Western Security Force Assistance in Weak States

Emily Knowles & Jahara Matisek

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Time for a Peacebuilding Approach

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Security force assistance (SFA) is increasingly emphasised as a way of supporting local partners on the front lines. In this article, Emily Knowles and Jahara Matisek suggest that traditional approaches to SFA are too technical to deal with political problems in fragile states. They suggest a new vision for SFA in fragmented security sectors: a peacebuilding tool for stabilising political settlements that improves relationships across armed groups and between the security sector and civilian population.

The failure of two costly military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan to establish sustainable levels of security has led some commentators to announce the death of the nation-building project.[1] Placing comparable numbers of Western boots on the ground, except in the case of a direct threat to state survival, is unlikely for the foreseeable future.[2] For many Western powers this has meant rethinking approaches to military intervention abroad. NATO commitments in places such as Afghanistan were reduced to 16,000 troops in 2018 from a height of 100,000 in 2010,[3] and priorities in many European states have been refocused on homeland defence. Such shifts have been intensified by fears of a resurgent Russia and a string of Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS)-inspired attacks in major cities. Moreover, domestic politics in most European countries has shifted in reaction to the influx of refugees escaping the conflicts in Libya and Syria.

In recent campaigns Western reliance on technological superiority – particularly from the air – has allowed many states to engage violent non-state actors with minimal risk to their own troops. However, for international support to be strategically effective there must be allies on the ground with the power to seize, clear and hold terrain.[4] To meet this need, Western states have been training and equipping host-country security forces in unstable regions across the world. Small teams of special operations forces and military advisers, as well as security assistance and intelligence support units, are building host-country security forces to do the bulk of front line fighting against groups like Al-Shabaab,

1. Doug Bandow, 'The Nation-Building Experiment That Failed: Time for U.S. to Leave Afghanistan', *Forbes*, 1 March 2017.
2. Rachael Gribble et al., 'British Public Opinion After a Decade of War: Attitudes to Iraq and Afghanistan', *Politics* (Vol. 35, No. 2, June 2015), pp. 128–50; *BBC News*, 'David Cameron: "Syria Is Not like Iraq"', 29 August 2013; *The Economist*, 'Missing in Action', 8 March 2014; Richard Norton-Taylor, 'UK Military Operations Since Cold War Have Cost £34bn, Says Study', *The Guardian*, 23 April 2014; Shashank Joshi, 'Future Wars Will Need a More Versatile Response', *The Telegraph*, 13 July 2015.
3. NATO, 'Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan', 18 July 2018, <http://www.nato.int/cps/in/natohq/topics_113694.htm>, accessed 2 July 2019; UK Parliament, 'The International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan: Key Issues for the 2010 Parliament', 2010, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/key-issues-for-the-new-parliament/britain-in-the-world/the-international-security-assistance-force-in-afghanistan/>, accessed 2 July 2019.
4. Jahara Matisek and Jon McPhilamy, 'Why Airpower Needs Landpower', *Modern War Institute*, 5 November 2018; J C Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1967), p. 85.

US forces have partnered with the Ugandan security forces to improve their effectiveness, 2017. *Courtesy of US National Guard/Penny Snoozy*

Boko Haram and Al-Qa'ida. This is a trend that the Oxford Research Group calls 'remote warfare',[5] although it goes by many other names including 'surrogate war',[6] 'light footprint warfare',[7] 'low-intensity war'[8] and 'by, with and through'.[9]

Africa is a congested space for this sort of activity with multiple overlapping unilateral, bilateral and multilateral efforts aimed at building stability, countering terrorist activity and building the capacity of local partners.[10] Moreover, parts of Asia, such as the Philippines, have experienced rises in violent extremist activity over the past two decades, leading the international community to intervene to prevent the collapse of governments. In response to a branch of Daesh emerging in July of 2017, the US deployed over 250 military advisers, numerous support aircraft and authorised expenditure of over $100 million with Operation *Pacific Eagle-Philippines* to support the Filipino government and armed forces.[11] The prevalence of this indirect approach to deal with insurgents and terrorists has not reversed troubling instability in Afghanistan, Libya, Mali, Somalia and

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5.   Oxford Research Group, 'Conceptual Series: Defining Remote Warfare', <https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/pages/category/conceptual-series-defining-remote-warfare>, accessed 26 June 2019.

6.   Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

7.   Megan Karlshoej-Pedersen, '"Light Footprint" Operations Keep US Troops in the Dark', *Defense One*, 5 October 2018, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/10/light-footprint-operations-keep-us-troops-dark/151797/>, accessed 26 June 2019; Bradford Ian Stapleton, 'The Problem with the Light Footprint: Shifting Tactics in Lieu of Strategy', Policy Analysis No. 792, Cato Institute, 7 June 2016.

8.   Roger Carey, 'Low-Intensity Warfare and Limited War', in Roger Carey and Trevor C Salmon (eds), *International Security in the Modern World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1996), pp. 133–51.

9.   Melissa Dalton et al., 'Civilians and "By, With, and Through"', CSIS Briefs, 25 April 2018.

10.   Greg Mills and Jeffrey Herbst, 'Africa, Terrorism and AFRICOM', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 152, No. 2, April/May 2007), pp. 40–45.

11.   Since the US first invaded the Philippines in 1898, American military assistance and economic aid to the country has been a mainstay of relations due to Islamic insurgencies threatening Manila's rule. See Congressional Research Service, 'The Philippines', 19 December 2018; Lead Inspector General, 'Operation Pacific Eagle–Philippines: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, 1 October 2018–31 December 2018', 2019; Gregory Poling and Eric Sayers, 'Time to Make Good on the U.S.-Philippine Alliance', *War on the Rocks*, 21 January 2019.

