



## **How We Look: Hostile Perceptions of Humanitarian Action**

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Humanitarians have become very concerned about how they look. This is with good reason. The UN and other humanitarian agencies have suffered unprecedented loss of life in recent years among their national and international staff. They feel strongly that the way others see them is having a significant effect upon their own personal safety and on their ability to reach the victims of war. Staff security and resulting access problems are now priority concerns in several very different types of war around the world. This session is focusing on the nature of anti-humanitarian hostility in Iraq and Afghanistan? Why, in these two places, do some people want to kill us?

One of the words on everybody's lips is perception. In particular, there is a sense that the way humanitarians are perceived in Afghanistan and Iraq as counterparts to the War on Terror is making real problems for the wider acceptance of humanitarian action in the Islamic world and beyond. Many humanitarians feel that the company they are required to keep with Coalition forces and a new wave of opportunistic, less principled NGOs and commercial contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan is dangerously skewing their image as humane, impartial and independent protectors of the victims of war.

This concern was voiced at the recent IASC High-Level Humanitarian Forum which expressed concern that integrated political, military and humanitarian operations and the politicization of humanitarian assistance as an instrument of foreign policy are creating "adverse perceptions of the humanitarian community" that are giving rise to "threats that are now regional and global in nature".<sup>1</sup> An earlier report of humanitarian agency perspectives emerging from Iraq by Tufts University also identified elite and popular perceptions of humanitarians as critical to their ability to operate safely and with effective reach. The Tufts study reported humanitarians feeling they are viewed as "of the north" and as "mendicant orders of empire" and as part of a "crusade" or

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<sup>1</sup> Chairperson's Summary, High-Level Humanitarian Forum, IASC, Geneva 31<sup>st</sup> March 2004.

“western conspiracy”.<sup>2</sup> These perceptions are thought to increasingly erode the “acceptance” of humanitarians - the hallmark of their security strategy and the vital ingredient in making the humanitarian space they need to operate.

Today’s concerns about perception focus mainly on Iraq and Afghanistan and the new context of global terror and counter-terror. This is undoubtedly the context in which humanitarian agencies have suffered most casualties and where humanitarians feel most exposed. But it is also important to keep any discussion of humanitarian perception geographically broad and historically aware. Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq, there are many different contemporary contexts where humanitarian action is also challenged, resented and denied, and where national and international humanitarian workers have been targeted and murdered. Chechnya, DRC, Burundi, West Timor and Bosnia have all seen humanitarian casualties and denial of humanitarian access recently. There are also many places in which humanitarian action is expected, welcomed and appreciated.

The whole question of how humanitarian agencies are perceived around the world today deserves careful attention and is rightly a strategic operational concern of all agencies. The temptation to generalize and even sensationalize about the threats ranged against humanitarian action must be resisted. Instead, the humanitarian community is best served by informed, up to the minute and highly contextualised analysis that gives real insight into how political elites, militant groups and popular opinion is viewing humanitarian actors at a particular time and in a particular place.

Lack of time and expertise means I am not able to go into specific situations and perceptions today. Instead, I will try and identify some general themes. To do so, I will use two stories and raise several questions for further discussion. I will then suggest a few things we might do.

## **Seeing Ourselves**

None of us has ever seen ourselves. None of us can ever really see ourselves. Even mirrors and videos can only ever give us glimpses and angles of vision on ourselves. Because our eyes are in front of us, we can never see our whole selves. We can never really know how we look. This is an important thing to recognize in any discussion of perception. It shows the limits of our self-perception and our need to use imagination, empathy and information if we are to think hard about how we appear and how we are seen.

My two stories are about the challenge of interpreting how things are seen differently. The first story makes the obvious point that humanitarians are not necessarily negatively perceived because they are humanitarians. Identifying

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<sup>2</sup> The Future of Humanitarian Action: Implications of Iraq and Other Recent Crises, Report of an International Mapping Exercise, Feinstein International Famine Centre, Tufts University, January 2004, pp5-6.

the non-humanitarian reasons for their rejection might enable humanitarians to take some mitigating action. The second story illustrates that how humanitarians see themselves may be very different to how others see them. Truly recognizing this may be important because for humanitarians to understand how they are seen may well be more strategically useful than constantly trying to make others see them differently.

