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On assessing risk assessments and situating security advice: the unsettling quest for 'security expertise'

Chapter 8 of *Doing Fieldwork in Areas of International Intervention. A Guide to Research in Violent and Closed Contexts* (2020) edited by Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Morten Boas (Bristol: Bristol University Press), pp. 127–142.

Judith Verweijen

He was visibly nervous, perhaps traumatised. He had just been on a deployment to Afghanistan, and it looked like he had been having a rough time. The officers of the European Union Security Assistance Mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (EUSEC DR Congo) had been sympathetic towards my research on the Congolese army, but they were concerned about my safety. And this officer in particular was worried about my plans to conduct research in remote rural areas with ongoing military operations. Taking another sip of his beer, he sketched the heart of darkness scenarios I would—in his eyes—inevitably be facing. He seemed convinced that my status as a woman would make my descent into the 'jungle out there' even more dangerous. "If they try to rape you", he explained in a way that I perceived as mansplaining, "tell them that you have AIDS". Was that sound advice or not? I did not get much chance to make up my mind, for a next thought popped into his head. Lowering his voice, he whispered, "If you like, I can get you a handgun, before you go out there, that's the only way to stay safe."

Looking back at this beer-drenched conversation, it is the starting point of the gradual erosion of my belief that those who we are socialised into seeing as 'security experts', notably professional (Western) military personnel, are actually knowledgeable about 'the security situation' in war-ridden eastern DRC. Imagining myself carrying a handgun, and the situations in which I would use it, I quickly concluded it would expose me to immense danger, not least as I was utterly incapable of handling such a device. Moreover, it would elicit potentially lethal reactions by provoking exchanges of fire, not to speak of the risks of being arrested and thrown out of the country on accusations of being a mercenary or spy. The more I reflected on this—unsolicited—advice, the more outrageous it seemed. But he had not been joking. He had been dead serious. Perhaps his reasoning reflected his own sense of security as a trained military professional, feeling insecure without a firearm. But he also seemed to be reading the eastern DRC's security dynamics through a predefined grid of a 'war zone' that appeared strongly shaped by his experiences in Afghanistan.

The story of my field research in zones in the eastern DRC's Kivu provinces that were coloured red on the security maps of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in the DRC (MONUSCO)–facilitated by a light-touch approach to risks and ethics at the university where I was then based– is one of continuous engagement in finding, processing, and assessing 'security expertise'. This process invited ongoing reflections on questions such as: what counts as knowledge on security dynamics? How is such knowledge constructed? Who is in its possession? How does this knowledge translate into guidelines for action? In this chapter I describe how in the course of 14 months of fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation between 2010 and 2012 conducted in three phases (for a detailed description, see Verweijen, 2015a), my understandings of who was a 'security

expert' and what counted as 'security expertise' started to shift. Although initially unsettling, these shifts ultimately proved a fruitful avenue to enhancing awareness of how one's positionality and related biases shape readings of 'the security situation', and how these readings feed into the construction of 'security knowledge'.

MILOBS missing out on micro-dynamics

In the first two months of my research, I frequently interacted with foreign military personnel of different kinds, including EUSEC. Conducting research on the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) and their micro-level relations with civilians, I felt that there were perhaps distinctly 'military' dimensions that I would overlook as a 'civilian'. A trained military eye, I suspected, would be able to observe aspects of command and control, training, and military strategy and tactics that I might not be able to detect. In addition, I believed that military professionals might be well placed to assess particular aspects of the security situation, such as armed group activity. After all, they are trained in developing 'situational awareness', whilst having in principle a systematic approach to gathering what they call 'intelligence'.

Keen on talking to military personnel (and on lowering accommodation costs since conducting research on a shoestring budget), I seized upon the rather unanticipated opportunity to stay for some time in a team site of UN military observers (MILOBS) in North Kivu. MILOBS are unarmed military personnel deployed as part of the UN peacekeeping mission, charged with gathering and verifying information on security dynamics. It must certainly be strictly forbidden for non-UN personnel to stay in a MILOBS team site, but the Uruguayan officer who was in charge did not seem to be overly concerned. He was more worried about my safety, indicating which zones were, according to him, dangerous. These zones were subject to seemingly unpredictable events—armed group attacks on army positions, assassinations of local authorities and business people, frequent ambushes, and in some zones, kidnappings. Yet, as I would gradually find out thanks to a journalist from the area, the patterns this instability followed were not incomprehensible. To grasp these patterns, however, one needed fine-grained knowledge of local conflicts and power relations—knowledge that the MILOBS did not possess.