Yemen.[12] Peace is difficult to achieve when a third party intervenes in complex conflicts that are often entrenched and then worsened by conflict dynamics of greed and grievance colliding with food insecurity and water scarcity.[13] As Patricia L Sullivan, Leo J Blanken and Ian C Rice have shown in an analysis of 171 cases of internal armed conflict ending between 1956 and 2012, military aid to post-conflict countries can increase state repression.[14] The difficulty level only increases when states attempt to support local partners cheaply, discreetly and with low appetites for risk.[15]

> There are many practical reasons why SFA efforts can fail to produce the effective, accountable and legitimate local security forces that are necessary for greater state stability

There are many practical reasons why SFA efforts can fail to produce the effective, accountable and legitimate local security forces that are necessary for greater state stability.[16] This article further contends there is a greater problem: flawed vision. While SFA efforts may be aimed at building effective security, approaches are rarely rooted in the reality of local partners' capability, capacity and legitimacy. Instead, Western SFA advisers provide tactical training fixes to problems that are inherently political. This article draws on the authors' most recent research materials collected during semi-structured interviews with international and local military, diplomatic and civil society representatives in 2017 in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Senegal and Uganda, and in 2018 in Mali and Kenya. This fieldwork concentrated on lessons learned from contemporary SFA and partner operations, but this article focuses on the example of international humanitarian law (IHL) courses, which are included with Western SFA on the African continent. While each case has a richness of its own, they collectively demonstrate that narrow training will not fix problems that are not caused by a lack of skills or knowledge. As Claire Metelits notes in the case of South Sudan, technocratic support to democratisation programmes will not bring peace if the ethnic and intercommunal rivalries that are driving and perpetuating conflict are not addressed.[17]

This article bridges a diverse and rarely united literature on peacebuilding and SFA to show that the long-term success of these initiatives requires both a change in vision and an adjustment in expectations to account for the complex realities of security provision in fragile states. In many conflict-affected environments, thinking about SFA as a tool to enable or reform relations between different security actors within a fragile state and between militaries and their civilian counterparts is more appropriate to the local reality of security sector fragmentation than can be addressed through traditional tactical SFA (namely, making host-country forces more lethal). Generating positive outcomes for civil–military relations (CMR) as well as basic military capacity should therefore be a priority when designing and evaluating these SFA activities. The article discusses one blueprint for stable political settlements, one which prioritises

12. Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson, 'Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres', Oxford Research Group, Remote Warfare Programme, 27 June 2018, pp. 28–29; Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson, 'No Such Thing as a Quick Fix: The Aspiration–Capabilities Gap in British Remote Warfare', Oxford Research Group, Remote Warfare Programme, 30 July 2018; Samiuel Quashie-Idun and Brent Swails, 'Mali's Prime Minister and His Entire Government Resign', *CNN*, 19 April 2019; *France 24*, 'Government, Haftar Forces Battle House-to-House in Tripoli', 29 April 2019.

13. Buddhika Jayamaha et al., 'Changing Weather Patterns, Climate Change and Civil War Dynamics: Institutions and Conflicts in the Sahel', *Journal of Diplomacy* (Vol. 20, No. 1, Fall/Winter 2018), pp. 70–87.

14. Patricia L Sullivan, Leo J Blanken and Ian C Rice, 'Arming the Peace: Foreign Security Assistance and Human Rights Conditions in Post-Conflict Countries', *Defence and Peace Economics* (26 December 2018), DOI: 10.1080/10242694.2018.1558388.

15. Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson, 'All Quiet on the ISIS Front? British Secret Warfare in the Information Age', Remote Control Project, Oxford Research Group, 2017; Knowles and Watson, 'Remote Warfare'.

16. Knowles and Watson, 'Remote Warfare'; Mara E Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Jahara Matisek, 'Pathways to Military Effectiveness', PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, June 2018; David H Ucko, 'Systems Failure: The US Way of Irregular Warfare', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* (Vol. 30, No. 1, 2019), pp. 223–54.

17. Claire Metelits, 'Challenging US Security Assessments of Africa', *African Security* (Vol. 9, No. 2, 2016), pp. 89–109.

local ownership of the process, timelines and objectives of SFA to ensure that programmes have a lasting impact on CMR in fragile states.

What Is SFA and Why Do It in Fragile States?

The definition of SFA in Allied Joint Doctrine (AJD) 3-16, as used by many NATO members, is derived from *US Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 1-13, Security Force Assistance*, which describes SFA as the act of making foreign security forces – at all levels – competent, capable, sustainable, committed, confident and accountable.[18] The intent is that the recipient will become capable of protecting its domestic population from security threats, as well as becoming a reliable partner on the ground for dealing with regional threats and working with neighbours. In weak states, SFA providers face the difficult task of trying to build effective, accountable and legitimate security forces when institutions themselves are fragmented and basic safety and security are often tenuous.

Foreign assistance to a host-country security sector does not occur in isolation. A multitude of other forms of aid (such as economic and technical aid) are deployed with the intent of trying to strengthen or rebuild other parts of the host-country government (such as courts and administrative offices). It is also rarely a unilateral effort by one provider, with many states, multilateral organisations and private companies providing small portions of SFA in what might theoretically add up to a comprehensive approach to building host-country security organisations.[19] Even the deployment of peacekeepers – be it from the UN, African Union (AU), or some other cooperative body – in this context can result in 'informal SFA'. When peacekeepers interact with security actors from the West and the host country, a diffusion of norms, values and supposed best practices occurs.

