to the legitimate risk of being targeted in an attack, they also serve as rituals of safety to manage persecutory anxiety, that is, a fear of institutional humiliation and professional blame after an incident. The data also point to a middle ground of organisations that seem to navigate uncertainty without retreating into such rituals. At the same time, the findings raise questions about how security risks are distributed between international staff, national colleagues, and implementing partners. Moving forward requires leadership focused on containment. By naming and metabolising organisational and individual anxiety – talking openly about fear in teams rather than displacing it into ever-stricter rules – leaders can shift security from a defensive performance into an adaptive and evidence-based practice.

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THE GREEN ZONE PARADOX

The heat was unbearable. Baghdad in August is punishing. At 45 degrees Celsius, the air is thick with dust and diesel fumes. Traffic barely moved. One reason was the Green Zone in the city centre: a ten-square-kilometre enclave surrounded by walls, wires, and checkpoints that forced traffic to circumnavigate. Inside this gated compound sat international organisations, government ministries and wealthy Iraqi individuals.

I visited Baghdad regularly between 2017 and 2020 as a security adviser for a Western diplomatic mission. By then, the worst of the post-invasion violence had subsided. Islamic State had been pushed out. The security situation, while far from stable, had improved substantially from the 2006–2008 period when suicide bombings were daily occurrences. Yet the Green Zone remained. There were still ten-metre T-walls topped with barbed wire, armoured vehicles at checkpoints, and multiple layers of badge systems with an ever-changing access logic.

We stayed outside the walls, in what Green Zone residents called the Red Zone. Our compound was lightly fortified. We moved in unarmoured vehicles, without convoys, relying on acceptance strategies and keeping a low profile. We understood this as a proportionate approach, based on our reading of the available incident data, local staff accounts, and the operational context. We felt that the actual threat level to Western diplomatic staff in 2018 Baghdad did not justify the fortress mentality that had calcified years earlier.

The disconnection became painfully apparent during a meeting with a senior United Nations (UN) security adviser, whom I will call Felix. We were led into the Green Zone through multiple checkpoints, past K-9 dog units and armed guards, into a heavily air-conditioned building. We received a security briefing describing a city of imminent peril: kidnapping risks, improvised explosive device threats, and the danger of moving anywhere without armoured protection. It was a narrative generated entirely from within the bubble.

When I gently challenged this, noting that we had been moving around the city for days, that our local staff reported stabilising conditions, and that the incident data did not support the threat level being described, Felix became defensive. He questioned whether we had "adequate resources" and "professional capacity" to properly assess risks. The subtext was clear: *You are naïve. You are cutting corners. You are going to have an incident sooner or later*. I recognised my own defensiveness rising in response. Part of me wondered if he was right. Was I being recklessly counterphobic by taking extra risks in order to prove to myself that I was not afraid? Was my systematic risk analysis just a form of rationalisation for my discomfort with restrictions, with bureaucracy, and with walls?

The multi-layered security screening at Baghdad International Airport on our departure highlighted the absurdity of it all. Different security entities operated sequential checkpoints, each distrusting the others. Bottled water was confiscated randomly at some layers and waved through at others. Procedures were followed because "that is how it was always done," not because anyone could explain why. It was security theatre: a ritual performance that managed anxiety without necessarily managing risk. Over the years, this dynamic of polarised security postures, defensive reasoning, and ritualised procedures resistant to evidence is what led me to ask a fundamental question: *What if security in the humanitarian sector is not just a technical problem, but really a psychological one?*

This article draws on survey data collected for a Master's thesis in Leadership and Consulting at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin as well as on my own experience as a security risk management practitioner with 15 years of field exposure in conflict-affected contexts across the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia.

THE BUNKERISATION PROBLEM

Since the 1990s, the humanitarian sector has experienced a paradox. Aid organisations have extended their geographical reach into conflict zones while at the same time limiting their contact with the very populations that they serve (Collinson & Duffield, 2013). This withdrawal manifests physically in "bunkerisation": a retreat into fortified compounds resembling military bases, movement in armoured convoys, and layers of protocols that separate international staff from the local context (Duffield, 2010).

Standard explanations cite increased targeting of aid workers after high-profile attacks in the early 2000s such as the bombing of the UN compound in Iraq in 2003 which killed two dozen people, the professionalisation of security management, and increased expectations of duty-of-care (Fast, 2014). These factors are real, but they do not fully explain why fortified postures persist even when threat levels decline. Nor do they fully account for resistance to scaling down measures when evidence suggests lower risk, or for defensive reactions when the protective value of existing practices is questioned.