Within the zone where the MILOBS team site was located, I soon struck up a friendship with Emmanuel,[1] who shared an interest in comprehending the reigning insecurity due to his profession. We developed a close research collaboration, travelling to various surrounding villages to interview people. These interactions allowed me to gradually get a firmer grasp on who was targeted by whom, how, and why. Due to recent military operations, armed groups had been displaced and thus cut off from their regular sources of income. Consequently, these groups were developing new strategies to access revenue, including kidnappings. Additionally, as armed groups had been driven deep into the bush, they incurred difficulties to access towns and villages. As a result, some economic operators working with their money, such as *cambistes* (money changers), traders and local shopkeepers, tried to default on their obligations to these groups, like not paying back outstanding debts or interests. In response, armed groups carried out revenge attacks against these civilian collaborators. Furthermore, since the army had now become the dominant force, seeking protection from armed groups was no longer an effective way of securing one's business.

[1] All names in this chapter have been changed for security reasons.

This prompted economic operators to try to switch loyalties, which elicited further revenge attacks. Another dynamic was the loss of power of those local political actors who had previously been backed by armed groups that were now no longer in control. Capitalising on the changing power configuration, their political rivals sought alliances with the newly dominant armed forces to settle scores, sometimes in a violent manner.

In sum, confirming observations of the 'micro-dynamics of violence' school (e.g. Kalyvas, 2006), much of the insecurity in the zone stemmed from shifting and contested armed actor control. Yet, the MILOBS had not developed that analysis. They often lacked the details of particular security incidents, in particular how these incidents were related to the complex ties between civilians and armed groups. Furthermore, they analysed events in isolation, not seeing wider patterns and underlying dynamics. From an 'ethnography 101' perspective, this ignorance is easily explainable. Of the seven MILOBS in the team site, only two spoke conversational French. In addition, the MILOBS did not spend much time outside of their team site. Their interaction with Congolese was limited to encounters during their car patrols. This situation made them heavily reliant on their Congolese interpreter to gather information. Yet their interpreter also lacked the fine-grained understanding of local power relations and politics needed to grasp the logics that inform security incidents. Not being from the area, he did not have the intimate connections—such as family bonds—that facilitate access to sensitive details. Many people in the area also distrusted MONUSCO, therefore likely withholding or manipulating information.

Aside from access to certain types of information, it occurred to me that the MILOBS were lacking a particular theoretical sensitivity that could have helped them make sense of the observed insecurity. The instability caused by contested armed actor control over the area, and the ways civilians harnessed these actors for personal purposes, were textbook micro-dynamics of violence stuff. This theoretical awareness had gone a long way in fostering my understanding of security dynamics in the area. But the MILOBS likely had not had similar exposure to theories highlighting the importance of revenge, jealousies, and score settling within the production of violence. As a result, they may have tried to interpret events through the grid of Grand Conflict Narratives, which posit relatively stable fault lines between well-delineated adversaries defined on the basis of political, ideological, religious, or ethnic affiliations. Yet such narratives are not readily applicable to the convoluted political–military context of the eastern DRC, introducing uncertainties about armed actors' logics of action.

Kidnapping analytics

Increasingly aware of their limited appreciation of what was actually going on, I started to become reluctant to take the MILOBS's security advice at face value. On what basis, I wondered, did they call certain zones 'unsafe'? Did the fact that multiple security incidents occurred in a particular zone necessarily imply that I myself was at risk? For whom, exactly, were the zones they deemed 'unsafe' unsafe? Raising the question with Emmanuel and some of his friends, we started to comprehensively think through the observed dynamics. The targets of murders, attacks, kidnappings, and ambushes were not random. They were carefully selected. These acts were meticulously planned, aiming at specific houses, vehicles, or people. And as revealed by their timing and location, they were grounded in in-depth knowledge of people's routines and movements. It did not logically follow—or so it seemed—that a *muzungu* (white person) researcher rapidly visiting the area would necessarily run a high risk of being attacked, in particular when nobody was aware of her movements. These observations allayed my concerns to frequent zones

deemed unsafe by the UN.