However, violent non-state actors thrive in regions where there is weak governance and embedded conflict. SFA advisers looking for partnerships in these areas often end up working with armed groups which have a history of predation, corruption and sectarianism. Since 2007, 23% of the violent incidents against civilians recorded were perpetrated by state forces.[20] Building the capacity of predatory armed forces can feed the self-perpetuating cycle of violence and conflict, which currently sees almost half of all post-civil war countries relapse into conflict within five years.[21] Further complicating an already dynamic security environment, it is not uncommon for host-country security actors to be pro-government during the day, but work for the insurgents at night.[22] This is a challenging environment for SFA providers who are often given tactical training mandates and objectives that do not respond to or address this complexity.

Is SFA in Weak States Set up to Fail?

Making SFA efforts 'stick' in fragile states poses immense challenges. These include principal–agent issues that arise when there is a divergence in interests between donors and recipients.[23] When donors interweave themselves into entrenched regional conflicts on the basis of narrow, counterterrorism objectives, a mismatch in strategic objectives and priorities is almost assured.[24] As emphasised by analysts at a May 2018 event on Iraq post-Daesh hosted by the London School of Economics, it was really only the international coalition that ever saw countering Daesh as the dominant strategic priority

18.   US Homeland Security, 'JDN 1-13: Security Force Assistance', Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, 29 April 2013, pp. x–xi; Ministry of Defence, 'AJD 3-16: Allied Joint Doctrine for Security Force Assistance', 2016.

19.   Ivor L Wiltenburg, 'Security Force Assistance: Practised but not Substantiated', *Militaire Spectator* (Vol. 188, No. 2, January 2019), pp. 88–99.

20.   This figure is based on Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) data from Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia for violent incidents against civilians recorded since 1997 by state forces, militia forces and rebel groups. Of 57,982 recorded events, 13,195 of them were attributed to state forces. See ACLED, 'ACLED Data Export', *ACLED Data*, 13 April 2019, <https://www.acleddata.com/data/>, accessed 22 April 2019.

21.   Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can be Done About it* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 27, 34, and 177.

22.   J B Walker, *Nightcap at Dawn: American Soldiers' Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2012), pp. 124–26; William Reno, 'The Politics of Security Assistance in the Horn of Africa', *Defence Studies* (Vol. 18, No. 4, 2018), pp. 498–513.

23.   Stephen Biddle, 'Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency', *Dædalus* (Vol. 146, No. 4, Fall 2017), pp. 126–38.

24.   Knowles and Watson, 'Remote Warfare', pp. 28–29; Knowles and Watson, 'No Such Thing as a Quick Fix'.

in the region.[25] All other groups – including the Kurds, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's forces, Russia, Iran, the Gulf, and Turkey – all had a long list of concerns and priorities that far outstripped the perceived threat of Daesh.[26] Others suggest level of investment as a defining factor for the success or failure of an effort, with the presence of more SFA advisers leading to a greater payoff.[27] However, even when investment has been considerable, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, pouring money into host-country militaries with poor CMR has been shown to create a 'Fabergé egg' army: expensive to build but easy for insurgents to crack when the new military lacks cohesion.[28]

This is also a problem when capacity-building efforts are carried out with small groups of elite local forces which may become 'islands of excellence' but are nevertheless unsustainable if they cannot be integrated into a functioning defence and security sector writ large. One of the great international hopes from long-term SFA activities in Iraq was the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) – a multi-ethnic elite unit that showed some promise as a template for the broader security forces.[29] However, as the most capable part of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), CTS found itself conducting large-scale conventional operations against Daesh for which it was neither trained nor equipped. Operations were scaled up from company-level-and-below to battalion-level-and-above, including the integration of artillery, close air support and coordination with other ISF units.[30] This high-ops tempo and expanded mandate exacted a high price, with reported CTS battle losses of 40% of its total strength.[31]

A similar SFA experiment is underway in Somalia, with the creation of the specialised advanced infantry company, *Danab* ('the lighting force'), by US Special Forces. Such SFA efforts are being pursued as a way of creating a capable military unit without the problematic political dynamics (such as clanism) seen in other Somali security institutions.[32] Accordingly, the aim of US engagement with Somalia, as expressed in a Department of Defense 'Report on Military-to-Military Cooperation with Somalia', is:

> that the Somalia National Security Forces (SNSF) develop into a unified, capable, and responsive security institution that is subject to civilian control and the rule of law, respectful of human rights, friendly to the United States and regional partners, and trusted by the population with the ability to project power nation-wide and provide for its own internal security and defense.[33]

The *Danab* has essentially been built up as an 'effective military enclave' separated from the problems emanating from bad governance in Mogadishu.[34] However, prospects for what will happen if the *Danab* is ever integrated into the normal security architecture of Mogadishu, or if Western SFA trainers leave, are alarming. If Iraq is any indicator, there is a real risk that the *Danab* will be eliminated – either on the battlefield or through politics – due to it being the only effective part of the Somali security forces, and therefore a threat to the corrupt and inept leaders in Mogadishu. Or, as the 2012 military coup in Mali cautions, there is also a risk that the *Danab* may pre-emptively seize power in an ineffective Somali state. Unfortunately, either outcome seems more likely than a smooth integration