Hansen (2007) observed that many international actors in Baghdad treated insecurity as a "nebulous, generalised, and insurmountable challenge" rather than a series of addressable incidents. When I visited a decade later, after the security situation had improved substantially, the same pattern remained. The bunker had become self-sustaining and immune to disconfirming evidence.

The costs are significant. Fortification consumes resources that could otherwise be used to fund programming. Walls that keep us safe also keep us blind to the contextual dynamics that are essential for effective humanitarian action (Autesserre, 2014). Bunkerisation alienates local populations and reinforces the perception of foreigners as fearful or superior, creating the very distance that increases risk by severing the relationships that provide true protection. Despite widespread awareness of these contradictions, the pattern continues. At the opposite end of the spectrum lies the minimisation or dismissal of security threats rather than excessive protection against them. Both hyper-fortification and systematic risk denial suggest dynamics that go beyond rational risk management.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL LENS: SOCIAL DEFENCE SYSTEMS

In 1960, psychoanalyst Isabel Menzies Lyth looked at nursing services in a way that remains strikingly relevant to humanitarian security risk management (Menzies, 1960). She wanted to know why hospitals structured nursing work in ways that caused high staff turnover and low morale, even when the stated goal was to support the nurses. Her answer was that these structures served a hidden purpose. Nursing involves intimate contact with death, pain, and bodily vulnerability. At the task level, this work generates depressive anxiety in the nurses, who fear for the safety of their patients and feel acutely responsible when things go wrong. Cooper and Lees (2015) distinguish this concern for others from persecutory anxiety at the leadership level, where the

threat centres on the professional self: the fear of blame, humiliation, or legal liability following an incident. To cope, the hospital unconsciously developed depersonalised protocols. Task rotation prevented nurses from forming attachments to patients, ritualised procedures created an illusion of control, and decisions were pushed up the hierarchy to move responsibility away from the front line. These "social defence mechanisms" allowed nurses to work without being overwhelmed, but at a high cost. Effectiveness dropped, staff became dissatisfied, and the anxiety increased because the protocols never addressed the underlying fears. Participants in the study could not explain why these structures existed and any attempt at changing them was met with heavy resistance. The defences operated beneath the surface of awareness, serving a psychological purpose that was presented as an operational necessity.

Humanitarian work generates a similar climate of anxiety. Aid workers not only face direct threats to their safety but also carry the emotional burden of witnessing suffering that they are powerless to stop. They may also experience moral injury: the distress, guilt, shame, anger, or loss of trust that can arise when their actions, organisational decisions, or perceived failures conflict with deeply held moral and professional values. This may occur when staff are required to withdraw from populations in need, accept harm to local partners, or implement policies that appear to protect the organisation while transferring risk to others. There is an inherent ambiguity in conflict zones where "doing good" may inadvertently cause harm, for instance when aid distributions fuel local resentment or shift targeting patterns. The primary task of engaging in a meaningful way with vulnerable populations in chaotic environments is stressful by nature. When organisations cannot manage this anxiety consciously, they create social defence mechanisms. Bunkerisation provides a concrete boundary between the "good" inside and the "bad" outside. Walls and risk matrices act as a form of psychological containment. They attempt to establish predictability in a place that is inherently unpredictable.

But just as nursing's protocols perpetuated the problems they aimed to solve, bunkerisation, too, creates a vicious cycle. Fortification leads to detachment from the local context. This distance leads to poorly informed decisions. By alienating the population, the organisation increases real risks, while the lack of contact makes the outside world feel even more threatening. This perceived danger then justifies further withdrawal (Collinson & Duffield, 2013). At the opposite end of the spectrum, we find another kind of defensive response: systematic risk denial. This can take on the form of idealising community acceptance as sufficient protection, dismissing security concerns as institutional paranoia, or rejecting basic precautions. In psychodynamic terms, such approaches may serve a counterphobic function, managing anxiety by denying danger or acting as though it does not warrant concern.

Both bunkerisation and systematic risk denial represent a failure to reach what Klein (1946) called the depressive position. This is the psychological capacity to tolerate ambiguity and to hold the good and bad parts of a reality together simultaneously. Reflective security practice requires holding this ambiguity. It means acknowledging real danger without retreating into a bunker or falling into denial.

FINDINGS

To see if these tendencies within humanitarian organisations were just anecdotal, I surveyed 60 security professionals and aid workers across UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement, international NGOs (INGOs), and governmental

organisations (GOs), such as bilateral development-cooperation agencies. Survey data was collected through professional networks including the Global Interagency Security Forum. Due to small sample sizes and exploratory methods, findings should be interpreted as hypothesis-generating rather than definitive. Nonetheless, the patterns align strikingly with practitioner observations and the theoretical predictions of systems psychodynamics.