## The Rabbi

In my first story I want to try and learn from the Jewish experience of antisemitism. For centuries Jewish people have been forced to engage in the terrible task of thinking rigorously about why people might object to them. I am in no way suggesting that current anti-humanitarian sentiment is in any way equivalent to the centuries old horrors of antisemitism but there is something we can learn from Jewish thinking on their own experience of rejection and violence.

In a recent paper, Brian Klug, uses a thought experiment to reflect on the imagined experience of a certain elderly Rabbi Cohen who is thrown off the No.73 bus in London by Mary, the bus conductor.<sup>3</sup> As he stands on the pavement, Rabbi Cohen wonders if he has been the victim of anti-semitism? In other words, has he experienced the fundamental hostility shown towards Jews as Jews?

To answer this question, Klug asks us to look at a number of scenarios to see what else might have been going on in the bus. What if Rabbi Cohen had been smoking? Even if Rabbi Cohen's long beard and *kipah* identified him obviously as a Jew, maybe Mary had simply thrown him off the bus for smoking and not for being a Jew. In this way, Mary treats him no differently to Jane Smith or Bhupinda Singh who she also threw off for smoking that day. Her decision is because he is a smoker not a Jew. What if Mary had thrown the Rabbi off because he was singing religious songs, which are deeply important to him as a Jew, at the top of his voice on the upper deck? Is she throwing him off because he is singing or because he is singing Jewish songs in particular? Is it because he is singing as a Jew or because he is singing so loudly? Is he thrown off for being Jewish or loudish?

What if Mary is, in fact, bigoted and prejudiced in her attitude to Rabbi Cohen? She knows his type and has decided to kick him off her bus ostensibly for singing but really because he is a troublesome foreigner who should not be here in the first place. One look at Rabbi Cohen with his oriental looks, his long beard and funny cap is enough to tell Mary exactly what he is: one of them *mullahs*. "Clear off, Abdul", she shouts in his ear as she pushes him out onto the street, where Rabbi Cohen reflects philosophically that he is the victim of Islamophobia!

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Klug (2003) *The Collective Jew: Israel and the New Anti-semitism, Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol 37, No 2, Routledge, London. The next section draws in detail on Klug's thought experiment about Rabbi Cohen and Mary the bus conductor. I am very grateful to Adam Leach at Oxfam for sending me this paper.

This story made me think of humanitarians' own bemusement today. We do not seem to fully understand why we are being rejected, targeted and attacked by certain violent groups or resented by different publics in countries we are trying to help. Not unnaturally perhaps, it seems hard for us to understand why some people don't like us. Is it because of who we are and what we believe and, as such, a form of anti-humanitarianism which hates humanitarians as humanitarians? Is it because of certain things that we do while we are humanitarians that we consider quite normal - like singing or smoking? Have they mistaken us for somebody else and think we are all part of the same enemy group? Or do they know who we are perfectly well but are choosing to lash out at us in order to get at somebody else - some wider group like immigrants in the Rabbi's case or "westerners" in our case?

The story of Rabbi Cohen and its parallels with contemporary humanitarian rejection poses the question of whether hatred of humanitarians is an essentialist hatred, an instrumentalist hatred that hits humanitarians to hurt others, an intolerance of certain humanitarian attributes and habits, a case of mistaken identity or a good old human mixture of all four.

## **The Rose**

The second story is about a red rose. If the problem of perception is relatively new in humanitarianism, many people will be aware that it has been a fundamental problem in philosophy for thousands of years. Centuries ago, the *Sceptics* claimed it was impossible to prove that what we see and sense around us is actually real. Famously and probably apocryphally, their leaders had to be held back from walking over precipices which they could not be sure were really there. Their contemporary descendants, the post-modernists, celebrate a similar belief that there is no such thing as objectivity. Instead, truth is usually just the beliefs, experiences, confusions and interests of elites impressively disguised as facts. This conviction allows post-modernists to deconstruct anything and show it to be many things.