25. Information provided at an event titled 'The Islamic State in Retreat', LSE Department of International Relations, London, 31 May 2018.
26. Knowles and Watson, 'Remote Warfare', p. 29.
27. Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald and Ryan Baker, 'Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (Vol. 41, Nos 1–2, 2018), pp. 89–142.
28. Jahara Matisek, 'The Crisis of American Military Assistance: Strategic Dithering and "Fabergé Egg" Armies', *Defense and Security Analysis* (Vol. 34, No. 3, 2018), pp. 267–90.
29. Knowles and Watson, 'Remote Warfare', p. 14.
30. David Witty, 'The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service', Brookings Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, 16 March 2015, pp. 33–34.
31. Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, 'Operation Inherent Resolve: Report to the United States Congress: July 1, 2017–September 30, 2017', 2017.
32. Colin D Robinson, 'The Somali National Army: An Assessment', *Defense and Security Analysis* (Vol. 35, No. 2, April 2019), pp. 1–11.
33. Department of Defense, 'Report on Military-to-Military Cooperation with Somalia', submitted in response to the request contained in Senate Report 113-44, page 202, to accompany S. 1197, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014, 17 January 2014, pp. 2–3.
34. Jahara Matisek, 'An Effective Senegalese Military Enclave: The *Armée*-Nation "Rolls On"', *African Security* (Vol. 12, No. 1, 2019), pp. 62–86.

of the *Danab* into the civil–military architecture of Mogadishu.

Western policymakers and military strategists are keen to view the problem of weak states with violent non-state actors as being solvable through military assistance programmes. Providing tactical training is an attempt to apply a 'patch' that fixes doctrinal, strategic, operational and/or tactical problems inherent in host-country security. Even the newest US State Department initiatives to counter terrorism – two new anti-terrorism assistance centres in Africa and Southeast Asia to join the one in the Middle East – focus only on training.[35] However, this article, drawing on the lessons from the case study of training in IHL, contends that SFA strategies typically fail in the long term, not because of the quantity (or quality) of host-country personnel trained, but because of the nature of weak state CMR. State fragility creates numerous CMR pathologies that reduce the effectiveness, accountability and legitimacy of armed forces. This means that SFA training can be ill-suited to improving partner behaviour and ability in the long term, especially without formal mechanisms in place to ensure a better CMR environment that lends itself to the overall strategic purposes of nation- and state-building.

In fragile contexts, governance and control is often wielded through loose alliances between powerbrokers such as local strongmen, warlords and militias.[36] These opaque and sometimes precarious relationships can dictate the development of political coalitions and lead to the intense politicisation of armed groups – including the state armed forces. In weak states, the relative military might of different armed groups is one of the most crucial levers of power. In this context, foreign SFA can be an unintentional 'kingmaker' as it strengthens parts of a fragmented system that may not serve the population or the stability of the state as a whole. Elites have incentives to subvert SFA for their own purposes, while simultaneously engaging in corrupt or predatory behaviours that feed the very instability that SFA may be trying to address.[37]

> There are a range of structural issues facing host-country military personnel in fragile states that make it difficult for the average soldier or police officer to survive

In addition to a challenging political and social context, there are a range of structural issues facing host-country military personnel in fragile states that make it difficult for the average soldier or police officer to survive. These pathologies include, but are not limited to: no, low or late pay; poor living conditions; lack of basic supplies; and minimal equipment. In response to these structural conditions, host-country security actors tend to adopt a multitude of behaviours including bribery, corruption, extracting 'tolls' and 'fees' from citizens, selling war materiel, setting up informal business deals in conflict zones, abuse of prisoners, judicial/martial executions and 'liberal' (non-discriminatory) use of firepower around civilians.[38] While some are motivated by greed or grievance to engage in these behaviours, many adopt them as survival methods on the battlefield and/or to financially support their families.[39] Regardless, the net result is a failure to protect civilians from harm.[40]

35. Jessica Donati, 'As Diplomacy Shifts, U.S. Expands Military-Style Counterterrorism Training', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 May 2019.

36. William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999); Joel S Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

37. Jahara Matisek and William Reno, 'Getting American Security Force Assistance Right: Political Context Matters', *Joint Force Quarterly* (No. 92, 1st Quarter, 2019), pp. 65–73.

38. Authors' fieldwork, 2015–2018. Authors' interviews with SFA policymakers and advisers, the Pentagon, 26–28 July 2017; authors' interviews at US Africa Command, 1–4 August 2017. Many noted these various problems encountered with partner armed forces in Africa and the Middle East. For example, these officials had identified the problem of Somali troops not being paid so they naturally set up roadblocks to charge tolls, and also how Ugandan and Kenyan troops in the Jubaland region of Somalia were making business deals with various armed groups (to include Al-Shabaab) to smuggle natural resources (such as hookah coal) out of the port of Kismayo. Finally, they observed how impressive certain military units of Chad and Cameroon were, but lamented how they over-relied on firepower instead of combined-arms manoeuvre.

39. Department for International Development, 'Why Corruption Matters: Understanding Causes, Effects and How to Address Them', Evidence Paper on Corruption, January 2015, pp. 19–21.

40. Liam Walpole and Megan Karlshoej-Pedersen, 'Remote Warfare and the Practical Challenges for the Protection of Civilians Strategy', Remote Warfare Programme, Oxford Research Group, June 2019.

Current approaches to SFA perpetuate, and may even exacerbate, these challenges. As a recent research project on elite bargains for the UK's Stabilisation Unit notes, 'international actors and global power structures are instrumental to shaping the underlying distribution of power in conflict-affected countries'.[41] International attempts to strengthen centralised government control over the use of force or the greater accountability of armed actors are highly political processes because they essentially aim to transform the existing distribution of military power.[42] These are the archetype of limited access orders, where elites gain privileged control over parts of the economy, military and government, in exchange for not engaging in violence.[43] The cost of this cynical bargain is that state power is greatly reduced, and elites can always extract more rents from the central government because they end up having more coercive power than the state itself. If approached too technically, SFA may itself prove destabilising as it alters the balance of power between different groups.

