

Security Force Assistance to Fragile States: A Framework of Analysis

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A major shift in global security provision has occurred. Security Force Assistance (SFA) programs, which involve the training and equipping of a foreign armed force, have become an increasingly common form of intervention into fragile states. These programmes have replaced large-scale combat deployment and policy makers now prefer them over broad and expensive security sector reform. This Special Issue focuses on dynamics that are specific to fragile recipient states with fragmented security forces. In this introduction article we assess the state of the field of SFA studies. We discuss approaches to the study of SFA and propose a framework for research which covers conceptualisation, implementation, and impact of SFA programmes. A key observation emerging from the case studies presented here is that the logic of governance in many of these states relies upon manipulating security sector fragmentation, which can produce outcomes that are directly opposed to SFA providers' intent. Moreover, the proliferation of providers and programmes exacerbates this fragmentation.

Key words: military intervention; armed forces; great power competition; rising powers; train and equip; Burkina Faso; The Gambia; Lebanon; Mali; Niger; Tunisia.

Introduction: Why do we need to study SFA in fragile states?

Security Force Assistance (SFA) programs, which involve the training and equipping of a foreign armed force, have become an increasingly common form of intervention into conflict-prone states and mark a major shift in global security provision. These programmes have replaced large-scale combat deployment and policy makers now generally prefer them over broad and expensive security sector reform projects. This Special Issue examines this growing trend with a focus on the dynamics of SFA programmes in fragile states. While our interest is on the contemporary state of SFA programmes, the practice of militarily more advanced state training and equipping other countries' armed forces is not necessarily novel. Rather it is a phenomenon which has evolved over time in response to shifting global security trends.

Since WWII, such interventions have ranged from large programmes to train entire branches of the security sector to enhance peacetime functionality, to stealthily develop local strike forces for immediate combat operation through small secret missions conducted by intelligence officers and special forces. Throughout the Cold War, the larger train and equip programmes were premised on the idea that assistance would build the capacities of recipient

regimes to defend against internal and external challengers, while serving as proxies in the providers' wider struggles for influence (Gill 2004; Westad 2005).

In the two decades following the end of the Cold War in 1991, the US and other Western powers focused security assistance programmes on fragile states in the Global South, combining weapon supplies with training. There was increased attention to multilateralism and the idea of the West as a champion of values such as democracy, human rights, and free trade. The Rwanda genocide and the wars of former Yugoslavia epitomised this idea of the need for the international community to protect civilians and police regimes around the world. Train and equip programmes became components of ambitious security sector reforms in conflict-ridden states. For instance, in Liberia following the end of the civil war in 2003 the whole army was disbanded and rebuilt from scratch. All 100 000 government soldiers and rebel fighters demobilised and a small home guard type of armed force of 2 000 soldiers was trained by private US security firms (Mohlin 2017; Bøås and Stig 2010).

The shift to the Global War on Terror in 2001 set the stage for another significant change in focus. In the immediate aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, DC, the US and its European allies identified 'ungoverned territories' in fragile and fragmented states as potential refuge for perceived terrorist threats. Their interventions aimed to build strong and capable state security sectors in recipient states. Invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan first required strengthening and support to forces opposing the regimes of Saddam Hussein and Taliban, then, in the next stage, building legitimacy and capacity through reforming and re-building state security forces.

The contemporary concept of SFA took shape amidst the consequences of this initial phase of the Global War on Terror. By 2009 there was strong domestic pressure in the US and its European allies to withdraw as campaigns dragged on and 'victory' as it was imagined in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003 grew more elusive. Best to declare 'the job was done' and that it was now time that Iraq and Afghans 'took responsibility' for their own security. This solution involved intensified train and equip programmes so that foreign troops could withdraw with the aim to leave behind an enhanced state security capacity to fight insurgents (Gates 2010). At the same time, European and US officials wanted states in the global South, especially the North-African and Sahel countries, to rapidly increase their capacities to control migration and organised crime, developments that some of these officials feared would exacerbate political tensions in their own countries' domestic politics. These changes converged with a trend where peacekeeping mandates have required stronger military capabilities (and willingness to use them) of the deployed contingents, and where protection responsibilities have increasingly been delegated to regional institutions such as the African Union (Moe and Geis 2020). Consequently, SFA programmes and related train and equip type of security assistance are ubiquitous in today's relations between Western states and the global South (Biddle et al. 2018).