Towards the end of my stay, I raised with the MILOBS the idea of doing research in the Binza area, at that point a hotbed of kidnappings. They quickly brushed aside my plans as "totally crazy", stating I could get kidnapped myself. They considered my plans to go on a motorcycle particularly unsafe, emphasising I could be hit by stray bullets. At first panicked by their statements, systematically reflecting on how they arrived at these conclusions together with Emmanuel allayed some of my fears. Perhaps the MILOBS did not fully understand how much advance planning the kidnappings required, with the target, time, and location being so carefully chosen. Also, Emmanuel was convinced that going by car would in fact be more rather than less dangerous. Since car traffic in the area was relatively rare, and therefore highly conspicuous, it would immediately draw attention to the fact that there was someone with means in the zone. A motorcycle was much less visible. The car, so we concluded, offered a false sense of security. Even in the case of an ambush, what difference would being in a car make? Trying to flee would inevitably mean being shot at. It was perhaps that the MILOBS themselves felt safer in a car, not least as they were soldiers stripped of their common means of defence—the firearm. Yet reading the security situation through one's own predefined notions of 'safety' is not going to yield accurate risk assessments.

These assessments, I became convinced, could only be developed through logical reasoning, in particular reflections on the nature of perpetrators and their motives, targets and modus operandi. Such reasoning also provided me with a (perhaps mistaken) sense of security. It led me to believe that one could open and demystify the black box of insecurity, breaking the paralysing effects of blanket fear stemming from incomprehension. In addition, adequate analysis allowed one to develop accurate precautionary measures. Emboldened by these considerations, Emmanuel and I decided that we could in fact visit Binza, but with a carefully designed plan of action. First of all, since motor-taxi drivers were rumoured to often collaborate with kidnappers, Emmanuel would drive the motorcycle himself. Second, to mask my whiteness while on the road, I bought a full-face motor helmet, scarf and gloves to cover as much skin as possible. Third, we kept our travel plans completely secret, not informing anyone where we were going and when, aside for the MILOBS. Once arriving in the village where we intended to conduct research, we spread a false narrative on the length of our stay and our next destination. We told people we would move on to a village towards the east within two days. However, the next day, we suddenly returned to where we had come from, but not via the main road, where people could immediately see and report on our direction. Instead, we zigzagged among rows of houses in order to reach the main road at the outer edge of the village, then went full speed ahead.

We completed the mission without being kidnapped. However, this may have had as much to do with luck as with artfulness. How much our precautionary measures had reduced risk remains a wild guess. No matter how much I clung to analytics in order to navigate insecurity, I still felt an intense relief upon returning into an area deemed safe. Had I been religious, this would undoubtedly have been an appropriate moment to thank the Supreme Being.

Attenuating the barbarian syndrome

Compared to the MILOBS, I found another type of military actor that I initially interacted with—MONUSCO blue helmets—somewhat better informed. The officers from the Indian or Pakistani army I spoke with appeared to have a more robust awareness of armed groups and developments within the FARDC. Yet their analyses were often still limited. Heavily focused on the military side of things, they did not adequately grasp how and how deeply both state and non-state armed forces

were embedded into civilian society. Furthermore, they readily highlighted the ‘rag-tag’ nature of these forces as an explanation for their behaviour. To substantiate that analysis, they would cite features of what from their vantage point appeared ‘military unprofessionalism’: unclear hierarchies, deficient logistics, and a lack of discipline. For instance, one Pak-batt (battalion from Pakistani contingent) officer said about the FARDC: “If they want to clean their weapon they shoot in the air. There are not even checks whether they wear their uniforms properly, so even at the basic level there is no discipline”. These observations did not only stem from their positionality as professionally trained military but, as I discovered, were also derived from certain biases towards Congolese society and ‘culture’ (see also, Verweijen, 2017). As one Ind-batt (Indian battalion) officer observed: “whatever organisation you have in the military, it is a reflection of society”. Hence, the perceived deficiencies of Congolese fighting forces were mainly ascribed to the ‘underdeveloped’ nature of Congolese society. Implicitly, these analyses were infused with tropes of ‘African barbarism’, which frame the propensity for violence as an innate feature of ‘Africans’.

Such assumptions are highly consequential for assessing insecurity and how it potentially affects oneself. If armed forces have tenuous command and control, the risk of falling victim to abuses by soldiers is potentially higher, depending on soldiers’ norms and intent. In these cases, soldiers may for instance engage in burglary or road robbery without permission from their commanders. Where armed forces are highly disciplined and commanders have a firm grasp on their subordinates, by contrast, such acts would only occur when ordered or tolerated by the hierarchy. If commanders in these more disciplined forces have a virtuous character, maintaining good contact with them can be a way of enhancing one’s safety. But obviously, if one assumes that all army personnel are undisciplined and inherently violent, liaising with them will not appear a viable safety mechanism. Thus, MONUSCO blue helmets urged me to approach FARDC officers with caution. This advice created a dilemma as the nature of my research forced me to spend a lot of time with the Congolese army.