A Case in Point: International Humanitarian Law Training

Poor IHL compliance by many recipients of SFA is a problem that needs solving. It is impossible for armies to earn the acceptance and legitimacy of the local populations that they serve if they arbitrarily detain civilians, torture prisoners or abuse their power to serve parochial interests above those of the wider population. However, interloping SFA advisers consistently misdiagnose compliance as a problem that stems from a lack of basic IHL training. Using this logic, the more local soldiers you train, the better their behaviour on the battlefield. A popular

aspect of SFA for international trainers is following the international IHL checklist. This provides a quick win because it is easily achieved. For example, an Irish SFA trainer deployed to Mali in 2017 stated:

> The UN and other civilian organisations give all the Malian soldiers human rights training – how to handle prisoners of war and how to handle non-combatants ... We emphasise that training in our field exercises by building scenarios where they have to take prisoners and treat them correctly, just as we would in Ireland and the UK.[44]

A similar approach was underway in Koulikoro Training Centre when the authors visited in September 2018. In this centre, the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) is providing IHL training to Malian soldiers. In 2016/17 the UK spent £0.8 million delivering IHL and preventing sexual violence in conflict modules through the EUTM Mali, with a further £0.87 million allocated for broader military and civilian support (with a focus on infantry, medical and IHL) for 2018/19.[45] These master's-degree level programmes were optimistically delivered with the aim of professionalising a force with limited education levels that has been linked to numerous violations including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary arrests.[46]

The Malian armed forces (FAMA) and the broader Malian government have also been accused of ethnic bias, particularly when it comes to relying on ethnic self-defence forces operating in the central and northern regions of the country to provide security where they cannot (or will not) operate. For example, reports suggest that the Malian government has supported GATIA (*Groupe d'autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés* – Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies), an ethnic militia group linked to obvious human rights violations in the north.[47]

41. Christine Cheng, Jonathan Goodhand and Patrick Meehan, 'Synthesis Paper: Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains That Reduce Violent Conflict', Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project, Stabilisation Unit, April 2018, p. 47.

42. *Ibid.*, paras 192–94.

43. Douglass C North, John Joseph Wallis and Barry R Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

44. Alex Duval Smith, 'Turning Mali's Army into a Fighting Force', *BBC News*, 3 May 2013.

45. Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), 'Sahel Support to Multilaterals: Annual Review', HM Government, 2018, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/668314/Sahel_Support_to_Multilaterals_Annual_Review.pdf>, accessed 2 April 2019; CSSF, 'Sahel Defence and Security', 2019, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/758141/AFRA_Sahel_Defence_and_Security_Programme_Summary_FY_1819.odt>, accessed 2 April 2019.

46. Human Rights Watch, 'Mali: Unchecked Abuses in Military Operations', 8 September 2017; *France 24*, 'Twenty-Five Bodies Found in Central Mali After Army Sweep', 18 June 2018; Afua Hirsch, 'Mali's Army Suspected of Abuses and Unlawful Killings as War Rages', *The Observer*, 19 January 2013.

47. Modibo Dolo, 'Pour avoir demandé au gouvernement de rompre tout lien avec le GATIA : L'ambassadeur des Etats-Unis au Mali s'est attiré la colère des maliens', *Bamada*, 1 October 2016, <http://bamada.net/pour-avoir-demande-au-gouvernement-

In central Mali, Bambara and Dogon ethnically distinguished armed groups have recently been acquiring heavy, war-grade weaponry – some of which is presumed to be coming from the armed forces – that has increased the lethality of localised disputes.[48] A recent attack by a Dogon militia group killed at least 134 civilians across three Fulani villages in apparent reprisal for the deaths of 23 Malian soldiers at the hands of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa Al-Muslimin a few days before.[49]

The slow mobilisation of Malian forces to aid the victims, coupled with a worrying government tendency to overgeneralise and overemphasise links between Fulani communities and jihadist groups,[50] raised anger and suspicion that the reprisals were state-sanctioned. The following resignation of several high-ranking Malian military officers and officials has not quelled tit-for-tat violence that continues to claim lives in both Dogon and Fulani communities.[51] Ethnic imbalance or bias in the FAMA is not a problem that is being visibly addressed by SFA provision, which is focused on mass rather than makeup of the force.[52] This has the potential to be hugely counterproductive, particularly in terms of the future ability of the FAMA to provide adequate and legitimate security to all Malians across all areas of the country.

The potential for SFA to worsen prospects for civilian harm at the hands of local security forces is not just a risk in Mali. Many SFA trainers will acknowledge, off the record, that it is not uncommon for 'bad' things to happen to prisoners and other 'suspects' when SFA personnel are not around to monitor their local security partners.[53] In July 2017 Amnesty International released a report documenting the cases of 101 individuals accused of supporting Boko Haram – often without evidence – who were held incommunicado and allegedly tortured by Cameroonian security forces including the elite Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR – *Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide*).[54] Created in 2001, the BIR is a special operations unit of about 4,500 that has received SFA from France, Israel and the US.[55] The BIR and other Cameroonian security institutions received IHL instruction as part of their technical training from the US.[56] However, this has proven inadequate when it comes to altering heavy-handed approaches to countering terrorism and the politicisation of the armed forces. It was not until irrefutable evidence emerged of the BIR burning down civilian houses and executing civilians – including women and children – in Cameroon's anglophone regions in February 2019 that the US finally reduced security assistance to Cameroon.[57]

de-rompre-tout-lien-avec-le-gatia-lambassadeur-des-etats-unis-au-mali-sest-attire-la-colere-des-maliens>, accessed 12 June 2019; UN Security Council, 'Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali', 22 September 2015, S/2015/723.

