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The Identity Work of Journalists and Humanitarians in South Sudan's Protection of Civilians Sites

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ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the simplistic juxtaposition of protectors and protected in South Sudan's Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites, by asking: who was civilian in South Sudan, and how were civilians being protected? We present a civilian landscape that is much broader and more complex than the dominant PoC imaginary. Drawing attention to civilians who engage in professional tasks, the article considers the everyday practices of humanitarians and journalists. This illustrates that the category of 'civilian' is not the bureaucratic or legal certainty suggested by international law or PoC discourse, but unstable, shifting and constructed through everyday practice.

Introduction: The civilian protection imaginary

The international response to the conflict in South Sudan introduced a new salience to the concept of the civilian, as it gave rise to the establishment of displacement spaces termed 'Protection of Civilians' (PoC) sites. These sites were a unique phenomenon, arising after the start of hostilities in 2013, when tens of thousands of civilians who were being targeted by pro-government and rebel forces on an ethnic basis arrived at UN bases and demanded to be let in for safety and protection (Cormack and Pendle 2023). The fortified enclosures that resulted were designed to keep civilians safe from harm at the hands of actors outside the walls and came to be the sites of a very particular *imaginary* — in Taylor's (2002) sense of 'the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations'. In keeping with the circumstances of their founding, this PoC imaginary revolved around shielding a defined group of (discursively innocent) civilians from violence outside the perimeter. The sites were imagined as ostensibly closed spaces; civilians entered and exited through heavily monitored perimeter gates and enjoyed limited, basic privileges once admitted (Foley 2016). It was a paradigm that envisaged civilians as being in the care of, as well as shielded by, outside protectors. As the

other contributions in this Special Issue show, PoC interventions cannot help but constitute their subjects and this influence travels in two directions: as they worked along the fringes of the POC imaginary, humanitarians and journalists were being constructed as a certain type of civilian and, at the same time, influencing what the civilian category meant in the context of South Sudan.

The narrow PoC imaginary is both enduring and contested, even as the sites themselves transitioned, arguably only at the level of rhetoric, into more generic 'displacement camps'. It persisted throughout the 2013–2020 period, even as the civilian character of the sites was impugned, sporadic violent perimeter breaches occurred, and criminality flourished within and around the sites (Da Costa 2023; Hagemann 2023; Paddon Rhoads and Sutton 2020). This article interrogates the simplistic juxtaposition of protectors and protected, engaging with two questions at the heart of this Special Issue: who is civilian in South Sudan, and how are civilians being protected? The account that follows presents a civilian landscape that is much broader and more complex than the dominant PoC imaginary would suggest. Focusing on the case of civilians who engage in professional tasks, we consider the everyday practices of two groups: humanitarians and journalists. The presence within the PoC sites of civilians carrying out professional duties offers an important example of how the category of 'civilian' is not the bureaucratic or legal certainty suggested by International Humanitarian Law (IHL) or PoC discourse. On the contrary, the civilian is something unstable, shifting, and constructed through everyday practice (Cormack and Pendle 2023).

This discussion proceeds in three parts. The first introduces the case of journalists and humanitarians, outlining each category of professional actor and situating them in the context of the PoC sites. The second argues that the relevant legal definitions and bureaucratic categories fail to capture the situation of these civilian professionals. The third part presses this view further, presenting the *identity work* that journalists and humanitarians engaged in to assert their dual professional and civilian identities. Through this work, these actors aimed to accomplish their professional objectives (such as delivering aid or reporting the effects of war) and minimised risks of harm at the hands of conflict actors. Insofar as their discursive identity work is designed to preserve personal safety, it functions as a form of civilian self-protection (CSP). As the discussion also highlights, these civilian professionals often struggled to avoid being implicated in conflict dynamics – whether due to certain features of their identity or because their activities reach across into the combatant domain. The ways in which these professionals attempted to secure their own safety and obtain the resources needed to achieve their goals in South Sudan shows that the 'Protection of Civilians' concept (Pantuliano and Svoboda 2016), as well as the construction of the civilian category more broadly, is indeed a 'work in progress' (Williams 2013) – and that this work is, crucially, often carried out by civilians themselves. Civilian identity thus emerges as a matter of negotiation and co-construction between those who serve as protectors of the space and those who are meant to be protected. South Sudan's PoC sites reveal both the limits of law and the ways in which the protector/protected paradigm obscures important struggles.