In 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland, the philosophical struggle over the nature of perception came to a head over two Scotsmen's experience of a rose. Thomas Reid was most indignant at David Hume's apparent skepticism which suggested that much of the way we see and experience things in the world is shaped by the ideas we have about them in our minds. Hume seemed to argue that the way we think about things has as much power to shape the way we experience them as our five physical senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch. In other words, reality is created mentally and not just physically. Reid thought that all this talk of ideas was going too far and claimed that it was common sense that the smell of a rose was exactly how the rose smelt, nothing more and nothing less. The smell of a rose is a fact common to all our senses. And it is common sense to believe that the smell of a rose and how it looks and feels is precisely how it is in reality. In short, a rose is a rose. Humanitarians tend to say the same about humanitarian

action and agencies. It is quite obviously as they experience it - kind, impartial, politically distinct and universally recognizable as such.

Many of us moderns (unless we are committed post-modernists) are likely to believe a little bit of Reid and Hume together. We would probably agree that a rose really does smell like a rose and that it is common sense to trust our senses as a real experience of the world. But we might also believe that a red rose can *mean* different things to different people and that this, therefore, can affect how we think about the look, smell and touch of a rose. If my mind is steeped in romantic imagery of the rose, its smell will engage all sorts of ideas of love, its look will evoke a certain image of fragile womanhood and the prick of its thorns will feel like righteous suffering in pursuit of a higher goal. If, however, I have no such ideas about roses but simply find them growing wild in the forest on the way to my well, I will not necessarily associate their scent with rapture, am likely to be hurt and irritated by their thorns and not think of women at all as I hack my way through them to clear a path.

The current discussion about how humanitarians are seen and experienced may have much in common with the philosophers' argument over the rose. To the international humanitarian, all the physical trappings of what makes up modern transnational humanitarian action like Toyotas, satphones, computers, food aid, water tanks, medical supplies and young white people are shaped by mental ideas of compassion, rights, responsibilities, friendship, internationalism and protection which make them look like something that is essentially good. However, other people who do not bring the same ideas to bear upon these self-same objects are likely to experience them rather differently. The same warm metal of Toyotas and water pipes may feel physically the same but might be mentally shaped by ideas of imposition, conquest, colonialism, arrogance and outrage. For certain militants in Iraq and Afghanistan perhaps, this is humiliating and intolerable. For moderates, the experience is likely to be more ambivalent. The westernized aspect of humanitarian action can be tiresome, mostly beneficial and often humorous too. They are glad of the water, the schools and the electricity but they could do without some of the patronizing behaviour that comes with it and the terrible fear of civil war that could follow after the pipes are laid.

In the problem of the rose and the water pipe, humanitarians face a real test. Because what they experience as humanitarian action is not what their extreme opponents and even some ambivalent aid recipients experience. The experience of receiving humanitarian action is not the experience of being a humanitarian. It is a different and more complicated thing than the essentially good thing that a humanitarian means it to be. And yet, many humanitarians probably feel ambivalent too. Even if they do not agree that their humanitarian intentions are colonial, arrogant and inter-twined with Coalition politics, they may well concede that certain power dynamics play badly in humanitarian work and that nobody likes outsiders running their country for too long. They can see something of the other view.

I have used the story of a red rose but as those in the ICRC and IFRC involved in the ongoing discussion about the emblem will know, I could just as

easily have told the story about a red cross! The story simply shows that human beings may see the same thing but experience it very differently.