48. Human Rights Watch, '"We Used to be Brothers": Self-Defense Group Abuses in Central Mali', 7 December 2018; Anna Pujol-Mazzini, 'How Mali is Pursuing Justice for a War that Never Really Ended', *World Politics Review*, 29 January 2019.

49. Katarina Hoije, 'Mali Dismisses Army Commanders After Deadly Attack on Villages', *Bloomberg*, 24 March 2019; *Defense Post*, '23 Mali Soldiers Dead as Militants Attack Dioura Camp in Mopti Region', 18 March 2019.

50. Human Rights Watch, 'We Used to Be Brothers'.

51. For the resignations, see *Defense Post*, 'Mali and Chad Replace Senior Armed Forces Staff After Deadly Attacks', 24 March 2019; Susanna D Wing, 'What's Behind the Escalating Ethnic Violence in Mali? Here's What You Need to Know', *Washington Post*, 12 June 2019; *CGTN Africa*, 'At Least 41 Killed in Latest Round of Dogon–Fulani Violence', 19 June 2019, <https://africa.cgtn.com/2019/06/19/at-least-41-killed-in-latest-round-of-dogon-fulani-violence/>, accessed 25 June 2019; Adam Forrest, 'Gunmen on Motorbikes Kill 41 People in Mali Villages', *The Independent*, 19 June 2019; *France 24*, 'Mali's President Keita Visits Site of Massacre of Ethnic Dogons', 14 June 2019.

52. Authors' interviews with EUTM Mali military trainers, Koulikoro Training Centre, Mali, September 2018.

53. Interviews with SFA policymakers and advisers at US Africa Command, 1–4 August 2017. In addition, similar remarks about bad partner behaviour were made by Australian, British and Canadian military personnel in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 7–11 August 2017. Finally, this observation was made in an authors' interview with a US Army field grade officer who had returned from a deployment in northern Iraq, working with local Kurdish militias, 13 July 2018.

54. Amnesty International, 'Cameroon's Secret Torture Chambers: Human Rights Violations and War Crimes in the Fight Against Boko Haram', 2017.

55. *BBC News*, 'Burning Cameroon: Images You're not Meant to See', 25 June 2018.

56. *Voice of Africa*, 'Cameroon: Armed Forces – BIR Commando Training Centre Graduates 1,850', 26 December 2017; United States Army Africa, 'Human Rights and Law Training', 13 May 2019, <https://www.usaraf.army.mil/media-room/photo/29178/human-rights-and-law-training>, accessed 2 July 2019; Carla Babb, 'US Keeps Training Cameroon Troops but Urges Accountability in Criminal Probe', *Voice of America*, 27 September 2018.

57. Siobhán O'Grady, 'U.S. Cuts Some Military Assistance to Cameroon, Citing Allegations of Human Rights Violations', *Washington Post*, 7 February 2019.

Western SFA personnel (and even some officers from other African militaries) commonly describe the Chadian military, *Armée nationale tchadienne* (ANT), as '[b]rave warriors, but bad soldiers'.[58] Chad withdrew its contingent of 800 soldiers from the AU peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic in 2014 following accusations that its soldiers fired unprovoked into a market in the capital, Bangui, killing about 30 people, and that it supported groups of Séléka forces who were targeting Christians.[59] Militaries that have provided SFA to the ANT recognise its military effectiveness, but are also aware of its notorious behaviour when conducting counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations.[60] For example, Western advisers that had trained and worked alongside the ANT observed how the 'warrior culture' led the units to only make dangerous frontal assaults that were exceptional in clearing villages of insurgents – albeit with little of the village remaining intact.[61] The army behaves in this fashion despite having received numerous rounds of IHL training from foreign partners, on both a bilateral and a multilateral basis as part of training given to the G5 Sahel Joint Force.[62]

Providing IHL training in this environment is at best insufficient and at worst inappropriate – particularly if it becomes a box-ticking exercise that is more about satisfying legal and policy requirements back home than improving partner behaviour. These requirements exist for the US military (and other government agencies) due to the Leahy Amendment, which restricts US military training and equipment for units that have committed human rights abuses.[63]

There is no comparable law in the UK, but assistance must still pass through the Overseas Security and Justice Assistance process that balances the risk that assistance fuels abuses against the strength of mitigation measures.[64] However, in many cases poor host-country behaviour and non-compliance with IHL standards are not a result of a lack of training and will therefore not be fixed by technical SFA. Fragmentation, sectarianism, corruption and the normalisation of violence by a regime or within a state shape how security forces behave towards civilians and inform their responses to conflict and insecurity. An alternative vision for SFA is needed that is more adequately prepared to meet the challenges of how politics and violence are intertwined and exercised in a weak state context.

Policy Solutions: SFA as Peacebuilding in the Security Sector

Taking a peacebuilding approach means seeking out ways and means to use SFA to increase cooperation between various formal and informal elites in a weak state. This approach places less emphasis on developing conventional military power and more emphasis on facilitating and improving relations between the different factions within the security sector and between the security sector and the civilian population.[65] This means rethinking the actors involved in SFA, who should own that

58. Authors' interviews with SFA policymakers and advisers, US Africa Command, 1–4 August 2017, with many adding on the desire to make many of these partner security forces 'Africa Good Enough', implying the low-expectations many had after years of experience, regarding the intent of trying to make them 'professional' or 'somewhat-competent'.

59. Somini Sengupta and Alan Cowell, 'Chad, Amid Criticism, Will Pull Troops From Force in Central Africa', *New York Times*, 3 April 2014; *BBC News*, 'CAR Crisis: UN Says Chad Troops Fired into Market', 4 April 2014; *News24*, 'Chad Blasts UN Report on Troop Abuses in CAR', 2 June 2017.