Before moving on, some brief comments on data and method will be made. The discussion that follows is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with humanitarians and journalists who have worked in South Sudan, and these interviews are complemented by ethnographic observation. Over 40 journalists were interviewed in 2018, including

a diverse mix of South Sudanese and foreign journalists working both freelance and for a range of national and international news outlets. Ethnographic observation was also carried out while accompanying journalists on assignment in the Malakal PoC site investigating potential war crimes committed in Upper Nile state. Empirical material on humanitarians was gathered in 2015, encompassing 47 interviews with humanitarian actors (including national and international staff of NGOs and UN humanitarian agencies) and focus group discussions with 42 internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in the Juba, Bor, and Bentiu PoC sites. Observations of humanitarians were also carried out within these PoC sites. These observations and interviews were then coded thematically (using NVivo) to draw out aspects of practice that implicate civilian identity. Quotations from interviews reproduced in this article have been anonymised to preserve confidentiality.

The two sets of civilian professionals will now be introduced in more detail, situating their presence in South Sudan and within the PoC sites.

The case of journalists and humanitarians in South Sudan

While it has not historically been the practice of UN missions to shelter civilians inside their bases, UNMISS (United Nations Mission in South Sudan) commanders in South Sudan almost universally opened their doors to civilians in December 2013. These actions were a response to the sudden onset of widespread, targeted attacks (mostly on the basis of ethnicity) that took place almost simultaneously in a number of cities in response to president Salva Kiir firing his cabinet some months earlier and accusing his vice president, Riek Machar of planning a coup. Given the genesis of the PoC sites as protective spaces during a period of acute violence, questions of whether a particular individual is recognisably 'civilian' or not have acquired fundamental significance. IDPs who arrived at the gates of a PoC site underwent a tacit classification exercise: those deemed civilian were granted entry, while those whose status was doubtful risked being turned back. Admission to the site thus hinged on an (often implicit) determination by the site's gatekeepers that the person standing before them merits the civilian label: it was 'civilians' who were being let in, because it was civilians who ought to be protected inside. Equally, sanctioned presence inside the PoC site established one's civilian credentials.

Yet there were other civilians who entered and moved about inside the PoC sites in very different ways from the account above, claiming different privileges, facing unique risks, and gaining access to its resources in ways that were off limits to ordinary IDPs. The two professional groups examined here — journalists and humanitarians — share several features with each other. First, both are generally entitled to legal protection from intentional targeting in armed conflicts in accordance with IHL rules, as will be discussed below. However, both journalists and humanitarians are often deliberately targeted with violence (Committee to Protect Journalists 2019). These professionals are routinely attacked, not in spite of the fact that they are journalists or humanitarians, but *because* of this. Second, to the extent that they participate in formalised organisations and professional networks, both sets of actors espouse specific professional commitments and subscribe to codes of conduct. They may also share normative commitments of serving war-affected populations, though the specific justifications for their presence in armed conflicts may differ. Traditionally, journalists

bear witness to the conduct and harms of war, while humanitarians provide direct, life-saving assistance and generally eschew public accusations against perpetrators. As we will discuss, both groups also differ from each other and within themselves in further, crucial ways.

Lest the impression be given that we are speaking only of the Western expatriate stringer for Reuters, or the Swiss Red Cross humanitarian delegate, it is important to clarify who these journalists and humanitarians are. All the individuals examined in this article possess some degree of professional identity as humanitarians or journalists, and made a claim to civilian classification, whether as a social or legal matter. Beyond this, they were quite differently situated.

As an entry point, it is helpful to consider the differing ways through which humanitarians and journalists come to engage in professional activities within the PoC sites. The 'international' and 'local' groupings will initially be used loosely here, with the ultimate aim of complicating that unsatisfactory binary. The first grouping encompasses actors whose work brought them to South Sudan – whether from bordering countries, places elsewhere in the region, or further afield. Accounts of 'expatriate', 'external', 'intervening', or 'international' humanitarians and journalists generally have this sub-group in mind, though the persisting image of white, Western professionals obscures what is in practice considerable diversity (Bunce 2011). This first sub-set of professional actors found themselves in the PoC sites mainly because of their jobs. As we will discuss in this article, security was often a factor for these actors in the sense that PoC sites were often deemed safe(r) places to carry out their professional tasks. However, it was primarily their professional tasks that provided the rationale for the presence of these humanitarians and journalists within the sites.