## How We Are Seen

**What is most visible?** In the 1990s, Alex de Waal coined the term “the humanitarian international” to describe the western funded liberal project of humanitarian action as it mushroomed after the end of the Cold War. It is this essentially secular project with its liberal values, powerful western agencies and particular programming style that is most easily seen and most keenly felt as intrusive and abrasive when it arrives *en masse*. This particular version of progress and compassion has always been contentious to some. Historically, there is a long tradition that sees humanitarian and development NGOs as neo-colonial vanguards – the missionaries of western neoliberalism. This critique has come from all parts of the world, not just Islamic societies. It has also routinely come from within NGOs themselves. But today the humanitarian international is obviously facing a renewed and particular challenge from Islamists and certain Arab nationalists. In targeting the most precious parts of this humanitarian system - the United Nations and the ICRC - those who reject such liberalism are sending a powerful message to the system as a whole. The fact that most Islamic manifestations of humanitarian action and even some Church-based agencies are perceived less harshly and not targeted so much seems to confirm that hostility is reserved for a certain type of secular humanitarian action – parts of which sometimes also announces itself as king-maker, nation-builder and saviour of civil society. Today’s targeting of the secular is, of course, in contrast to former conflicts in Latin America and South Africa where certain types of church activists were often targeted and murdered more than secular activists by right wing authoritarian states.

**Dangerous attributes:** The IASC suspect it is the excessively “northern face and footprint” of humanitarian action that is equivalent to the smoking and singing that got Rabbi Cohen kicked off the bus. Perhaps these are dangerous attributes that we should get rid of by de-colonising the international aid system. Maybe the way we sing our humanitarian creed is in fact rather loudish. While deeply meaningful to us, it may be offensive and insulting to others on the bus. Maybe it just sounds too self-righteous, too superior and too infuriating. Beyond what humanitarians say, our agencies can be and look extraordinarily rich and privileged in war in a way that is quite at odds with their apparent mission. Like many of us, I have been at the wheel of many a white landcruiser that has repeatedly sprayed dust into the face and eyes of people walking along country roads. I have not stopped to pick up people who are carrying their sick children to the nearest hospital. I have paid my staff salaries that are twice the going rate for senior government officials. I have also marched into the ministry of agriculture as a famine early warning monitor clutching a piece of drought-stricken wheat and complaining of government inaction in the face of impending disaster, only to be told that what I was holding was barley. How does all this look? In its insensitivity and ignorance, international humanitarian action undoubtedly has dangerous

attributes which are part of its style rather than a core part of its purpose. These attributes can become particularly dangerous depending on who else is on the bus.

## Who is Looking?

**Different Group Perceptions:** Perception is seldom monolithic in a society unless it is profoundly indoctrinated. It might be worth trying to identify some general categories and groups of people whose various perceptions seem critical because it is unlikely that everyone in Iraq and Afghanistan perceives the humanitarian international from a single common perspective. The **gunmen and bombers** who kill humanitarians obviously have a determined view that sees humanitarians as hostile, either directly as enemies or indirectly as collaborators or pressure points. Next are the **political and religious leaders** who can shape and voice popular opinion one way or the other. Some of these argue moderate perceptions of humanitarians and their actions, others hold to extreme anti-humanitarian positions and control and sanction the gunmen. Then there are **the general public**, ordinary people including impoverished widows, unemployed young men, lawyers, nurses, farmers and many others. Some of these are receiving international aid and others are not. All feel loyalty to certain groups and their leaders, some more strongly than others. Many have religious faith of various kinds. Finally, perhaps, **elite, militant and popular opinion beyond Iraq and Afghanistan** is also significant. The way people abroad hear about humanitarian action in Iraq and Afghanistan can influence their views on the humanitarian international and change the way they regard it in their own locale. This secondary regional or global opinion may be rightly identified by the IASC and others as having a potential domino effect on humanitarian credibility and acceptance in other parts of the world.