The survey assessed three primary variables: organisational cultures of anxiety, reliance on social defence mechanisms, and the sophistication of security risk management (SRM) practices. Data analysis utilised one-way ANOVAs, post-hoc Tukey HSD tests, and Pearson correlation coefficients, supplemented by qualitative coding of free-text responses from the survey participants.

VARIATIONS IN ANXIETY ACROSS ORGANISATIONAL ARCHITECTURE

The data show statistically significant differences in cultures of anxiety across organisation types (F (3, 49) = 6.532, $p < .001$). Respondents from International Organisations (IO/IGOs) – primarily UN agencies – reported the highest average anxiety (mean = 3.26), followed by GOs (mean = 2.95). In contrast, the RCRC Movement (mean = 2.56) and INGOs (mean = 2.50) reported notably lower levels of anxiety.

These scores suggest that bunkerisation might be a structural product of organisational visibility and accountability rather than just a response to local threat levels. As a container for the political projection of 193 member states, the UN faces intense pressure to demonstrate procedural compliance. Qualitative feedback from UN respondents describes a "constant sense of urgency" where administrative hurdles created "unnecessary anxiety without equal benefits". In these high-visibility environments, security protocols often shift from risk mitigation to a defensive performance. This is the persecutory anxiety of the policy level in action: a performance intended to shield the institution from blame for negligence alongside the physical safety concerns of the staff (Cooper & Lees, 2015).

RITUALS OF SAFETY: THE LINK BETWEEN ANXIETY AND SOCIAL DEFENCES

The survey confirmed a statistically significant correlation between high organisational anxiety and a reliance on defensive psychological mechanisms ($r = -.47$, $p < .01$). Because lower scores on the coping variable indicated more primitive defensive responses, the negative correlation suggests that higher organisational anxiety was associated with less mature coping. The qualitative material suggests that these responses often take the form of overly bureaucratic procedures and the normalisation of protective routines that function as stabilising rituals.

A recurring pattern is rationalisation, where security procedures are justified through formal language even when their practical utility is opaque. One IO respondent noted that they have a "matrix for everything" including green-amber-red ratings. Yet, "when you ask what 'amber' actually means, or when we transition between levels, no one can really explain it". In this respondent's account, the risk matrix appeared to function less as an analytical tool than as a means of making uncertainty appear manageable. Conversely, some respondents described what they perceived as a dismissal of security constraints or local threats, which may suggest defensive denial. One INGO manager described a country director who "insists that we're 'accepted

by the community' and any concerns are just paranoia". Both hyper-fortification and systematic risk denial represent defensive splitting, that is, an unconscious process in which complex situations are reduced to all-or-nothing oppositions. In this state, there is no middle ground. The world is simply divided into total danger or total safety. These extremes signal a failure to achieve Klein's depressive position of being able to tolerate ambiguity.

THE SOPHISTICATION TRAP: WHY ANXIOUS SECURITY IS STAGNANT SECURITY

Higher organisational anxiety predicted lower levels of sophistication in security management ($r = -.54$, $p < .001$). Stronger social defence mechanisms were positively associated with less sophisticated security risk management practices ($r = .55$, $p < .001$), suggesting that organisations caught in an anxiety culture rely more on ritual than adaptation. Once a security measure is implemented, scaling it back becomes psychologically and strategically difficult regardless of the external context. Qualitative accounts suggest that resistance may partly reflect concern that de-escalation could leave decision-makers exposed to scrutiny, professional criticism, or accusations of inadequate care should an incident occur.

Importantly, as Krahmann (2008) observes, effective risk management is inherently a "non-event". This creates a serious knowledge problem: it is often impossible to know whether the lack of incidents is caused by the security posture or happens despite it. This makes any attempt to reduce security measures feel like an existential gamble. Adaptive security requires leaders to tolerate the depressive position: living with real improvement while accepting ongoing uncertainty. Without this ability to metabolise doubt – to take in uncertainty and work it through rather than react defensively – security practices turn into rituals that persist long after the original threat has subsided.

THE SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS OF ANXIETY

To make sense of why these practices stagnate, we must identify exactly whose anxieties are driving the architecture. The survey results, field observations, and several qualitative accounts suggest that bunkerisation can operate through a dual logic. Physical walls respond to the very real fear of being targeted in an attack. Yet they also function as rituals of safety to manage the persecutory anxiety of leadership.