The Special Issue focuses on this surge in SFA programmes following the failures of massive direct interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and growing concerns among provider governments that developments in fragile states pose security threats to their own countries. As responses to failures of these large-scale international military interventions, SFA programmes have emerged as critical elements of missions with a smaller footprint (Biddle et al. 2018). Policy makers view SFA as lower in material and political costs than a full-scale

intervention, particularly in fragile states. The SFA programmes that occupy the attentions of this Special Issue's contributors are notable for occurring in this context of retreat and repositioning of provider states.

Recent SFA programmes are also taking place alongside broader international interventions, especially in conflict-affected states. Yet, many SFA recipient states are authoritarian or illiberal democracies, which means strengthening their security forces may enhance their repressive capacities and enable authoritarianism (cf. Billerbeck and Tansey 2019; Smith et al. 2020). SFA in these types of domestic political contexts often have low visibility and are nearly absent from public debates. Furthermore, the number of provider states, including bilateral engagements as well as coalition programs, has increased and further complicated the SFA landscape.

While there is a long history of governments using their own soldiers to train and equip armies in other countries, the contemporary practice is notable for its focus on countries designated as “fragile states” and their fragmented security forces. This situation pushes some SFA providers to accept that they cannot build the security forces that doctrine envisions. Instead, providers single out small units for specialist training to make them ‘good enough’ to fight insurgents. Such pragmatism exacerbates the fragmentation of armed forces. At times, providers are drawn into violent competition among the recipient's domestic political factions and play a direct role in further blurring lines between state and “non-state” armed actors. This approach of SFA in fragmented states provides a significant contrast to Security Sector Reform (SSR) based upon the principle of power-sharing and multi-lateral co-ordination (chiefly through the UN) (Day 2020). This builds on a classic problem within SFA: the misalignment of (multiple) recipient interests with provider interests (Porch 2013; Biddle et al. 2018). This Special Issue highlights misalignment and even competition between the multiple providers for SFA to fragile states, a fragmentation among providers that in turn intensifies the fragmentation of the security forces that they assist (Cimini and Hanau-Santini 2021; Dwyer 2021; Marsh and Rolandsen 2021).

Despite the proliferation of SFA programmes, there is limited research on the difficult realities of these programmes in fragile states. This Special Issue addresses this gap with seven case studies based on original field research, which is rare given the sensitivities often surrounding provision of SFA.¹ This is a unique set of articles in terms of the authors' knowledge and access to detailed data about assistance to a broad range of security forces. Each article in the Special Issue focuses on how the impact of SFA programmes is related to the ways in which they are conceptualised and operationalised. Thus, we highlight common unintended consequences and explore the overall effects of this form of assistance.

In the following sections we discuss the definitions of SFA and common themes within fragile states and their relationships with providers. We then examine existing theories that explain the dynamics behind SFA programs and find shortcomings in dominant theories when applied to fragile states. The articles in this Special Issue demonstrate that nuance and alternative approaches are needed to consider the multitude of actors and objectives on both sides of the equation. They generate insights that we use to outline ways to study various stages of SFA provision – from motives to impact. Thus, our aim is that this introduction and the Special Issue will help lay a foundation for future research into SFA and its broader implications.

Defining Security Force Assistance

The study of SFA suffers from the use of a wide range of related and overlapping terms, which vary by country and field of study. A broad range of programmes has produced a dizzying array of technical terms: Train, Advise, Assist (TAA), Advise, Assist and Enable (A2E), Foreign Internal Defense (FID), By, With and Through (BWT), Wide Area Security (WAS), Defense Institution Building (DIB)... and many more (Stoker 2007). NATO uses this definition:

“Security force assistance (SFA) includes all NATO activities that develop and improve, or directly support, the development of local forces and their associated institutions in crisis zones. Local forces comprise indigenous, non-NATO military security forces and will be defined by the North Atlantic Council (NAC).” (NATO 2016).

SFA as it is used here differs from arms supplies in that it includes training and centres on improving operational capacity. In size and public profile, it differs from covert special forces military assistance which are often politically problematic for the provider state. The largest recent SFA programmes have been implemented in Iraq and Afghanistan to boost the national security forces’ capacity to fight insurgents while foreign soldiers go home.

