

A Hidden Conundrum: Security Assistance and Informality in the Sahel

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When providing security assistance (SA) to countries in the Sahel, both the USA and Europe have taken insufficient account of informality within the recipient countries' security sectors. This is a main reason why the SA has not had a lasting strategic impact in terms of improved capacity and professionalism among recipients. When dealing with informality, SA providers confront difficult dilemmas as they seek to balance their need for strategic impact with their desire to impose a Western approach to security sector management. For SA to have a lasting impact, its providers must first appraise how recipient security sectors, which in many cases are qualitatively different from their own, *actually work*, and then calibrate their activities and goals based on the appraisal.

Brief Points

- The deep and multifarious relationships between the political leadership and security sector personnel affect how SA is implemented, with the result that SA programmes can have unintended political impact.
- Opaque human resource management in recipient countries obstructs organisational transparency when it comes to capacity and competence.
- Poor control over budget and payroll results in corruption, unpredictability and ineffectiveness.
- Existing approaches to SA attempt either to impose a new order from scratch or to single out smaller units for elite training. Neither of these approaches has averted the impact of informality and both have produced limited results and sometimes adverse consequences.

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Informality: An Overlooked Factor

Security Assistance (SA) is a crucial element of European and US engagement in countries embroiled in armed conflict, SA comprises both security sector reform (SSR) and security force assistance (SFA) programmes. The main component of SA is provision of training to the recipient country's security forces, but it may also include the distribution of weapons and supplies. The training may aim to enhance technical capacities as well as to promote governance reform and human rights awareness. As Secretary of State Robert Gates once said, the purpose of such assistance is 'helping other countries defend themselves'.¹

There are essentially two approaches to providing SA to the Global South, including the Sahel region, both of which are affected by informality and related challenges. One approach involves external actors supporting deep seated reforms to effect **broad and lasting changes to a country's security sector**. Currently, programmes taking this approach demonstrate a preference for short- or medium-term standardised solutions that reaffirm the norms and standards of the SA providers. Even within multi-year programmes, the SA personnel are usually on short-term contracts and expected to rapidly provide concrete deliverables. Well-known failures, such as the Western SA programmes in Afghanistan and Iraq, illustrate the challenges of affecting lasting change; after years, sometimes decades, of high-volume security assistance, the impact has been minimal. Moreover, within the present international order, there are only a few cases in which a sovereign country has agreed to let external actors set all-encompassing, structure-altering mandates. Indeed, to many former colonies, accepting massive foreign engagement with their security sectors smacks of the "bad old days" before independence.

The other approach to SA involves singling out **small units within the recipient countries to receive high-intensity specialist training**. The chosen groups might be rapid response forces that deal with 'terrorist' threats in urban environments or long-range, light scouting units that can operate in and report from remote areas. Typically, they will have capabilities useful to the SA provider: being able to protect citizens of SA-provider countries who are stationed in the recipient country, to block migration routes or to intercept drug smugglers. However, they will

have little strategic impact on the armed conflict they are ostensibly meant to address. One exception is Niger, where the army's main fighting forces are the twelve special-forces battalions that received SA training and equipment. Challenges related to this approach to SA is that enhanced elite units can affect politico-military relations. They may achieve disproportional strength in relation to other units, making them particularly useful in coup attempts or schemes to blackmail the democratic civilian political leadership of a country.

Many researchers have examined the efficacy and appropriateness of current approaches to SA in the Sahel and other volatile areas in the Global South. Their explanations for the shortcomings of SA programmes often point to differences in interests and goals, and to problems in communication, between providers and recipients as well as to inappropriate design and inefficient implementation of SA programmes.

This policy brief redirects focus to the often overlooked factor of **informality within security organisations in the Sahel**.² This informality is indeed related to corruption and language barriers, but it is something more encompassing: It represents a qualitatively different way to run a security organisation from that to which Western European programme planners and instructors are accustomed. Indeed, the incapacity of SA providers to account for such informality might be the main reason why so many programmes prove ineffective or even harmful.

Informality within government security institutions may be defined as

*[I]mplicit practices, social understandings, networks of interaction, and socially sanctioned norms of behaviour (conventions, customs, traditions etc.)—relying on expectations of reciprocity, which are neither officially established nor codified, but are commonly and widely accepted as legitimate.*³

Research into informality within government security forces is part of a larger field of study concerned with **hybrid security and governance** (see Further Reading). Hybridity, in this literature, relates to the manner in which formal organisations, governance structures and

procedures are mixed with informal practises, norms and non-state networks. Whereas much research on recipient militaries seeks to understand why these organisations fail to perform, research on informality is apt to focus on **how an organisation actually works and the type of legitimacy it can draw on**. Without this information, such research implies, security assistance can never be implemented in a way that brings about the desired changes.