60. Antonin Tisseron, 'Tchad : L'émergence d'une puissance régionale?', Institut Thomas More, <http://institut-thomas-more.fr/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/NoteActu34-201507-Fr.pdf>, accessed 4 July 2019.

61. Authors' interviews with US Africa Command, 1–4 August 2017; authors' interview with British military officer, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 7–11 August 2017.

62. International Institute of Humanitarian Law, 'First Course on IHL and Human Rights for the G-5 Sahel', 3 December 2018, <http://iihl.org/first-course-on-ihl-and-human-rights-for-the-g-5-sahel/>, accessed 2 July 2019; International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 'Chad: Soldiers Trained in International Humanitarian Law Before Deployment to Mali', news release, 31 October 2013, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/news-release/2013/10-31-chad-mali-ihl-military-training.htm>, accessed 2 July 2019; ICRC, 'Chad: Training Chadian Soldiers on Rules of War', 13 February 2015, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/chad-training-chadian-soldiers-rules-war>, accessed 2 July 2019.

63. Eric Schmitt, 'Military Says Law Barring US Aid to Rights Violators Hurts Training Mission', *New York Times*, 20 June 2013.

64. HM Government, 'Overseas Security and Justice Assistance (OSJA): Human Rights Guidance', 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/583304/OSJA_Guidance_2017.pdf>, accessed 6 May 2019.

65. Lisa Schirch, *Conflict Assessment and Peacebuilding Planning: A Strategic, Participatory Systems-Based Handbook on Human Security* (Boulder, CO: Kumarian Press, 2013).

process and which elites should be incorporated into the peacebuilding consensus.[66] A peacebuilding approach to SFA would broaden participation both across the security sector (to include informal or non-state providers of security) and around the security sector (to involve local civil society and the ministries of defence, interior and justice). Equally important is the development of professional police forces that can maintain some modicum of order and stability in their communities without having to rely on the army for protection. Finally, lessons from peacebuilding and stabilisation about the criticality of local ownership should be applied to SFA activities and approaches.[67]

> A peacebuilding approach places emphasis on facilitating and improving relations between the different factions within the security sector and between the security sector and the civilian population

The question of broader participation across the security sector is a key issue. Traditional SFA prioritises working with state armed forces and 'coalitions of the victors'[68] to reduce levels of violence and restore some level of stability. However, bargains can also backfire – either when they fall apart, unleashing fresh rounds of conflict, or when they solidify into a form of elite capture that prevents needed reforms.

A recent briefing by Erol Yayboke and colleagues outlined a series of questions that civilian and military practitioners should answer together when planning joint stabilisation interventions that would also be applicable to a peacebuilding approach to SFA: 'are there actors that have demonstrated an ability to provide stability or security? Who are the actors that communities support and why? Are policy objectives in alignment with what locally-legitimate actors are able and interested in supporting?'[69] Power mapping should be used to draw on the information held across militaries, civilian agencies and broader civil society to answer questions around how military hierarchies on paper differ from those on the ground, or how non-state actors and government forces are perceived by different communities. To the largest extent possible, SFA should be widened to match this analysis.

Instead, many Western SFA donors operate from the mindset that the recipient country either has moved or is moving towards creating a security force with a political form of civilian control that mirrors Western models. However, CMR in a weak state is typically built around informal relations and myriad social networks that overlap between the government, security forces and even the insurgents.[70] The social milieu in this context means that Western models of CMR would require a radical transformation of the state and its politics – a shift that is likely to be resisted by the groups that would lose influence or control as a result. This presents donors with an SFA dilemma that is very similar to that faced during political peacebuilding and stabilisation efforts.[71] Is it better to work within the existing power structures and accept that this might lead to further consolidation of power by an abusive regime? Or should international donors press political, societal and military elites for a more transformational peace that may never gain traction, while potentially exacerbating violence between competing factions?

Solving this riddle may mean accepting a form of hybrid CMR that integrates leaders from the government and security forces but would also include informal actors who hold local legitimacy in providing security. Creating such relations would blur traditional Western notions of CMR. However, it would more accurately reflect the conditions on the ground in a way that can contribute to consensus-building among societal, political and military elites as long as it is managed as a political rather than as a technical process. Over time this could help to normalise ideas of cooperative politics, raising the costs for elites and groups tempted to try to profit

66. Oliver P Richmond, 'UN Peace Operations and the Dilemmas of the Peacebuilding Consensus', *International Peacekeeping* (Vol. 11, No. 1, 2004), pp. 83–101.

67. Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance International Security Sector Advisory Team, 'Local Ownership', 2019, <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/SSR-in-Practice/Principles-in-Practice/Local-Ownership>, accessed 3 May 2019; New Deal, 'New Deal – Building Peaceful States', 2014, <https://www.newdeal4peace.org/>, accessed 6 May 2019.

68. Knowles and Watson, 'Remote Warfare', pp. 16–17.

69. Erol Yayboke et al., 'Pursuing Effective and Conflict-Aware Stabilization: Partnering for Success', CSIS Briefs, 30 April 2019.

70. William Reno and Jahara Matisek, 'A New Era of Insurgent Recruitment: Have "New" Civil Wars Changed the Dynamic?', *Civil Wars* (Vol. 20, No. 3, 2018), pp. 358–78.