Lacking barracks and other infrastructure, FARDC personnel often stay in hotels or lodges when on a mission. In order to get to know officers, I decided to stay in the same places. In a certain town in South Kivu, this strategy panned out surprisingly well, and I soon found myself interacting with a particular officer on a regular basis. Although having a slight alcohol problem, Major John was an intelligent and well-spoken guy with advanced knowledge of security dynamics. That was no coincidence. He was the so-called S2 (intelligence officer) of an FARDC brigade. He was thus tasked with collecting information on armed groups and monitoring security developments in the area. Through frequent discussions with Major John, I discovered that the knowledge of armed groups possessed by the FARDC—that supposedly rag-tag, unprofessional, and undisciplined army—was far superior to that of the professional and relatively well-equipped MONUSCO forces. Major John appeared to have a good sense of the histories, size, revenue-generation strategies, and local political connections of armed groups in the area. What’s more, many of his observations were corroborated by other people I spoke to.

Major John did not only evolve into a so-called ‘key informant’ himself, he also brought me into contact with other members of his brigade. Through these regular contacts, I was able to mitigate what I have elsewhere (Verweijen, 2015b) labelled the ‘Barbarian Syndrome’ surrounding armed actors in the Global South. Having frequent informal conservations with members of the brigade, they started to become concerned about my safety. Some officers of the general staff would discourage me from going to certain places if they knew military operations had been planned there. I also had extensive discussions concerning the nature of insecurity in certain areas with Major John and one of his best friends, Major Zero Zero. For instance, we went to great lengths to grasp

patterns of attacks in an area south of a particular goldmine. Ultimately, we drew the conclusion that this could not be the work of a highly organised foreign rebel group (the FDLR), as some had alleged. Rather, the attacks were more likely conducted by a group of bandits operating with the complicity of certain villagers. The implication was that travelling to that area was relatively unsafe. The foreign rebel group was not known for attacking and killing foreigners. However, that was uncertain for the group of bandits, whose level of discipline and objectives were unknown. Based on these conversations, I concluded that, at least in the case of this particular brigade, the FARDC was far more useful for navigating insecurity than any foreign military actor.

Imagining the ambush

While the FARDC seemed to have substantial 'security expertise', their narratives on security incidents could also be treacherous, as I learned from a human rights defender in the area. Becoming a key research collaborator, Hassan was by all means an impressive figure. Maintaining contacts with both armed groups and the army, he was always ready to go the extra mile to address human rights abuses, for instance pleading with army officers to liberate civilians they had unlawfully detained. His dedication to human rights also seemed to render him fairly 'neutral', as he was not interested in covering up abuses and crimes by one side or another. Thus, his analyses contrasted sometimes sharply with narratives of abuses or incidents circulating among the security services or parts of the population.

In the Kivu provinces, it often occurs that attacks are not explicitly claimed by particular groups. Moreover, the identity of the attackers cannot always be read from their appearance and mode of operating. The result is 'blame games' whereby different groups point the finger at different categories of alleged perpetrators. The latter commonly include the FDLR, the Congolese army (or deserters thereof), 'Mai-Mai groups' (a generic name for armed groups framing themselves as engaging in community self-defence), or groups of bandits. This finger pointing is not only informed by groups' desire to wash themselves of any blame, it is also shaped by ethnic biases. For instance, when asked about the recurrent ambushes in what is known as the '17 forest' due to it being 17 kilometers long, interlocutors from villages in the surroundings blamed these incidents on FARDC soldiers speaking Kinyarwanda (often framed as 'foreigners' who would not be 'authentically Congolese'). At the same time, certain groups in the army saw too readily the hand of the Mai-Mai in these incidents, in part as the majority of Mai-Mai combatants were members of an ethnic group that they heavily distrusted. Given that many FARDC personnel deployed in the Kivus are from the provinces themselves, it is not surprising that their interpretation of security events reflects dominant conflict narratives.