Cutting through this jungle of concepts and definitions, we define SFA as a set of activities of an external actor (provider) equipping and training an armed unit (recipient) with a stated aim to strengthen the recipients’ *operational capacity* and *professionalism*. Operational capacity is most directly addressed when combining training with provision of equipment – more powerful and reliable weapons, and other means to improve facets of military effectiveness such as medical assistance, communications, or reconnaissance. We limit ‘advice’ to the mentoring trainers give to trainees on the battlefield and not to overt direct engagement of ‘trainers’ in combat operations. In practice, the distinction can be blurred, as in Niger in Oct 2017 when four US Special Forces ‘trainers’ were killed in an engagement with fighters of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. The incident highlights the difficulty of precise definitions of SFA, as the provider and recipient treated them as SFA operators, even as events left observers to interpret otherwise.

Professionalism focuses on the ability to use a coercive capability in a consistent manner appropriate to the nature and scale of the threat and with a minimum of collateral damage. Attempts to improve professionalism are often aimed at officer-levels of security forces and can include efforts to impart a distinctive military ethos. In Mali and elsewhere, training has also attempted to inculcate values related to gender equality, democracy, and human rights. Such training is similar to post-war SSR programmes, but, as explained below, this is often done within the context of active operations against insurgents and handling of other immediate large-scale security threats. Some programmes also aim to increase the cohesion of armed forces or broader security apparatus. The unit to be trained may be civilian or military, it may be part of a state apparatus, semi-autonomous or even in some cases be in opposition to a state (as when SFA is directed at rebels, as during the fight against the Islamic State up to 2018).²

This definition is broader in scope than that of Biddle et al. (2018, 90) who describe SFA as ‘help in training, equipping and advising allied or ‘partner’ militaries to enable them to defend themselves.’ Our definition provides additional conceptual space to consider the actual nature of SFA programmes as operationalised on the ground. Although militaries may dominate SFA efforts (as providers and recipients), they are not the only actors involved. Our use of the term *security apparatus* includes the regular armed forces but often also encompasses organisations such as armed and uniformed paramilitary forces, border patrol forces and police, and in some cases, vigilante or civil defence groups that are only loosely aligned with the state. This Special Issue provides examples of traditional SFA effort described by Biddle et al., such as Wilen’s (2021) account of Belgian Special Forces training new Nigerien Special Forces battalions. Other cases represent less conventional actors and goals such as Kalfelis’s (2021) examination of quasi-NGOs training vigilante groups in Burkina Faso. We use *providers* and *recipients* to describe parties directly involved in SFA programmes. The former includes states or organisations that provide training or assistance while the latter receive. We avoid the term ‘host nation’ because different from peace keeping operations, SFA programmes are not hosted since the recipient of the assistance is directly engaged in implementing the programme (the exception might be the provision of training to units only peripherally attached to the state security apparatus).

In contrast to SSR and peacekeeping, SFA programmes typically aim to strengthen the recipient forces’ ability to carry out operations and to deal with large-scale security challenges. Still, train and equip activities can be part of broad security interventions such as international peacekeeping and SSR projects. United Nations and donor countries invest considerable funds in training police officers and soldiers to participate in peacekeeping operations and in training national security forces. But training foreign troops is not the overall goal of peacekeeping and therefore, the Special Issue does not focus on the training of peacekeepers. In missions which are closer to peace enforcement, like AMISOM in Somalia and MINUSMA in Mali, there are clearer similarities between SFA and peacekeeping. Moreover, there is overlap between SFA and reforms of the military, the police and other security institutions that usually follow internal conflict or regime change. Such efforts generally attempt to reform the police and military but also other areas of a state like the judiciary. Training security forces is often one aspect of these programmes, but the wider process aims to restructure state agencies and promote legislation to adhere to norms of good governance. A central aim of many SSR efforts is to improve the accountability and oversight of security organisations by civilian authorities (Jackson 2011). These factors make SFA different than SSR. Yet, articles in this Special Issue by Dwyer (2021) and Cimini and Hanau-Santini (2021) demonstrate how SFA efforts can contribute to wider SSR goals but at times complicate or even undermine them.