The second grouping of individuals performing journalistic or humanitarian duties in the PoC sites encompassed nationals or residents of South Sudan. Members of this latter group are often viewed as 'local' professionals, a designator which again potentially obscures more than it reveals. Some of these individuals had been displaced because of conflict-related violence, seeking refuge in the PoC sites mainly for reasons of safety. Some IDPs stepped into humanitarian or professional roles that were entirely new to them, and others re-engaged in professional duties that had some continuity with their past employment. This category also comprised South Sudanese individuals from areas *not* affected by conflict, who came to the PoC sites primarily in their professional capacity as humanitarians or journalists. The limitations of the 'local' label become obvious here (Fisher 2017). First, South Sudanese nationals from particular parts of the country might have been considered foreign in a given PoC site. Second, South Sudanese staff of international humanitarian organisations, or international news outlets, have been difficult to place neatly in local or international categories. Yet more individuals did not fall neatly into the above groupings: some transitioned through, or even embraced, multiple professional identities simultaneously (on humanitarian 'shapeshifting' in a different context see James 2021). Former journalists took on communications roles with humanitarian organisations, for example, and an aid worker with expertise in food security might have begun reporting on famine for the media. Issues of race and ethnicity then further complicated this international/binary, in ways which will be further discussed below. In the next section, we consider relevant legal categories in IHL.

The limitations of the legal imaginary of the civilian

The idea of the civilian, as it materialises in IHL rules, is an important matter in the case of South Sudan. Official narratives about the PoC sites — not to mention the material treatment of civilians who sought shelter there — hinged on conceptions of the civilian category that drew (implicitly) on IHL (Kindersley and Rolandsen 2019). This discussion explains how the relevant legal categories fall short in the case of journalists and humanitarians.

As codified in the First Additional Protocol (AP I) to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, the principle of distinction requires parties to the conflict to distinguish between the civilian population and combatants, as well as between civilian objects and military objectives (Article 48 of AP I). The civilian category is defined in Article 50 of AP I in a negative or residual manner, as anyone who is not a combatant (Garbett 2015; Hellestveit 2013; McDonald 2004). So long as they do nothing to forfeit their civilian immunity, journalists and humanitarians will generally enjoy civilian status and legal protection from direct attack in accordance with the principle of distinction. In various Resolutions, the UN Security Council has condemned intentional violence and interference with both journalists (UNSCR 1738, 2006; UNSCR 2222, 2015) and humanitarians (UNSCR 1502, 2003; UNSCR 2175, 2014), citing their legal civilian status and the specific protections IHL affords to each group. The caveat here is that these actors may still be legally harmed in armed conflicts, where the attack in question is found to comply with IHL's principle of proportionality — which allows for incidental harm to civilians where this was not anticipated to be excessive in relation to the expected military advantage (Articles 51 and 57 of AP I).

Significantly, neither 'journalist' nor 'humanitarian' is formally defined in IHL. Scattered references are made to journalists and humanitarians (with the latter routinely referred to by designations such as 'relief worker') in IHL treaties. However, the content of these categories and their fit with IHL's civilian category is not quite clear. As we note below, professional accreditation systems are of some help in fleshing out the identities and legitimate practices of these two sets of actors.

Journalists in IHL

Under the heading 'Measures of Protection for Journalists', Article 79 of AP I specifies that journalists 'shall be considered as civilians within the meaning of Article 50, paragraph 1', 'be protected as such under the Conventions and this Protocol, provided that they take no action adversely affecting their status as civilians', and that they may obtain an identity card issued by the government of the state in which they are a national, in whose territory they reside, or in which their employer is located. In practice, most self-identifying conflict journalists are unlikely to be captured in this provision. Few individuals engaged in journalism work in South Sudan have accreditation from their home country recognised by combatants, where they possess it at all. Moreover, many journalists view the system of journalism accreditation operated by South Sudan's Media Authority as being a source of insecurity rather than protection. South Sudanese and international journalists writing for international outlets are intermittently summoned by the Media Authority to explain themselves and justify potentially unflattering coverage of issues. Foreign

journalists risk having press accreditation revoked or not renewed, and may be expelled for reporting in ways that are entirely consistent with their civilian status in AP I. Moreover, the country's accreditation scheme for foreign journalists requires sponsorship by a South Sudanese person or organisation. Many journalists fear that this sponsor is intended to be a point of leverage if the Media Authority should wish to punish foreign reporters who have left the country. In an interview, one journalist describes how risk shifts to local fixers through this mechanism:

> So, if you are going to apply … [y]ou have to address it through a South Sudanese based here [in the country]. And that is basically your fixer. The reason why they have that is because they want someone to hold responsible, and it's kind of the way you can intimidate a person. If you come in and then you go like, we know you can write your negative reporting once you're out and not come back, but we know who to hold accountable when you're gone. So it kind of puts somebody in a tight spot.

Beyond accreditation, very few journalists reporting on South Sudan's conflict fit the narrow IHL definition of a 'war correspondent'. Virtually none professionally cover the movements of combatant forces, for example. In practice, conflict journalism comprises a mix of hard news, features, humanitarian reporting, and occasional investigative stories on issues such as government corruption. The image of the journalist presented in Article 79 of AP I is also likely to be alien to those engaged in warfighting – such as SPLA members guarding checkpoints, national security officers screening flight passengers, and even the UNMISS press officers who managed PoC site access.