71. Cheng, Goodhand and Meehan, 'Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains That Reduce Violent Conflict', p. 5.

from defecting from such a hybrid CMR model. This is in line with Roger Mac Ginty's suggestion that hybrid models of governance that 'capture the dynamism associated with peace, conflict, and the interaction between local and international actors in seeking to bring conflict to an end' can lead to institutionalised 'processes of social negotiation, coalescence, cooperation, and conflict that are associated with the creation of hybrid forms of peace and processes of peacemaking'.[72]

> Compacts between elite groups and donors are fragile and open to abuse by groups seeking to entrench their own power rather than tackle instability

Where state legitimacy is weak, this may mean working with non-state actors and local resistance groups who are supported by the populations that they serve.[73] This leads to the question of extending SFA to the civilian part of CMR. The international community must be careful to avoid quick assumptions about the extent to which local groups will use their knowledge and links with the community to solve problems and reduce support for violent actors. Just because groups are local, they should not be assumed to be a proxy for local legitimacy. This is where community consultation and detailed mapping become essential to avoid violent competition between different groups vying for SFA. Rather than allowing international actors to set the criteria for group inclusion, this should be a locally led process that is driven by community responses to the question of: who do you support to provide your security and why?

There will be plenty of groups that only appeal to the populations that they serve through fear, lack of choice or distrust of the alternatives. Others might appeal on ethnic, sectarian, linguistic or political grounds. Balancing demands for decentralised and informal security provision against the benefits of centralising and consolidating government power

over security forces will be a challenge, but this is not a question that the donor community can answer in isolation, nor in consultation with small numbers of elites. Pursuing a peacebuilding vision with SFA in this context would lead to the 'production of new political orders, in which rights are expanded and peace is more sustainable'.[74] It would also likely result in a messy security picture in the short term, and the risk of fragmentation would endure in the long term if communities reject reforms that might reduce their power over security provision. Donor control over the process and direction of SFA would be reduced, heightening the risks that local solutions will not advance (and may contradict) donor government interests. This will mean making hard decisions over the extent to which donors can support the initiatives that emerge.

However, what is lost in efficiency may be gained in sustainability. Compacts between elite groups and donors are fragile and open to abuse by groups seeking to entrench their own power rather than tackle instability. Fictionalising a state apparatus and then refusing to deal outside of it only serves to mask the deep divisions that remain. These agreements often fail to address issues around representation in the security sector, or behaviour that prioritises the protection of some groups over the population as a whole. Using SFA to create opportunities for broad community engagement and wider relationship-building within fragmented security sectors is an approach that is anchored in local realities, starting where actors are – not where third parties want them to be.

Conclusion

Local ownership has become one of the cornerstones of international approaches to peacebuilding.[75] The UK's 2011 *Building Stability Overseas Strategy* also emphasised the need for conflict-sensitive international engagement abroad, stating:

> the starting point needs to be ... analysing and understanding the situation to ensure that work designed to build stability does not unintentionally

72. Roger Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (New York, NY: Springer, 2011), p. 208.

73. William Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa: New Approaches to African Security* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Sam Wilkins, 'From Security to Reconciliation: How Nigeria Can Win its Bloody War with Boko Haram', *War on the Rocks*, 8 December 2017.

74. Joanne Wallis et al. (eds), *Hybridity on the Ground in Peacebuilding and Development: Critical Conversations* (Acton, Australia: Australian National University Press, 2018), p. viii.

75. Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance International Security Sector Advisory Team, 'Local Ownership'; New Deal, 'New Deal – Building Peaceful States'.

make things worse. The chances of success are greatest when the international community gets behind a political settlement that lays the foundations for tackling the causes of conflict in a country.[76]

This raises a question of why SFA still seems to be designed to provide tactical fixes to political problems in fragile states. Many Western SFA personnel are trained and given handbooks about local context and culture but only pay it lip service because of their tendency to create institutions and a political order that they are familiar and comfortable with. Applying peacebuilding approaches to SFA delivery would acknowledge local agency and would reduce the current tendency for SFA recipients to use international programmes as a way to boost equipment, training and prestige for little return in improved IHL compliance or CMR. If Western SFA personnel can avoid the mental trap of trying to create local security structures like the ones they have at home and can leverage their time with partners to enable and improve relationships across and around the security sector, this would reduce many of the current pitfalls of SFA.

Improving training itself is still a valuable endeavour for people on the ground implementing SFA, as is managing 'unrealistic expectations … [of making] a liberal state'.[77] However, efforts to build the capacity of local partners still focus disproportionately on tactics, training and military effectiveness. Rethinking the vision for SFA in fragile states to achieve stable political settlements is one way that donors could have a genuine impact on one of the major drivers of conflict in fragile states – a lack of effective, accountable and legitimate security providers who serve the interests of the whole population.[78] It may be difficult for Western donors to accept an SFA approach that complicates the security architecture, taking longer and ceding control of the process to local populations that may not share the same interests or priorities. But if a peacebuilding approach to SFA sets the conditions for lasting peace, the difficulties will be worth it in the long term. ∎

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The views expressed by Dr Matisek are his own and do not reflect the official views or position of the US military, US Air Force, Department of Defense, US Government, US Air Force Academy, or the US Military Academy at West Point.

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76.   William Hague, Andrew Mitchell and Liam Fox, 'Building Stability Overseas Strategy', Department for International Development, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence, 2011, p. 16.
77.   Peter Albrecht and Paul Jackson, 'State-Building Through Security Sector Reform: The UK Intervention in Sierra Leone', *Peacebuilding* (Vol. 2, No. 1, 2014), pp. 83–99.
78.   Many of the authors' thoughts on SFA come from the SFAssist project hosted by the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO), Norway, 5–7 December 2018. The authors especially thank Øystein H Rolandsen and Nic Marsh for hosting them at PRIO.