SFA in Fragile States

Our interest for this Special Issue is the proliferation of SFA programmes in fragile states. State fragility is a key factor when discussing the provision of SFA, since both the design and impact of such programmes are affected by political dynamics in and between providers and recipients. The term ‘fragile states’ has become a common part of the vocabulary of security policy communities and is regularly the driving factor and justification for the development

of SFA programmes. Yet, it is also a contested term, which has sparked important debates surrounding the value of attaching reductionist labels to states (cf. Grimm, Lemay-Hébert, and Nay 2014; de Siqueira 2017). Our goal is not to definitively categorise states or attempt to quantify fragility. The articles in this special issue each provide the socio-economic, political, and historic context for patterns of insecurity in the case study countries, which is often a neglected aspect of broad fragility indexes (Nay 2013).

With a focus on SFA, we view state fragility as a co-construction between both the provider and recipient. SFA providers regularly define fragility in terms related to their own national interests to help a recipient “in defending against internal and transnational threats to stability” (US Joint Doctrine 1-13: Security Force Assistance 2013, vii). Fragility is further defined in the provider's terms as recipient armed forces that need SFA to become "competent, capable, committed, confident... incorporate principles of good governance... respect human rights...foster transparency", etc. (ibid, x). While the fragile label has been created and applied by Western states, recipients have not been passive in this process (Fisher 2014; Grimm, Lemay-Hébert, and Nay 2014). As the articles in this issue show, the recipient then constructs a second definition of "fragility". The article on Tunisia demonstrates how some SFA recipients define their interests in ways that are genuinely similar to the provider's interests. Many of the other articles reveal that recipients leverage their status as "fragile" in instrumental ways to serve political interests that are very different and can be at odds and even incompatible with the interests of providers. In sum, "fragility" is an outcome of this relationship, and thus the politics is an essential element of the multiple changing definitions of "fragility" as it unfolds in the actual SFA process.

States that are viewed as fragile by SFA providers often have common traits that intensify challenges related to the provision of security assistance. Firstly, fragile states by their very nature have fragmented centres of power which facilitate divided loyalties (Migdal 1988). This is particularly true of their armed forces and security services. In contexts where there is the lack of a Weberian monopoly of legitimate violence, ruling elites instead seek assistance and accommodation with armed actors who are partly or fully independent of the state coercive apparatus (Ayoob 1995; Tapscott 2019). Such environments pose distinctive challenges to civil-military relations where security forces often have unclear mandates and threaten both citizens and the ruling elite (Collier 2007, 131–34; Fitch 1998; First 1970; Talmadge 2015). This often means that SFA takes place amidst struggles between various factions that try to manipulate SFA to strengthen their own interests. Lebanon is one such example (Tholens 2021). Afghanistan is another where assistance to Afghan security forces relieved Afghan officials from having to make hard decisions and use their own scarce resources to protect their own government (Kühn 2019). Fragmented centres of power mean some of the key security actors in a country may be outside the official structure of the security forces, producing hybrid assemblages of state, private and grassroots institutions, with different degrees of co-ordination and friction (Moe and Geis 2020; Bagayoko, Hutchful, and Luckham 2016; Meagher 2012; Ahram 2011).

Kalfelis's (2021) article in this Special Issue deals directly with the conundrum of providing SFA to security forces in states in which parts of the population regards the state's security forces as corrupt and predatory, and where there is little political will to address this problem. Her case study of assistance to vigilante groups in Burkina Faso grapples with the trade-offs in assisting armed groups that enjoy popular support as effective providers of

order, but also commit human rights abuses and challenge state authority. Her article raises the important issue of how to conceptualise SFA provision to groups that are simultaneously grass-roots militias and integrated into the state security apparatus. This is another feature of SFA that can be particularly important while also vexing to academics and policymakers when evaluating these programmes in fragile states. Conversely, SFA programmes only focusing on regular armed forces ignore important security sector actors that might play prominent roles in the host government's actual security strategies.

Secondly, armed forces in fragile states are often viewed with suspicion by political leaders due to a history of military interference into civilian politics. Biddle et al. point out that militaries in unstable states are not 'disinterested defenders of the state' but are instead seen as 'natural rivals and potential threats' (2018, 99). This problem is particularly acute where governments intentionally weaken and fragment armed forces capacities as part of their 'coup-proofing' strategies, but accept SFA resources if they can divert them for other purposes (Knowles and Matissek 2019). SFA programs can then strengthen illiberal leaders, sometimes unbeknownst to the provider, but other times with their implicit knowledge. Dwyer's article (2021) on The Gambia shows examples where specialised units trained under SFA programmes become instruments for regime protection under the control of the incumbent executive. While Gambia is newly democratic, SFA programs risk recreating some of the contentious security dynamics that were central to the previous dictatorial regime. The case is one of several examples throughout this issue of how SFA can exacerbate the problems these programmes are meant to address.