Humanitarians in IHL

Under the heading 'Personnel Participating in Relief Actions', Article 71 of AP I stipulates that humanitarian actors ought to be respected and protected, forming part of the assistance in relief actions, 'subject to the approval of the Party in whose territory they will carry out their duties.' Moreover, 'each Party in receipt of relief consignments shall, to the fullest extent practicable, assist the relief personnel referred to in paragraph 1 in carrying out their relief mission', only limiting their activities in cases of 'imperative military necessity'. For their part, relief personnel 'shall take account of the security requirements of the Party in whose territory they are carrying out their duties' or risk having their activities terminated. Further references to relief workers (and variations on this theme) can be found in the two APs.

Overall, humanitarian actors are in a slightly different situation from that of journalists under IHL, though some similar problems arise. Like journalists, few self-identifying humanitarian actors will find themselves reflected in Article 71 of AP I (Mackintosh 2011). However, it is generally accepted that under both GC IV and AP I, international humanitarian actors who deliver humanitarian assistance in armed conflicts (humanitarian relief, namely humanitarian and protection assistance involving food, water, sanitation, shelter, health services, as well as humanitarian coordination) are legally classified as civilians (Article 71(2) of AP I). So long as they maintain their civilian status and do not participate in hostilities, international law prohibits targeting them directly (Schwendimann 2011).

Compared to journalists, there are more robust legal frameworks addressing humanitarian assistance. Nonetheless, the figure of the humanitarian actor is poorly described in law and the relationship of this actor to the civilian category is muddled. With the

exception of humanitarians belonging to the Red Cross family of organisations, the claims various humanitarians make to legal humanitarian and civilian identity are more tenuous (Sutton 2020). In South Sudan's PoC sites, humanitarians face the additional challenge of sharing the space with UNMISS actors who are often perceived as combatant-like (Ibid.)

Global efforts to professionalise the humanitarian sector over the past few decades provide further clues about legitimate humanitarian identity (Davies 2012; Thurstans 2011). Professional humanitarians deliver reliable, appropriate, high-quality programming; hold themselves accountable to beneficiary populations; and follow standardised approaches (Walker and Russ 2011). Complicating matters, the process of humanitarian professionalisation is also entangled with militarised, politicised, and securitised approaches to aid (Joachim and Schneiker 2012; Richey and Chouliaraki 2017). Furthermore, detractors of professionalisation would contend that the professional humanitarian actor is not a 'good' humanitarian at all: bureaucratic humanitarians risk eroding their relationship with the beneficiaries of aid (James 2016; Roth 2012).

It has been suggested here that IHL is not functioning to provide a recognisable definition of the work of journalists or humanitarians. Rather, the boundaries of the civilian category are forged out of the practical and often contingent attempts of these actors to assert and be recognised as (privileged) civilians. In the empirical discussion that follows, we outline how both sets of actors take it upon themselves to assert civilian identities through everyday identity work, even as their professional activities may cause them to intrude on the conduct of fighting parties.

The identity work of journalists and humanitarians in South Sudan

As they manage perceptions and position themselves strategically in relation to various conflict parties, journalists and humanitarians work to assert their identity as civilian professionals and secure the resources needed to accomplish their professional tasks – tasks that might affect the conduct of fighting parties. As a result, these civilian professionals emerge as much more than a passive category established in IHL or the PoC imaginary.

Identity work as a form of civilian self-protection

The everyday practices of journalists and humanitarians can be conceptualised as a form of embodied identity work. The term refers to the routine practices that humanitarians and journalists implement with the aim of embodying (and thereby asserting and defending) their respective civilian and professional identities. Drawing on Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999) idea of social practice, we propose that these professionals bring together a range of material and discursive resources in order to enact moments of practice that both *do* things and create representations of what it is that has been done and the identity of the person doing it. In part, these practices are directed at achieving material outcomes – reporting, in the case of journalists, and assisting, in the case of humanitarians. At the same time, they also aim to secure an individual's dual status as a civilian and as a professional who is engaged in recognisably humanitarian or journalistic work.