Several respondents described organisational arrangements in which accountability appeared to be shifted downward through rigid protocols; this may reflect difficulty in containing the psychological weight of responsibility. In these accounts, fortification appeared to serve two functions: mitigating the risk of external violence while also offering demonstrable procedural compliance in the event of scrutiny after an incident. In such accounts, the risk matrix may do more than just analyse the reality on the ground. It can also provide a documented trail of caution that helps contain leaders' fear of failure.

Survey responses provide direct evidence that security measures may serve both protective and defensive functions. One respondent described "a culture of 'avoiding responsibility' by complete fortification", adding that the issue was "not fear of security incidents as such, but fear of taking decisions and a culture of shifting accountability". Another observed that anxiety increased "the higher one goes in the organizational structure and the further away from the actual field reality", because

senior managers feared the consequences of incidents and were vulnerable to exaggerated media and public accounts. A further respondent argued that "there is no 'risk appetite'" and that spending on staff protection could produce "isolation from the people we serve". These accounts do not demonstrate that security measures are irrational. Rather, they suggest that practical risk reduction and institutional self-protection can become intertwined.

UNEVEN PROTECTION AND SHARED RISK

The survey also suggests that anxiety and protection are not experienced evenly within humanitarian organisations. Several respondents distinguished between the security arrangements available to international and local staff, and some described risk being transferred to national colleagues or implementing partners. These accounts should not be read as evidence of a uniform organisational practice; rather, they indicate that the psychological and operational consequences of security decisions may be distributed unevenly. One respondent described an "extensive culture of risk transfer to local staff, implementing partners and others who are not international UN staff." Another participant offered a contrasting model of shared risk: "We do not simply transfer risks to our implementing partner organisations but share risks with them and actively invest in the security and safeguarding systems of our partners." Taken together, these accounts suggest that security arrangements and decision-making processes may affect not only the level of protection provided, but also how responsibilities and residual risks are distributed among international staff, national colleagues, and partner organisations. They point to shared risk, rather than the transfer of risk, as a potentially important dimension of reflective security practice.

THE MIDDLE GROUND: NAVIGATING THE DEPRESSIVE POSITION

Alongside these accounts of defensive practices and uneven protection, other responses suggest approaches that accommodate uncertainty without relying on either hyper-fortification or systematic risk denial. A significant middle ground exists, primarily occupied by organisations within the RCRC Movement and various INGOs. These groups reported lower anxiety cultures (mean scores of 2.56 and 2.50 respectively) and higher coping sophistication. Responses from participants in these organisational settings suggest an ability to recognise contexts as both dangerous and operationally accessible at the same time. Qualitative responses support this interpretation: one respondent described seeking "a good balance between risk and reward" while operating in areas considered dangerous, while another reported openly discussing changing developments and their implications for organisational risk.

Rather than resorting to the extremes of hyper-fortification or of total risk denial, participants' accounts suggest that such organisations may maintain more permeable boundaries with the local population. This approach allows them to employ what is known as active acceptance, where security is derived from meaningful relationships and negotiation rather than concrete walls. The survey responses from this group suggest that their success is rooted in leadership that can metabolise doubt. By acknowledging that security can be managed but never eliminated, these leaders reduce the internal unease of the organisation. This capacity for containment allows them to make evidence-based adjustments to their security posture, scaling measures down when threat levels decline without experiencing the move as an existential gamble.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

If bunkerisation and its opposite extreme, systematic risk denial, are understood as defensive responses to intolerable anxiety, then the path toward more effective security risk management requires a shift from technical control to psychological containment. This transition involves more than refined risk matrices or better equipment. It requires structural changes in how organisations acknowledge and process the climate of unease that accompanies high-risk work.

FROM RITUAL TO EVIDENCE: THE SECURITY MANAGER'S DILEMMA

For security managers, the primary challenge is to differentiate actual risk signals from internal organisational noise. Here, reducing organisational anxiety refers not to eliminating legitimate concern, but to using procedures and routines to make uncertainty feel psychologically manageable. This requires a rigorous commitment to incident data over worst-case speculation. In contexts like Baghdad, the persistence of a high alert status long after targeted incidents have declined suggests that measures have shifted from protection to ritual. Adaptive security requires a documented, transparent process for scaling down measures. By distributing the psychological weight of such decisions across a wider team and grounding them in systematic analysis, managers can reduce the personal fear of blame that often prevents de-escalation.