Thirdly, fragile states are often offered and accept multiple SFA programmes from diverse actors that engage in overlapping efforts. While most research has focused on SFA from Western providers, in this Special Issue Seabra (2021) draws attention to the growth of assistance from 'rising powers' such as Brazil, China, and India. He considers whether their record of SFA differs from Western providers and highlights how new providers intensify the scramble for influence among provider countries (cf. Turner and Kühn 2019). This situation can lead to duplicate and uncoordinated efforts that undermine planning, implementation, and basic sharing of information. Even coalitions of SFA providers are not necessarily constructed around a shared primary purpose. This problem is discussed in the cases of The Gambia, Lebanon and Niger in this Special Issue. It is also emphasised in Marsh's and Rolandsen's study (2021) of the bewildering amount of security programmes in Mali, where some SFA providers are willing to take on considerable risks while others are criticised for what recipients consider to be inadequate participation.

Finally, cost and sustainability of SFA programmes is particularly challenging in fragile states. While SFA often is seen as cost-effective (Biddle et al. 2018), operations in very fragile states can be especially costly. The recipient's security forces often lack supporting infrastructure and amenities that providers desire, which adds to the programme budget. Moreover, risky environments combined with low state security capacity lead providers to send their own soldiers or hire contractors to protect trainers. Significant cultural differences, language barriers, and variations in capacity further hinder training, adding to the overall engagement timeframe. For the providers of SFA, the dilemma of sustainability is particularly acute. A long-term commitment is needed to reach the needed level of capacity and professionalism. But many provider states are unwilling to invest in deep and comprehensive engagements, instead opting for shorter-term programmes that Karlin (2018)

shows have much less chance of success. Against this outline of the SFA concept and the fragile state context the following section discusses existing research and shows a way forward for future research.

Researching SFA to fragile states

This Special Issue builds on and contributes to a small but growing field of research interested in train and equip missions. As SFA-programmes proliferated during the 2010s, researchers began calling for systematic research on its effects and offered pioneering work (Schroeder 2010; McInnis and Lucas 2015; Serafino 2016; Watts 2015). Since 2017 research has increased steadily, with accounts of specific cases and comparative studies (Karlin 2018; Santini and Tholens 2018; Neads 2019; Williams 2020; Tull 2019; Henningsen 2019; Enstad 2020). While assistance from the US remains the main focus of much research (Dube and Naidu 2015; Savage and Caverley 2017), in recent years European Union missions have received attention (Palm and Crum 2019; Skeppstroem, Hull Wiklund & Jonsson 2014). In the more theoretical contributions, SFA is considered as a principal-agent relationship in which the provider (principal) uses the provision of SFA as a tool to achieve objectives through the services of a recipient (agent) (Biddle et. al 2018; Rittinger 2017; Burchard and Burgess 2018). This theory is useful when discussing the fundamental logic behind the SFA programmes and to illustrate the challenges with adverse selections (information asymmetry in planning and implementation of SFA programmes) and agency slack (the providers and recipient can have diverging and even opposing objectives).

This use of a principal-agent (PA) theory of SFA needs more nuance, however. SFA programmes vary in size and focus and the dynamics between provider and recipient differ accordingly. There are several inter-related variables to consider: the degree to which narrow self-interest motivates the programme; the comprehensiveness of training given to each individual recipient; and the size of the programme (Henningsen 2019). Dynamics differ between, on the one hand, programmes where special forces provide training to a small elite unit tasked with, for instance, protecting foreigners in a capital against terror attacks; and on the other, large-scale human rights and gender awareness programmes taught by regular army officers. In the former type of programme the principal is motivated and able to reduce impact of adverse selection and control agency slack because there is a higher degree of narrow self-interest involved, and the small size and intensity of the programme makes it easier to monitor compliance and sanction slack.