The focus here is on those aspects of identity work that constitute a form of civilian self-protection, or CSP. Briefly, CSP refers to the efforts that civilians make to keep themselves, their families, and fellow community members safe from harm in war (Jose and Medie

2015; Kaplan 2017). By illuminating endogenous sources of protection and advancing a nuanced understanding of civilian agency, CSP scholarship upends conventional legal or bureaucratic imagery of inert or passive civilians. In situating civilians more clearly in relation to the fighting parties, CSP scholarship also demonstrates the compromises and trade-offs civilians make in war. As the CSP literature has so far engaged with the civilian population as a broad, negative category of non-combatant, our main contribution is to highlight the special problems humanitarians and journalists pose (Bellamy and Williams 2010; Suarez and Black 2014). The discussion will now consider three key dynamics: (i) how both professionals navigated the challenge of gaining safe and reliable access to the PoC sites; (ii) issues of race and ethnicity that inflected these experiences, and; (iii) the problem of 'reach across', whereby in executing their professional tasks these two groups were seen to interfere with the conduct of fighting parties.

Gaining access to the PoC sites

At the heart of conflict parties' concerns over the existence of the PoC sites was a belief that they provided safe harbour to those who might affect the course of the war (Briggs and Monaghan 2017). Defended as they were, the PoCs were a particularly clear instance of a more general phenomenon that Duffield terms the 'archipelago of international space' (Duffield 2010) – defended, bunkerised accommodation and working areas connected by a tightly regulated transport network, offering good access to displaced populations. A key feature of access to PoC sites as islands in the international archipelago was that it was discretionary. Who was allowed, via which points of entry, and with what privileges, was conditioned by perceptions of the individual or organisation who requested access.

Contrary to a bureaucratic imaginary of PoC sites as defended populations of civilians separated from the war outside, the sites are better understood as having been active, self-constructing communities of civilians that made varied use of the defended architecture of the space while being connected to the politics of the country outside the gates. For those civilians admitted inside — whether because of the professional tasks they engage in or the political claims they can make by virtue of their identity—UNMISS essentially offered a security subsidy.

Journalists who resided outside the PoC sites (whether foreign press or South Sudanese reporters from Juba) came to the sites in search of accommodation, transport, communications staff, and access to testimony from IDPs. Other journalists lived inside of the PoC sites, operating radio stations and mobile radio services out of reach from government and opposition forces (Frohardt and Orlando 2019). Those journalists who engaged in the PoC sites had to consider how they would be viewed by the conflict parties, particularly with respect to their neutrality in the conflict and their independence. We will return to this tension shortly.

For their part, humanitarians who operated inside of the PoC sites made use of UN facilities and services to varying degrees. With UNMISS permission, humanitarians built clinics, offices, and other facilities, and sometimes relied on UN escorts and logistics to supply them. Along with fortified humanitarian compounds located across South Sudan, the PoC sites formed an important part of the international archipelago – with the twist that humanitarians based in the PoC sites resided alongside IDPs and UNMISS, albeit in dedicated humanitarian hubs. Unlike their counterparts based

outside of the PoC sites, for whom employment with a humanitarian organisation often included its own security infrastructure (Andersson and Weigand 2015; Slim 2015), humanitarians residing in the PoC sites had to secure the goodwill of UNMISS. Accounts of the early days of the PoC sites found UNMISS peacekeepers and humanitarians squabbling over things like water and power shortages, and the delineation of space for 'humanitarian hubs' (Sutton 2021). At the same time as humanitarians had to manage their relationship(s) with UNMISS, they also engaged in self-protection strategies aimed at the warring parties and South Sudanese authorities. While the relative insulation of humanitarians in the sites offered protective and deterrent benefits, the physical distancing such practices required impeded the success of humanitarian efforts and could weaken relationships with local populations (Andersson and Weigand 2015; Autesserre 2014; Duffield 2010; Smirl 2015). Bunkerised humanitarians had to learn to build and avoid certain kinds of relationships with those around them in ways that preserved specific detachments from the conflict without becoming completely disengaged.

A crucial factor that determined whether journalists and humanitarians could operate inside the PoC sites was the nature of their professional tasks – more specifically, whether these activities aligned with UNMISS' goals and values. This was especially important in situations where UNMISS' consent was required to enter, or even to travel to, the sites. Both sets of professional actors reported challenges in navigating the tension between accomplishing their aims and staying in UNMISS' good graces.

An example arises here in the case of journalists whose professional goals aligned with the aims of UNMISS in a particular instance. During observational fieldwork accompanying journalists on an investigative reporting project in Malakal PoC, UN liaison staff showed a great willingness to assist their investigations. Journalists were allowed to wander the site unsupervised, and to travel with UNMISS troops on remote journeys beyond the Malakal base. In terms of obtaining privileged access to UN resources and spaces for their work, the two journalists being observed were exceptionally well accommodated. The nature of the story they were pursuing, which concerned forced displacement as a possible war crime, is likely relevant here. It resonated with civilian UN staff residing in the PoC site, many of whom had either been displaced themselves by the conflict or knew others who had. These staff were eager for the atrocities under investigation to be brought to light, and this alignment of normative commitments seemed to smooth access for the journalists (Wright 2016).