By comparing different narratives on security incidents, I became increasingly aware of the biases in the information provided by Major John and his fellow brigade members. Nevertheless, some of the general knowledge they had provided on armed groups and their command chains became essential analytical tools for my security decisions. One of these decisions concerned whether to conduct research on a particular 'ambush rich' axis or not. As my most trusted collaborator, I discussed the situation extensively with Hassan, leading us to try to dissect the mechanics of ambushing. Up till now, ambushes had in principle not been accompanied by atrocities, as long as victims did not actively resist having their belongings confiscated. Rather, the main ambush scenario consisted of armed men trying to obtain people's belongings as quickly and efficiently as possible, before vanishing into the adjacent bush. Armed groups have different repertoires of violence, and killing, rape and kidnapping did not appear part of this particular

group's repertoire. In addition, as the FARDC and Hassan suggested, the group was disciplined. This should reduce the possibility of the attackers inflicting additional harm during an ambush.

Based on this analysis, we thought systematically through what would happen in case we would fall into an ambush, imagining step by step how it would unfold, and how the perpetrators would act and reason. When ambushing was about quickly extracting belongings, so we concluded, it was best to facilitate that by not trying to resist and having a certain amount of cash at ready—sufficient for the attackers to rejoice at the booty and quickly withdraw into the bush. The thought exercise of 'imagining the ambush' and gauging the psychology of the attackers straddled the fine line between frightening and fun. It led us to coin the running gag of being 'ambush ready'. But it was not a joke, of course. The prospect of falling into an ambush remained all too real. Perhaps this form of psychological preparation could render a potential ambush less harmful, but it could not help preventing one. The fact that we managed to complete our trip ambush-less remained grace of Lady Luck. This ongoing fortune—travelling dangerous zones unscathed—was both a blessing and a curse. Without any incidents, how could I know whether I was pushing my luck too far?

Rape preparedness

Through what I labelled my 'ambush logistics', I came into contact with several humanitarian organisations. Each time I was moving into ambush-rich or otherwise dangerous zones, I would leave my valuables at the base of a humanitarian NGO. Being a regular appearance at some NGO compounds, I exchanged extensively with their staff, in particular logistics personnel, about the security situation. After all, they moved and worked in insecure areas, and sometimes had direct contacts with armed groups (even though they would rarely admit that). These regular conversations allowed me to discover that humanitarian logistics personnel grasped the security situation relatively well, including armed group dynamics. I generally took their security advice seriously—until the one time that I decided to ignore it.

My study design envisaged a comparison between, on the one hand, densely populated and accessible zones and, on the other hand, remote, isolated areas. I therefore planned a mission into the *Hauts Plateaux* mountain range. The area was not accessible by road, so I would need to go on foot. The decision to hike sparked concern among the UN blue helmets with whom I shared my plans. Apparently, going by foot was widely perceived as 'very insecure'. I would not be able to quickly access medical facilities, the blue helmets suggested, nor would I have the possibility to rapidly get away in case hostilities broke out. Reflecting on these comments, it appeared to me that these conditions also apply when going by car to areas where roads are in an advanced state of dilapidation. Their arguments therefore did not convince me to abandon my plans. Moreover, according to my research collaborator Sibomana, who was born and raised in the *Hauts Plateaux* area and would accompany me into the mountains, the risks were not exceptionally high.

Ascending to the highest town in the mountains that could still be reached by motorcycle, we were invited to spend the evening at the base of a large humanitarian organisation. Interested in their analysis of the security situation, I sat down with the security and logistics manager, who turned out to be an expat. The guy was unambiguous in his analysis, insisting that security in the area was bad, very bad. Two days prior one of their sub-stations had been attacked. "You are crazy to go into the mountains with just the two of you," he said, trying to discourage me from undertaking this mission. Out of the blue, he added: "I am pretty sure that you will get raped." He explained that his organisation continually registered rape cases in the area, and was apparently convinced that I would be affected by the same dynamics. His words unsettled me. Was it really

that dangerous to go into the mountains? And if the risks were outrageously high, why would Sibomana have agreed to this mission? I had few indications he had been trying to mislead me nor could I establish what the motives for that could have possibly been. Yet I also decided that it was not sensible to take a decision on the basis of two strongly opposed opinions.

