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The official aim of Security Force Assistance programs, or SFA, is to develop the capabilities and capacities of beneficiary countries' armed forces and their supporting institutions. As the political costs of largescale interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan have grown, US and European policy makers turn to SFA programs to train, advise, and equip the armed forces of various fragile states. This "light footprints" approach appears in the 2017 US *National Security Strategy*, "to give priority to strengthening states where state weaknesses or failure would magnify threats to the American homeland." It is better to have their soldiers fight jihadists and other threats the thinking goes, than to get dragged directly into the fight.

The problem with these SFA programs is that they almost never achieve their stated aims when they involve so-called fragile states. There are three main problems, each of which involves SFA in ways that strengthen political features of fragile states that SFA is meant to mitigate. The first problem is that key officials of the beneficiary state often are implicated in, and may even have vital interests in, the types of behavior and relationships that SFA programs identify as elements of the threats to be addressed. The second problem is that most leaders of fragile states intentionally weaken the capabilities and politicize the commands of their armed forces as key elements of their strategies to exercise authority; the opposite of what SFA seeks. Indeed, the entire logic of rule in these states is inimical to the types of organizations or most other state-building programs that SFA and other interventions support. The third problem is that the armed forces that SFA programs manage to create are unsustainable without substantial and open-ended foreign commitments to manage and pay for them. SFA programs in fragile states instead lead officials to reduce their commitments to sustain these and other institutions of their own states.

This first problem, that of officials who are implicated in the threats that SFA is meant to address, is evidenced in the numerous instances of high government officials. One prominent case involved Ahmed Wali Karzai, the late half-brother of President Hamid Karzai and former chief of the Kandahar Provincial Council. US officials believed that he was involved in major drug trafficking operations. Somali security officials with commercial and personal ties to al-Shabaab insurgents have been subjects of long-running complaints of SFA operators in that country. Mali's government officials, including some in the security services, have a long history of manipulating people's access to benefits of illicit trans-Saharan trade networks in return for political support. It should be no surprise that officials who occupy positions such as these, critical to the maintenance of personalist regimes based upon the manipulation of access to economic opportunities, including in illicit channels, lack the political will to seriously implement SFA programs that target elements of their own power. The frustrated SFA operators are left to wonder why they help a government that helps their enemies, a tension that was particularly evident to anyone familiar with life on the ground in Afghanistan.

The second problem, rulers that intentionally weaken and fragment their own armed forces, is a central element of coop-proofing. More than a few rulers of fragile states came to power via coups, and are well aware of the dangers of the SFA promise to build the capacities and capabilities of their armed forces. They become proficient disorganizers of their own armed forces as a prerequisite for remaining in power. SFA is not unwanted in these countries, particularly if it can be manipulated in ways that protect the country's leader. In Gambia, for example, the incumbent president Adama Barrow has used a joint US – EU SFA program to strengthen a palace guard. This regime survival strategy also hinges on diverting SFA resources away from the most capable elements of the armed forces that were key supporters of his predecessor who was forced from office. This delicate manipulation of SFA became a more important feature of his political strategy after he reneged on his promise to remain in office for only a three year interim period before handing power to an elected successor.

The third problem concerns the incapacity and lack of political will of recipient governments to sustain the armed forces and supporting institutions that SFA benefits. Through much of the late 2000s and through the 2010 “surge,” American and NATO member country SFA programs and other forms of military assistance to Afghanistan amounted to about \$5bn annually, or nearly all of the cost of sustaining that armed force. Meanwhile, the US and its allies covered 90 percent of Afghanistan's public expenditures. This gave Afghan officials little incentive to improve state effectiveness or accountability. Indeed, this period saw the collapse of Kabul Bank and the disappearance of about a billion dollars in assets, including US assistance to pay civil service salaries. Another presidential brother, Mahmood Karzai, was linked to that scandal. When a government has been as corrupt as Afghanistan's government, citizens tend to see the interests of the US behind that bad performance. In this way the US becomes responsible in people's eyes for the failures of Afghan SFA partners too.

The sad conclusion is that no amount of foreign money to boost the capacities and capabilities of fragile state armed forces or to build institutions, at least as SFA programs are now designed, will change this underlying logic of governance in fragile states. One path of real change involves overthrowing incumbent regimes, followed with intensive state-building interventions. Iraq and Afghanistan put an end to that plan, and shifts toward a more multipolar balance of power in the world would make future state-building interventions more contentious in geo-political terms.

One alternative would be to use SFA to build armed force capacities and supporting institutions without regard for the interests of the rest of authority structure, including its illicit elements, in a fragile state. This would be a bold but relatively low-intensity intervention to shift the balance of power in that state. This intervention might result in a government run by a politicized military, perhaps one that is interested in building more institutions to support its rule. This is what China's SFA is beginning to look like in parts of Africa; a bet that assistance to a center of institutional capacity in an otherwise fragile state will pay off in terms of rewarding future relations.

Another alternative is to use SFA to support a faction of a government and associated armed forces, including groups that are effectively militias that wear official uniforms, to accomplish a particular task. This is what US SFA looked like in Iraq up to the 2017 defeat of

the Islamic State. SFA was targeted to the Counter-Terrorism “Golden” Division, a force of almost 8,000 elite soldiers built by US advisors and trainers. This SFA was designed to bypass the rest of Iraq’s army, much of which consists of militias that owe allegiances to political parties and politicians, including ones that the US government deemed Iranian-backed terrorists but have been central players in ruling coalitions in Baghdad. A similar approach has characterized US SFA to a Somali counter-terrorism unit. This unit, locally called “Danab,” operates independently from, and at times in direct confrontation with conventional units of the Somali National Army. Operators appreciate that this unit is among the most effective at fighting al-Shabaab insurgents, though not as proficient at observing human rights norms.

The above points imply that, as a basic principle, interventions of the SFA sort to build institution in fragile states does not work, at least not in ways program designers intend. But these programs persist because the results are “good enough” in the sense that they produce outcomes that serve providers’ other interests, such as supporting local proxies in counter-terrorism campaigns. The US played a major role in the anti-Islamic State campaign, with the loss of only four US service members in the line of duty. This is good for warfighting, but it should not be mistaken for state-building. The other alternative, that of siding more decisively with a country’s armed forces to help them push a state-building project, recognizes that the stated objectives of SFA programs are not attainable, absent this broader (and usually authoritarian) state-building project.

More detailed discussions of these and related issues are available at:

Jahara Matissek & William Reno, “Getting American Security Force Assistance Right: Political Context Matters,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 92, (Jan 2019), 65-73, available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-92/jfq-92.pdf>.

William Reno, “The Politics of Security Assistance in the Horn of Africa,” *Defence Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018), 498–513, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14702436.2018.1463819>.