Shared responsibility and systematic analysis can help reduce this fear, but they cannot remove the uncertainty surrounding de-escalation. Even a well-supported decision to adopt a lighter posture may be viewed as imprudent should an incident occur. Moreover, the non-event paradox makes it impossible to prove that readjusting security is the *cause* of a peaceful period. To break this stagnation, organisations need to treat security as something they test and adjust over time, not a fixed state they lock in forever. This means deliberately looking for evidence that challenges the current posture and asking what concrete data would justify scaling back a given measure. If no such data can be imagined, the organisation is no longer linking measures to a concrete, external threat landscape. It is therefore no longer managing risk alone; it is primarily reducing organisational anxiety.

CONTAINMENT OVER CONTROL: THE LEADERSHIP FUNCTION

The psychoanalytic concept of containment, developed by Bion (1970: 77–82) offers a way of structuring security that does not rely on rigid defensive protocols. Containment occurs when leaders acknowledge anxiety, work it through, and give it meaning rather than instinctively defending against it. In practical terms, this begins with naming the anxiety. Leaders must be willing to discuss the fears of staff harm, professional failure, and legal liability. When these fears remain unvoiced, they go underground and re-emerge as meaningless administrative hurdles or ten-metre concrete walls.

Leadership must also facilitate reflective spaces where security staff can discuss uncertainty without fear of being labelled unprofessional. Containment depends on transparent and intelligible information flows. Several respondents linked anxiety not simply to the level of threat, but to unclear, excessive, or poorly targeted communication. Information was described as "cluttered," shared too late, or circulated at levels where it was not relevant. One participant stated that "transparency of information

flow and analysis is the most effective tool for establishing trust and reducing anxiety." Leaders can therefore make containment operational by explaining what is known, what remains uncertain, how a decision has been reached, and what evidence would justify revising it. This allows staff to understand risk as a shared problem for judgement rather than as opaque instructions that they merely receive.

Such discussions are not therapeutic sessions, but professional spaces for testing assumptions, sharing contextual knowledge, and preventing anxiety from driving decisions unconsciously. By modelling adaptive thinking and tolerating the ambiguity of the depressive position – understanding that a situation can be simultaneously improving and still dangerous – leaders give the rest of the organisation permission to think in nuances. Responsibility for risk assessment and decision-making should be shared rather than concentrated at the top, without transferring residual exposure or accountability onto national staff or implementing partners. This can reduce persecutory pressure on senior management.

BEYOND POLARISATION: A SECTORAL SHIFT

The humanitarian sector must move beyond defensive splitting. In security practice, this can manifest as a polarisation between bunkerisation and an idealised form of acceptance. Both extremes serve defensive functions. The security manager may be managing anxiety about responsibility, while the programme manager may be managing anxiety about operational restrictions. Acknowledging these motivations across the spectrum reduces the need for institutional judgement and allows for more integrated approaches.

Progress requires comparative learning between organisations operating in the same contexts with differing security postures. By analysing whether an agency's heavy fortification leads to fewer incidents than a peer's light footprint, the sector can move toward an evidence-based understanding of what provides protection. Ultimately, reflective security practice requires admitting that our decisions involve more than rational calculation. When organisations can sit with the discomfort of uncertainty rather than immediately retreating into the bunker, they create the necessary space for security practices that are truly adaptive, contextual, and honest about the fears that shape humanitarian work.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS REFLECTIVE SECURITY

Looking back on the Baghdad encounter, I see less a disagreement between opposing security philosophies than two practitioners trying to make responsible decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Felix's emphasis on procedural safeguards and my emphasis on operational latitude reflected different assessments of what protection required in that context. Both positions drew on professional experience and judgement, and both may also have been shaped by the anxieties inherent in conflict work. What I initially treated as an individual disagreement now appears, in retrospect, as part of a wider organisational dynamic in which security arrangements can also serve a social-defensive function.

These dynamics are not isolated to Baghdad but show an industry-wide pattern: anxious organisations lean on defensive practices that may protect the professional self from blame while becoming disconnected from the external threat environment. Breaking this cycle requires a sector-wide shift toward reflexivity and containment. Leaders must be able to acknowledge anxiety, tolerate ambiguity, and create

space for evidence-based decisions that are adaptive rather than merely ritualistic. Humanitarian security will never be free of danger, moral injury, or uncertainty. The task is to prevent these realities from unconsciously determining security architecture and to develop practices that remain grounded in evidence, responsive to context, and connected to the people humanitarian organisations seek to serve.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations or of any other organisation referred to in this article or with which the author is or has been affiliated. The author has no competing interests to declare.

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