Pointing in the other direction, journalists (and humanitarians) who were engaged in work that was unpalatable to UNMISS, or who insisted on presenting themselves as independent—from UNMISS, from politics, or from the conflict—struggled to secure reliable access to the sites. In one striking example, journalist Justin Lynch was pursued by UN personnel who were intent on 'evicting' him from the Malakal PoC site after his live reporting of the fighting contradicted official accounts of an attack on the site while it was underway. One journalist recounts the incident:

> [Lynch] was in Malakal and the UN, I actually flew out the day he flew in unfortunately, because the fighting hadn't started yet […] And he also like was flying in randomly and then happened to be there when the thing was, was attacked. But UNMISS, once he started filing reports about how the UN hadn't protected civilians, they went to, like, door to door trying to find him, and he had to, like, hide. I know, I know the aid worker who,

who hid him in his, in his container and was, like, don't leave. And he was sitting there filing copy from inside a container as there was a manhunt for him, cos the UN was trying to drag him out.

This rather dramatic incident shows how the independence of civilian professionals and their professional obligations may interfere with access to the PoC sites. A more general point is that the desire to assert the professional part of their identity as professional civilians can lead both journalists and humanitarians to decline (or lose) offers of support from UNMISS. The civilian protection of a 'protection of civilians' site, then, appears to be qualified in ways that have more to do with the kind of civilian one can authoritatively lay claim to being than the provisions of IHL.

Race and ethnicity in identity work

Having highlighted the limitations of international/local binary earlier, the discussion now considers its implications for the degree of civilian protection these actors are able to claim. A first observation is that 'internationals' enjoyed a range of formal protection resources that were unavailable to host-country citizens, as well as benefits such as evacuation insurance and consular services. Yet it was local professionals who were more likely to be put at risk through their work and to be targeted by violent attacks (Burri 2015, 73). Second, international humanitarians and journalists operating in South Sudan tended to inhabit civilian identities that were quite different from those of their local counterparts. Where their local identities became entangled with ethnic distinctions, civilian professionals sometimes faced serious constraints as subjects of local justice processes (Ibreck 2023), or the ethnic dynamics of the conflict more generally. In particular, the ethnic segregation of the PoC sites meant that an individual's (perceived or actual) race, nationality, and ethnicity could impact their access to all, or certain parts of, the sites (Radio Tamazuj 2016).

In interviews, white international civilians often positioned themselves outside of discursive categories such as ethnicity. This made certain readings of their identity unlikely, without going so far as to say that they were not seen as belonging to various identity categories in connection with their race, ethnicity, and nationality (and gender, age, class, and so on). The whiteness of the Western expat, far from being a non-category, carried its own, often colonial, meanings. One finding of this study was that white privilege functioned in crucial ways for both humanitarians and journalists in South Sudan. While whiteness sometimes made individuals the target of attacks (see discussion of Terrain Hotel incident below), it conferred various benefits on its wearers and routinely influenced the type of identity work that was required of its subjects. As a matter of positionality, it should also not escape notice that our own whiteness enabled each of us as researchers to access the sites and carry out this study.

One journalist describes the phenomenon of white privilege in South Sudan thus:

[…] South Sudan right now is a place where basically the reporting there is practically running off privilege. I don't think it's safe for almost, you know regional reporters, and definitely not South Sudanese to do a lot of the reporting there. So, you're basically often just making the bet that this random guy knows that if he kills a white person or hurts a white person, people are going to care.

[…]

most of the reporting I think on South Sudan right now that's being done on the ground, is basically, is basically built entirely, it's foundation right now is white privilege. Which is, which is a strange dynamic. Full of ethical dilemmas that like no one I don't feel like has really talked about in a public manner.

This claim is reiterated in the reflections of British and South Sudanese journalists on the role of nationality and ethnicity. A British journalist spoke of South Sudanese journalists being exposed to dangerous situations that he, as a white foreigner, would never face himself:

… my experience has generally been, like, most guys would rather talk to a foreigner than do them any harm. You know, so I feel pretty immune from these, sort of, localised, often ethnicized conflicts. And I feel that both sides would rather talk to me than do me any harm, on the whole.

A South Sudanese colleague presented a very different experience as a Dinka entering a Juba PoC site with a predominantly Nuer population. They explained:

… they will just look at me as a Dinka. So, it's hard sometimes to go to that area. I remember when the United States visited the United Nations, Samantha Power, when she came here, they went to [the PoC site] […] We were put in a small van like this one, and we were not allowed to go out. And some guys in the UNMISS [PoC compound], they were even coming near, they would even hit your head or your legs, so that they see you're actually, you're Dinka or Nuer, so you have to control [your movements], so it's difficult actually, in some area[s].