The next day, I went to the camp of a Mai-Mai group who were in the process of surrendering themselves to the Congolese army, but were still deployed in their fiefdom. Talking to the deputy commander charged with intelligence and operations, I tried to elicit his assessment of security dynamics in the area. Aware that his analysis could be highly self-interested, the reasons he invoked to substantiate that the zone was relatively safe appeared credible. The army was not conducting any operations in the area. Since his group was still in control, banditry was minimal. Furthermore, one of the bigger rebel movements that had earlier destabilised the area had withdrawn deep into the forest. This assessment converged with that of a range of other sources that I contacted in the village, including an FARDC commander, customary chiefs, a human rights defender, elders, and at the market people from different villages in the surrounding area. I also learnt from these sources that the attack on the humanitarian NGO had largely been a result of its own recruitment practices: they had hired no less than three people from the same (extended) family as security guards, and that in a region where employment is so scarce that the stakes of its distribution are extremely high.

Based on this information, I decided to leave the next morning with Sibomana, hiking towards the natal village of the Mai-Mai leader, with the approval of his colleagues at the camp. I did not say goodbye to the security and logistics manager, who I felt had misread the security situation. Yet despite my dismissing his analysis, I would eventually heed one piece of advice that he gave. Convinced that I ran a high risk of being raped, he had insisted that I would carry a so-called PEP kit, a cocktail of medication one needs to take within 72 hours after rape to avoid pregnancy and the transmission of HIV and other STDs. At that moment, the sexual violence aid craze in the eastern DRC had reached a climax, and many humanitarian NGOs distributed PEP kits to health centres. This included health centres in very remote zones, as I found out when coming across one after two days of walking. Having to overcome shame and guilt for usurping something that was destined for women with much less opportunity for damage control than myself, I eventually dared to ask the doctor running the centre for a PEP kit. Carrying around this unusual load—a couple of plastic bottles filled with pills—was both uncanny, a constant reminder of what *could* happen, and somehow reassuring, relaying the thought that one could somehow avoid the worst. It would travel in my luggage for many months to come, remaining untouched.

Conclusion: locating security expertise

My field experiences and observations differ little from those of the hundreds of researchers who have written on 'dangerous fieldwork' (Lee, 1995), 'danger in the field' (Lee-Treweek and Linkoogle, 2000) or 'fieldwork under fire' (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995). This extensive body of often fairly navel-gazing literature draws similar conclusions concerning how researchers obtain and assess security knowledge and translate this knowledge into guidelines for action. It tends to emphasise the importance of profound immersion in the research context (Peritore, 1990), and of constructing a social network and maintaining relations with 'key informants' (Kovats-Bernat, 2002). Furthermore, it highlights how access to information and exposure to risks are shaped by researchers' and research collaborators' positionality, including their political position, race, and gender (Nash, 1976; Green *et al*, 1993). It also offers dozens of practical guidelines for 'surviving

fieldwork' (Howell, 1990), which has become something of a cottage industry. These guidelines include: reflexivity, flexibility, anticipating and imagining danger, not growing complacent about the dangers one faces and making efforts to 'constantly define and redefine risk and danger in light of actual experiences' (Sluka, 1995, p. 280).

What was specific to my situation, and may be comparable for those studying foreign interventions, is that the nature of my subject matter led me to first interact with foreign security 'professionals'. Contrary to what I had expected, their assessments of 'the security situation' were highly inaccurate – burdened rather than enriched by their professional background. They seemed to assess risks based on their own professionally shaped notions of 'safety', whether stemming from being used to bearing arms or being attuned to sexual violence. In addition, they appeared to read the security situation through inappropriate analytical lenses, grounded in particular ideas of what 'war' was about. Aside from being tinged by cultural and racial biases, their assessments were often heavily coloured by professionally imposed restrictions on their contacts and movements (cf. Higate and Henry, 2009). These observations left me disillusioned about the added value of sending foreign security 'experts' to war zones, whether to observe or stabilise security dynamics, reform security services, or secure humanitarian operations.

Finding little security knowledge among foreign security 'experts', I shifted my orientation towards Congolese human rights defenders, journalists, and key informants within the Congolese army. But I was only able to assess the information they provided by triangulating it with the stories and observations of the hundreds of other people I contacted for my research—including local authorities, a wide range of security agencies, and political and military armed group members. In the end, I concluded, security 'knowledge' was not the sole prerogative of a few designated people. It rather seemed an immense puzzle that had to be painstakingly put together from hundreds of pieces, with individual pieces often being initially misplaced, and some pieces never found. What is remarkable is that few of the people who most decidedly contributed to piecing the puzzle together explicitly asserted having 'security expertise'. Hence, that expertise seems to reside precisely where it is not claimed, implying we should perhaps not look for it where it is ostensibly offered.

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