**Subtlety of Views:** If perception is seldom monolithic, it is also seldom simple. Any analysis of people's perception and opinion of humanitarian action would be wise to expect and accommodate an element of subtlety. Ambivalence, inconsistency and change in people's views are likely to exist alongside certain fixed perspectives. Individual and group views are likely to be nuanced and influenced by new ideas, contact with humanitarians, the emergence of new personalities and by key events. Some extremists – gunmen, leaders and ordinary people – may have very determined and non-negotiable views of humanitarians which are total or monolithic. But most decisions to kill humanitarians will be made calmly and quietly in a meeting somewhere. They are not usefully dismissed as fanaticism. Understanding the reason behind such murders rather than emphasizing their un-reason is important and requires careful, informed interpretation. Some are easily led and will simply see what they are told to see – whether by moderates or extremists. Others may have more ambivalent or ambiguous perceptions. For example, they might value humanitarian action, have good contact with humanitarians but still understand and tolerate their targeting by the gunmen. Their view might be a torn one which sanctions and regrets at the same time. They can see the logic of resentment and attacks against humanitarians

without totally endorsing or rejecting it. They might say, “Some of my best friends are humanitarians, but I still think they are getting too many things wrong these days. That does not justify what happened to them but I can understand it”. Others may have a slightly different perspective which holds that “nothing justifies killing humanitarians but that they do need to behave differently”. Allowing for a range of opinion and for ambivalent and even paradoxical views will be important in any appreciation of people’s perceptions of humanitarians.

## **The Cause of Hostility**

**Mistaken Identity?** Perhaps, like Rabbi Cohen, humanitarians are targeted as something they are not. The feeling that we are wrongly seen is a strong one in humanitarians who feel their attackers are mistaken into thinking they are all Coalition supporters. Most analysis seems to suggest that humanitarians have been mis-perceived by their attackers and mistaken for something they are not. In many ways this is a reassuring interpretation. If only our attackers could see us humanitarians for the decent, independent and impartial people we are then this error could be corrected. But the “mistaken identity” explanation that those who attack us don’t really understand who we are is simplistic and probably wrong-headed. People attack the UN and the ICRC precisely because they are the UN and the ICRC, not because they do not understand these organizations.

**Proxy Targets?** There is another strong feeling that humanitarians have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan as soft “proxy targets” in place of the more difficult hard targets of Coalition power. In other words, their killing is instrumental – its effect is meant to hurt those it cannot reach directly. But I am doubtful here. US military death tolls are already over 700 in Iraq, with terrible injuries being much higher still. This indicates that hard targets can be and are frequently hit. It seems more likely that humanitarians are being targeted as a key part of Coalition efforts and not instead of them. This suggests that the humanitarianism of international humanitarians is being explicitly rejected and their national staff killed as collaborators. The story of the rose shows how distinct humanitarian identity which is very obvious to humanitarians can be meaningless to someone else.

## **Is it a Perception Problem at all?**

**Bad Blood not Mis-perception:** In an important way, the problems faced by humanitarians are not the result of perception at all but of belief. Some of the killers, who perceive the world in highly dualistic terms, do not believe in any differences within the enemy population. Osama Bin Laden’s latest tape is all about blood.<sup>4</sup> He suggests that there are only two types of blood in today’s battle – “ours” and “yours”. If humanitarians have the wrong blood or Iraqis

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<sup>4</sup> Osama Bin Laden, A Message to Our Neighbours North of the Mediterranean, broadcast by al-Arabiya, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2004, translated and printed on BBC website.



and Afghans poison their blood by working for the American project and its allies, then they can be killed. This is a deeply essentialist way of reasoning, verging on the genocidal. Humanitarians will be killed because – like the civilians of coalition countries - their blood is a valid transaction in the sacrificial scheme of “reciprocal treatment” which is at the heart of this theology. The only way you can get perceived differently and spare your blood is by withdrawal from the fight and submission to Bin Laden’s version of history. Under this schema, humanitarians’ vulnerability is a matter of their blood-essence as westerners and intervenors. As Bin Laden makes clear, such an essentialist enmity can only be redeemed by the “act” of surrender and repentance.

**Disruption over Distinction:** Alongside this essentialist logic is also an instrumentalist one which deliberately over-rides distinctions of person (as civilians, children etc) to create maximum disruption, disarray and confusion in order to destabilize and topple the Coalition project in Iraq and Afghanistan. People who may not share Bin Laden’s essentialist theology can certainly see the logic of killing anyone to beat the Coalition. In this logic also, perception is not the problem. Bombers and gunmen do not have a “perception problem” when they deliberately kill children and women. They have not mis-perceived children as armed soldiers. Instead, they have calculated that their aims will be best met by killing women and children as well. And the same goes for humanitarians. It might be truly disruptive for the Coalition project to kill humanitarians and civilian commercial contractors so they do it. These people do not need to be educated about who humanitarians are. They know exactly who they are as the terrible mobile phone conversation showed before the murder of the Italian ICRC delegate in Afghanistan.