Principal-agent challenges are different in highly fragile states like Somalia compared to recipients whose armed forces are firmly under the control of an effective and democratically elected government. For example, there is less information asymmetry and a higher degree of interest alignment during SFA across most NATO allies, than there is with Somalia and the EU's training programme. In Somalia, it is very difficult for external providers even to establish the size, operation structure and capacity of the armed forces (Williams 2020). While the EU wants to develop forces to fight piracy, Al-Shabaab insurgents and to establish a strong national armed force to stabilise the country and minimise Somali immigration to Europe (Skeppström et al. 2015), various Somali officials involved in negotiating SFA programmes usually have short-term goals related to building personal political capital and influence through association with the programme. High information

asymmetry and lack of interest alignment in the case of Somalia therefore results in adverse type of principal-agent dynamic.

The lack of cohesiveness on both sides of the equation is evident, not only in the number of providers involved, but also in a proliferation of programmes from different actors. Moreover, providers typically have multiple layers of intermediaries between those conceiving and negotiating the SFA programme and those responsible for managing day-to-day training (Marsh and Rolandsen 2021). This can result in multiple principal-agent dynamics within a programme, especially when a private security firm is tasked with implementation. Even when a provider's security personnel carry out the programme there might be a considerable gap between the politicians' intentions when granting funds to the programme and the way the individual officers interpret the mission (Enstad 2020). A similar gap is often mirrored on the recipient side, especially in states with highly fragmented security sectors. This reduces the political leadership's capacity to co-ordinate SFA provision, as the nature of the principal-agent dynamic varies depending on the individual units' degrees of attachment and loyalty to the central state and their motivation and levels of professionalism: there is a sea of difference between vigilantes of Burkina Faso and the highly trained presidential guard of the Gambia.

In its purest form PA-theory does not account for these three crucial factors: the heterogeneity of programmes; the varying contexts in which they are implemented; and, the lack of cohesiveness of providers (principal) and recipients (agent). It is therefore necessary both to adapt and to supplement this theory. Studies of international organisations might be instructive in this regard for instance when conceptualising multiple vs. collective principals as well as multiple vs. fragmented agents (Graham 2014; Hawkins et al. 2006, 341-62). The contributors to this Special Issue also explore other approaches to conceptualising SFA. In the study of how SFA is carried out in Niger, Wilén uses a social network approach to systematise and analyse observations of the actual programs on the ground. She highlights the importance of social and professional networks, addressing how to group them and to map their relative position to understand the deeper function of their various social and professional points of interaction. This approach reveals how SFA is actually implemented and what is needed for programmes to reach their objectives without adverse consequences. Tholens (2021) and Cimini and Hanau-Santini (2021) apply the (security) assemblage approach in their studies of assistance to border police in Lebanon and to the broader security sector in Tunisia (Abrahamsen and Williams 2010; Higate and Utas 2017). Tholens argues that the relationship between the principal and the agent is fluid and that there is a group of securocrats that transcends the provider/recipient divide. It is within this group that the SFA programme is operationalised.

To provide the nuance of SFA that is often lacking in research on the topic, specific lines of inquiry into SFA are needed to uncover the complex dynamics at play in these programs. What is the intended purpose of a SFA programme; where and how is it carried out, is it legal/ethical; and, does it deliver the stated outcomes? While the application of PA-theory can provide some answers, a set of helpful approaches, such as recent discussions of security assemblages and hybrid security sectors in fragile states, is also needed to answer these questions. If we are to develop the field of SFA research further our research designs must distinguish between objectives and the processes of conceptualisation, motivations, implementation and operationalisation, and impact. In the following we summarise these sub-

categories of research, to which the articles in this Special Issue collectively represent a substantial leap forward and point towards important gaps.

Objectives and Motivations

Analyses of objectives and conceptualisation of SFA programmes commonly see these engagements as a part of the provider's foreign policy toolbox (Paul et al. 2015). Other tools include military intervention, diplomatic sanctions, humanitarian aid, etc. Research from this perspective focuses on the perceived purpose of SFA programmes from perspectives of providers and recipients and how the SFA programmes are conceived and developed. Official documents and interviews, chiefly in provider countries, inform this line of enquiry.