Similarly, local humanitarian actors faced a different set of risks and opportunities than their international counterparts. Befitting the more institutionalised nature of humanitarianism, organisational hiring practices and decisions about staff deployment served as an important site where these issues arouse. The head of an INGO in Juba offered:

It has to be understood that sometimes the 'best' person who applies for an NGO job is from a particular ethnicity that will spike local conflict … We have issues within ethnic groups, and also we can't have Ugandans go to a certain place, or a Dinka in Unity. And then in Warrap, a Dinka area, you can't have a Nuer. We do delve into that and make sure the people we hire, even those we send there, even on a day visit, that it will be ok for them.

This humanitarian also questioned why another humanitarian organisation sent a Dinka staff member to Bentiu—an area populated by a Nuer majority— where this individual was violently beaten. In his view: '[T]hey said she was a specialist in the field, I don't give a damn, you don't send that person. There are implications on their own life, but then [also a] reputational thing for [the] agency, and for everyone else.'

A UNMISS staff member further proposed that humanitarian camp management NGOs in the PoC sites overlook the racial, ethnic, and other affiliations of their staff:

You hire a Nuer person, and now because you didn't fact check or check their background … Now he's hired his cousin as block leader, then [an]other cousin to lead work crew. Now, you're wondering why this community is all men up in arms with camp management, and against all the other communities, and now this Shilluk tribal group is not happy. It's because this one tribe is in charge of everything.

The chasm between white expatriate and local humanitarians grew even wider when risk was transferred to the latter through, for example, remote management practices (Andersson and Weigand 2015).

While a full accounting of the role of race and ethnicity in the PoC sites is beyond the scope of this article and has been discussed in more detail elsewhere by others (James 2020), this discussion highlights how international and local civilian professionals needed to do different kinds of identity work in South Sudan. Each must often do distinct, context-specific work to claim civilian status, where pre-existing readings of their identities may complicate (or ease) this undertaking substantially. The (self-)assessments journalists and humanitarians made about whether an individual's race or ethnicity posed a problem in a particular PoC site resonates with the observations of Ahmed and hooks that certain social spaces are less 'friendly' to certain bodies (Ahmed 2010; Gregory 2019; hooks 2000). While whiteness often eases movement across the borders of the international archipelago, civilian professionals belonging to the 'wrong' group faced challenges in securing safe and reliable access to the PoC sites, moving about inside the sites, gaining entry to humanitarian NGO compounds, attending media briefings or humanitarian coordination meetings, and circulating in other elite spaces. In South Sudan specifically, the political power of whiteness was vividly on display during the aftermath of an attack on the Terrain Hotel in Juba in 2016, during which five white women were raped. In a striking juxtaposition to the lack of responsiveness to sexual violence and gender inequality in the country (Bubenzer and Stern 2011; Murphy 2019), ten soldiers were apprehended and sentenced for this assault (Lavery 2020). This is not to claim that whiteness functions as everywhere and always protective (indeed, it may cause one to be a target in other moments), but rather that it is an element of identity that can contribute to making acts of violence appear morally or politically exceptional.

Of course, there were further factors that determine access to PoC site infrastructure. One journalist described how race and ethnicity interacted with the issue of whom one was employed by:

> … There's a Sudanese guy [who] worked for the New York Times for a while, and he got treated quite a bit differently. But that's caught up in not just race but, like, he was northern Sudanese, and so like he was facing a lot of Arab, you know, like anti-Arab stuff, and was accused of being a spy all the time and other stuff. … In theory, someone like Hiba [Morgan, from Al Jazeera] could be treated better than a white person who is working for someone that no one knows, because, because Al Jazeera might outweigh the other stuff.

In practice, then, the successful enactment of the 'right kind of identity' is a more intersectional affair, in Crenshaw's (1989) sense of the term. Safety for these professional civilians, then, should be understood as something asserted *by* them, through active identity work, rather than a matter of legal taxonomy or the application of IHL provisions. In the case of journalists and humanitarians, this task is further exacerbated by the fact that their work can (and is often perceived to) affect the conduct of fighting parties.

The problem of 'reach across'

Engaging with another important theme in this Special Issue, namely that of ambiguity (Cormack and Pendle 2023), civilian professionals interacted with conflict dynamics in ways that impinged upon the combatant sphere. The problem of *reach across* presents itself when the professional tasks of humanitarians and journalists lead them to exert a material influence on the combatant domain.