## What To Do?

**Decent Information:** It is immediately striking that most reports of anti-humanitarian perceptions come from humanitarians themselves. With few exceptions, agencies seem to be second guessing the wider world about how they are perceived.<sup>5</sup> If we are to get much further on the perception question, it seems clear that agency speculation needs to be urgently replaced with harder surveys and insights into different people’s attitudes to humanitarians and humanitarian action across a range of settings. Something like ICRC’s People on War report is required and should not be too difficult to do on an ongoing basis. But more important is good intelligence (the term political insight might be more palatable to humanitarians) which is routinely gauging the views of political and militant elites and their current strategies. Such a routine gauge of elite and public opinion might be a natural part of OCHA’s strategic role. Alongside needs assessment, this other aspect of market research is basic to the humanitarian sector as a whole. While appealing for funds, OCHA might also monitor how politically appealing humanitarian

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<sup>5</sup> Two exceptions are the two 2003 reports by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue on perceptions of humanitarians amongst the Colombian Paramilitaries and Central Asian Islamic Opposition Movements.

agencies are in the various parts of the world in which they work. This is not necessarily particularly expensive nor rocket science but requires intelligent political analysts and observers.

**Presence and Posture:** Humanitarian agencies have to tailor their operational style to every new situation. We must challenge the idea that there is a single global way of implementing humanitarian action. The “humanitarian international” must appear in different forms. Agencies must get creative about how they operate. Condom sales might tell us something here. For example, the way I sell condoms in the Vatican will be very different to the way I sell them in the more bohemian parts of Paris or San Francisco. Selling condoms in the Vatican will tend to emphasize discretion, intermediaries and confidentiality. In Paris or San Francisco, I could be much more up front in my presence and distribution. So it must be with the humanitarian sell. We need to shape ourselves appropriately to context. Part of the challenge in Iraq and Afghanistan is a good one and an old one. Why should humanitarian action be so colonial? But, whatever shape emerges as appropriate, some kind of presence and commitment must remain key. In the worst of places – Central America, Somalia, Rwanda - agencies have always been valued and remembered by people for “being there” and not leaving. Presence does not need to be massive but it needs to be felt and it needs to last – “staying” can be very important to the people we care about.

**Keep Belief in Our Values:** Being hated and targeted can make one doubt oneself. Knowing that one is not perfect and being critical of oneself as part of a dysfunctional “humanitarian international” can also begin to erode our confidence. But while we humanitarians should think hard about what we are doing we should not be made to doubt why we are doing it. Our values are good ones. Many of the people we help in war share them. Many people in the world share them and want them. It is vital that kindness is shown in war and that limits on violence are set and argued. We must not be made to feel too bad about ourselves. On the Day of Judgment there will be a very long queue and we will all be in it – the politicians, the bombers, the humanitarians, the military, the civilians, and the contractors. And, funnily enough, neither Osama Bin Laden, George Bush nor Henri Dunant will be in the judge’s chair!

**An Ecumenical Humanitarian Council:** A good way to keep our values alive and well is to have them challenged and refined. Alongside the growth of the western liberal humanitarian international in recent years, there has also been an extraordinary renaissance of global Islamic humanitarianism – some of this is profoundly refreshing, some is also deeply politicized like some of ours but much of it is booming. I think we all now need to sit, talk, argue and agree together in some great council. Many of us knew that a big conversation was required after September 11<sup>th</sup> alongside or instead of the military action that emerged on both sides. We humanitarians cannot ask this conversation of others if we have not yet dared to have it ourselves. So let’s do it – in Geneva soon.

HS, Geneva 21.4.04