There are three overlapping, intersecting and mutually reinforcing aspects of informality that affect SA programmes in the Sahel: politico-military connections, opaque human resource management, and budget and payroll. These are discussed in separate sections below.

Politico-Military Connections

Although the Sahelian armed forces are officially apolitical, **high-ranking officers in these organisations often have deep and intricate connections to the political elite**. In such cases, internal cohesion and unified command and control can be severely underdeveloped and even circumvented by informal politico-military ties that result in parallel chains of command, corporatism and informal generational/alumni networks. These linkages, which do not necessarily follow chain of command, can involve instrumentalisation of the military by the political elites as well as politisation of the military.

Informal links to the military can also play a role in the survival strategies of political leaders and their affiliates. They need to gain and hold onto the loyalty of key units within the armed forces to protect them from coups, and, conversely, to thwart the other parts of the security apparatus that are perceived as threatening and disloyal. The prevalence of coups and coup attempts in the Sahel is one indication of the blurred civil-military relationships. Another is the militarisation of the civilian administration, which can also occur in countries with civilian governments. For example, over the last two decades in Mali, the use of military personnel in civilian positions has become a trend; it was evident in May 2021 when a number of high-ranking officers were appointed governors after the second coup.

The fusion of the military with the political leadership, and the resultant lack of cohesion within the security forces as well as

unpredictable command and control, **affect all stages of SA initiatives**. At the planning stage, informal politico-military connections may impact the priorities that the governments of the Sahelian countries convey to SA providers. This in turn may directly influence which unit receives what kind of training. It can mean that SA is not directed to the parts of the security apparatus that can most effectively implement a specific training programme. SA then becomes part of the political game. It may contribute to bolstering authoritarian leaders, to enabling coup makers or to nourishing grievances among segments of the security forces that are not benefiting from SA programmes.

For example, in the Sahel, SA has favoured the presidential guard of a recipient country, which as a result has been remodelled into a different kind of special-force or anti-terror unit that is stationed in the capital. In contrast, the segments of the armed forces engaged in active counter-insurgency rarely benefit from SA because they are often stationed in remote areas and not considered important to the game of loyalty and disloyalty. The military coup in Burkina Faso in September 2022 is a telling example of such a tendency. In this case, the so-called ‘Cobra units’ played an important role. They deployed on the ground, competing with the special forces units that were mainly assigned to protect the perpetrator of the earlier coup in January 2022.

Opaque Human Resource Management

In the Sahel, the extent to which formal qualifications and track records govern processes of recruitment and promotion in the military varies considerably. In many cases, such measures of merit may be trumped by other factors rooted in informal connections within security organisations such as corporatism, favouritism, nepotism or personal allegiance to superior officers. Often, appointments to positions of responsibility or promotions within the army are made without regard to formal procedures based on assessment of documented competence or seniority. Some officers have access to training abroad and are subsequently guaranteed promotions to certain positions, which also arouses suspicion and frustration among officers of the same rank with no access to such training. These promotion and hiring practices severely undermine the capacity of the Sahelian armies to perform according to expectations. Another

aspect of opaque human resource management procedures is the representation within the military of a country’s various communities. For example, in Mali and Niger, some parts of the country are overrepresented within the security forces.

Additionally, the qualifications and experience required for various positions may be minimised by the need to **re-integrate combatants from militias and insurgents** into the government army, a common requirement of the security sector reform dimension of peace agreements. However, the integration of former rebels may actually undermine the overall cohesion of the military. As one Malian army colonel stated: ‘In reality, the FAMA [the Malian armed forces] are made up of different “overlapping armed entities”, rather than “coordinated armed forces”’. In addition, even poor infrastructure can create a lack of cohesion in smaller basic units. For instance, malfunctioning base facilities, such as inadequate housing and food supplies, may result in many soldiers and officers living off the base, even during the formative first months of their service in the army.