One source of difficulty for journalists and humanitarians is the potential clash between their own professional and civilian identities. Being a non-combatant and being a journalist (or humanitarian) might sometimes pull in different directions. This problem arises acutely when the everyday tasks of these two sets of actors influence the conduct of conflict parties. This is in addition to the fact that, as discussed earlier, the personal features of some journalists and humanitarians may implicate them in the dynamics of a conflict.

The problem of reach across arises in various ways. First, humanitarians and journalists could be seen as complicit in the strategies of certain fighting parties where they disburse fees or pay bribes — such as at SPLA-IO checkpoints or through NGO 'registration fees' paid to the state. Second, humanitarian service delivery and media coverage may impede warring parties' efforts to harm the general civilian population or assist efforts to concentrate them in collectivities such as the PoC sites. Material support for the PoC sites could keep alive persons whom combatants wish to starve (Branch 2008), and journalistic coverage of troop movements and encounters could thwart the tactics of field commanders or humiliate them in the eyes of valued audiences (Bell 1998; Hawkins 2011; McLaughlin 2016). Third, fighting groups may reasonably expect that allowing humanitarians and journalists into particular areas would lead to the sanctioning of their adversaries (Beck and Werron 2018) or generate favour for their own actions. Journalistic reporting could lead to accountability and possible retribution for illegal actions taken by combatants (Tumber 2008). Even those humanitarian organisations who adopt an apolitical stance often maintain detailed records of harm to civilians, and some staff may decide to pass such information on (Charbonneau 2009).

Reach across points to the instability of the civilian and combatant categories, creating a need for those who occupy the civilian social space to actively work to assert themselves as neutral, non-combatant and causally unimplicated in the course of a war. The existence of a reach across problem points to both the insufficiency of the IHL conception of the civilian[1] and the need for these two groups of non-combatants (at least) to discursively 'make up for this gap' – to present a successful civilian face while causally interacting with the conflict. The risks of being seen as a target, or at least a group to be strategically managed are raised further in wars where conflict parties can only engage each other indirectly (Burri 2015).

Belying the seeming clarity and concreteness of the walls, checkpoints, and orderly living spaces of the PoC imaginary, we have described how the sites were host to profoundly unstable and shifting dynamics. Civilian identity emerged here as a matter of negotiation and co-construction between those who served as protectors of the space and those who were meant to be protected. The case of journalists and humanitarians reveals both the limits of law and the ways in which the protector/protected paradigm obscures crucial struggles.

Conclusion

We have proposed here that the professional effectiveness and safety of journalists and humanitarians is poorly served by IHL, by the PoC binary of protector/protected, and more broadly by the social and legal imaginaries associated with the civilian concept. As these civilian professionals 'reach across' into the combatant domain, their practices confound the notion of a bounded civilian category cleanly separated from the conflict.

Rather than being able to take for granted their own safety and reliable access to the PoC sites, many journalists and humanitarians had to actively engage in identity work to secure these. Moreover, this burden was distributed unequally, falling more heavily on those civilian professionals who did not fit into the white, Western, and expatriate categories, and whose identity features interacted with the fault lines of the conflict in South Sudan. For such civilian professionals, identity work could be both arduous and futile.

All journalists and humanitarians—even those who benefit from being of a particular nationality, ethnicity, or race, or who work for a highly reputed organisation—may grapple with the problem of 'reach across' as their tasks potentially impinge upon the prosecution of war. In this way, a disharmony arises between the assertion of one's civilian and professional identities. While this account expands the CSP concept to include the case of journalists and humanitarians, our intention is not to imagine safety solely in terms of protection from injury at the hands of violent actors. Harms to professional identity and reputation also hang in the balance, posing a threat to goals and impeding practices fundamental to the work of journalists and humanitarians. Safety becomes not simply a matter of biological wellbeing, but of securing the continuance of one's (professional) social group.

By peering inside the categories of journalist and humanitarian, this article has centred those actors who moved about on the fringes of the PoC imaginary. Arguing for a deeper appreciation of the web of relations that connects journalists, humanitarians, and IDPs in an intervention, the article also lays the ground for future accounts that might, for example, explore how the CSP strategies of civilian professionals interact with those of the general civilian population. An important question to ask here is whether a hierarchy of civilian lives existed within South Sudan's PoC sites—and still exists in the places they became—such that the CSP strategies of civilian professionals come at the expense of those of other civilians in a zero-sum manner. Might the persistence (and existence) of one distinct category have implications for the welfare of others? More broadly, the article demonstrates how different kinds of civilians might compete for material and discursive resources in conflict.

Note

1. An IHL concept that does address this type of engagement to some extent is that of 'direct participation in hostilities', though it is limited in scope.

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