Given the security organisations’ opaque approach to human resource management, their organisational charts might not indicate accurately the actual strength, competence and experience of the organisations. Officers in the Malian security forces describe a situation in which the gap between the formal regulations governing hiring and promotion and actual practice is huge. In a military base such as Kati, there should be 5000 men, but mustering a company of 120 soldiers and officers for a European Union Training Mission (EUTM) programme proved impossible. To meet the tally, the company commanding officer had to draw 40 men from two other camps. Moreover, it proved impossible to find officers and NCOs of the needed rank, so lower-ranking substitutes were sent to the training programme instead. After the training concluded, the ‘makeshift’ company was dissolved; the personnel returned to their original units and were never actually deployed together. The Malians believe that the European officers in charge of the EUTM programme turned a blind eye to the problems because they were under pressure to meet their quota of ten rounds of training each year.

To plan and implement SA programmes based on standardised Western models is difficult

when official organisational charts and regulations reveal little about the actual compositions and qualifications of security personnel targeted by these programmes. Hence, SA programmes and sector reforms need to be adjusted to the Sahelian organisational terrain. If they are not, then the SA training might not be appropriate for the recipients and might thus have little or no impact or even adverse consequences. For example, the target unit could come to see SA as a waste of time and become (further) disillusioned with the tasks and missions they are expected to fulfil.

Budget and Payroll

When external investigators look into the efficacy of SA, they typically pay attention to large-scale embezzlement and payroll falsification. Such crimes certainly constitute a problem, as demonstrated by the scandal in Niger. The 17 February 2020 audit report by the Inspectorate General of the Armed Forces of public contracts let by the Ministry of Defense revealed that 76 billion CFA francs (€ 116 million) were embezzled between 2014 and 2019. Improprieties were uncovered in Mali as well. A 2014 report from the Verificateur General (the national Audit Account) found huge sums were diverted from military budgets. The degree to which criminal networks have infiltrated the rank and file of security organisations is not known.

External auditors pay less attention to petty corruption in all its forms, such as the taking of small bribes or the selling off of weapons, munition and equipment. Many believe that, in Mali, the practice of putting “ghost” soldiers on the payroll is widespread. There are also cases in which the responsible officer sold the unit’s fuel and the soldiers had to pay for other means of transport between camps. In some instances, supplies and equipment are locked up to prevent theft, which increases the time needed to ready the units for action. These problems are all related to poor financial control. The various types of corruption are difficult to map, but anecdotal evidence indicates that corruption is widespread within Sahelian security organisations.

The prevalence of these problems means that SA providers must strive to find ways to prevent Sahelian security forces from misappropriating funds and selling equipment, supplies and even weapons and munitions on the black market. Attempts to ‘vaccinate’ SA programmes against

these tendencies result in ineffective and unwieldy control mechanisms that undermine the overall purpose of the SA programmes. EU projects have invested tens of millions of Euros in failed efforts to reform budgetary processes and payroll systems, including information management systems.

Implications and Dilemmas

Issues related to informality represent considerable obstacles to SA provision, especially to larger strategic programmes. Moreover, the programmes may engender adverse consequences, such as corruption, power grabs by the military and consolidation of autocrats' and corrupt politicians' grip on power. More important, however, all social structures rely on some degrees of informality, even Western security organisations, but these will vary between different sectors and organisations and serve different purposes. Put differently, Sahelian security organisations work, but not in the manner Western SA providers expect.

For SA to have the desired impact, its providers must fully acknowledge and address the different aspects of informality within the Sahelian security forces (and in countries elsewhere with similar challenges). SA providers can begin to address informality by thoroughly mapping the actual workings of the targeted security sectors and its norms and expectations, both among its personnel, those they are supposed to protect and the police. The empirical realities of the security sectors in the Sahel need to be the starting point for planning, implementation and monitoring/evaluation of all SA programmes. Resolving the tension between the empirical reality and the expectations and standards of Western SA providers presents a significant challenge. As a result, a further reduction in the large sector-wide reform programmes is probable, as is a continued increase in the focus on the high-intensity training of smaller units. ■

Notes

1. Gates, Robert M. (2010) Helping Others Defend Themselves: The Future of U.S. Security Assistance. *Foreign Affairs* 89(3): 2.
2. See Further Reading for relevant publications related to SA and informality. The main source of data for the broader trends within the Sahel is a set of interviews with security sector personnel in Mali conducted in May 2021 and in Niger in June 2021.
3. Bagayoko et al., (2016): 5.
4. The Cobra special unit was set up in 2019 by the former Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces to fight the jihadist groups that are plaguing the country and has received lots of training from external actors.

Further Reading

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THE PROJECT

This policy brief is part of the project 'Security Force Capacity and Professionalism in the Sahel', funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Defence. The project studies the nature, capacity and professionalism of security forces in Mali and Niger. It aims to generate knowledge on the modalities and implications of security engagement in the Sahel region and to inform decision-making.

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