Closer scrutiny of the objectives of SFA programmes reveals puzzles: why do programmes persist when there is glaring evidence that they often do not work according to their stated purpose (Edmunds et al. 2018)? When answering this question, some researchers take stated objectives as the point of departure (Biddle et al. 2018). SFA programs generally lay out specific goals related to improving the capacity and professionalism of a partner's armed forces, but motivations behind these activities are not always so straightforward. Recipients and providers alike may have hidden or underlying agendas outside the scope of official policies and rationales for SFA which can be pursued without the programmes reaching their official goals (Henningsen 2019). Creating long-term customers for security sector hardware has been and remains a motivation for SFA providers (Seabra 2021). Furthermore, it is assumed that by giving assistance and educating security personnel, the donor country will gain goodwill and influence in this form of 'military diplomacy' that is becoming more important as great powers compete for global influence (Sheperd 2017).

The conundrum of motivations is shared with humanitarian aid programmes. These programmes spawn their own interest groups that pressure to continue programmes for purposes other than alleviating crises and lifting people out of poverty (Autesserre 2014). Literature on humanitarian aid and long-term development assistance has a lot to offer the study of SFA. As with sanctions and humanitarian aid, decision-makers can use SFA to placate a domestic audience demanding that officials 'do something' about an undesirable situation. Syria is an instructive example where instead of direct military intervention to oust the Assad-regime, the US and its allies directed train and equip programmes to the armed opposition to trigger political change (Ahram 2011; Baylouny and Mullins 2018). Risa Brooks (2020) uses insights from civil-military relations to show how politicians' need to address domestic concerns can lead planners to underplay and even disregard constraints to programme success, as happened with American SFA in Afghanistan.

For small state providers, symbolic action can be an important objective. Contributions to great powers' SFA programmes – notably the US, but also the EU – signals their loyalty to other powers through political support of their activities in the recipient country. This has been important in US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also when EU member countries contribute to various programmes in African countries (Enstad 2020; Henningsen 2019). Belgium's SFA contributions provide opportunities for Belgian personnel to gain operational experience and deployments that lead to promotions from combat theatres and working in coalitions, while being exposed to a minimum of risk (Wilén 2021). For

poorer countries such as Uganda and Burundi, participation in the AMISOM operation which has a strong SFA component, generates revenue and is a way to manage discontent within the ranks and reward political supporters (Williams 2018). What these motives have in common is that reaching that stated objectives of the SFA programmes is of secondary importance.

Operationalisation and implementation

The study of SFA implementation is more concrete, focused on logistics on the ground and the engagement between trainer and trainee. As contributions to this Special Issue illustrate, fieldwork entailing interviews, focus groups and field observations are key elements of this research. This is the study of the unexpected, of aspirations meeting reality, of a multitude of micro-decisions, of encountering, overcoming, and circumventing cultural barriers for communication and interaction. The implementation of SFA programmes often varies considerably from their initial plans. Data on the operationalisation of SFA is needed to understand the deeper workings of these programmes and the relationships that they are built upon. Direct access to participants in SFA programmes reveals perceptions that affect the nature of the engagements but are absent from planning documents and official evaluations (Tholens 2021).

Close examination of the implementation of SFA programmes reveals the importance of local political contexts and the significance that individual actors play in shaping engagements. These factors are often unanticipated when SFA objectives and plans are drawn up. The in-depth field research that informs the articles in this Special Issue allows for unique insights into the process of implementing SFA. Wilén's research (2021) involved observing Belgian Special Force's training to Niger. She highlights the importance of informal social encounters during deployment in shaping aspects of the training. Dwyer (2021) and Kalfelis (2021) interacted with the recipients of SFA programs and both reveal how evolving political dynamics and inner workings of the recipient armed forces challenged the implementation of SFA programs.

Impact and consequences

The holy grail of much SFA research is to answer the question of whether SFA works or not, and to find ways to improve programmes. Does the provision of SFA make the people in the recipient country feel safer? Does it enable the recipient state to assert control over its territory and populations in an accountable manner? Does SFA improve relations between providers and recipients? Is SFA making the provider states safer and does it buy the provider sway over the recipient? The official goal of most SFA programmes is also related to reducing relevant aspects of state fragility. However, without knowledge of the objectives, motivations, and implementation of a SFA programme it is impossible to establish causal relationships between the provision of SFA and broader trends and changes in the recipient country, the provider, or the relationship between them.

Providers' 'after action reports' and project assessments are meant to critically evaluate SFA programmes. Yet, there is a need for more systematic research investigating broader trends and deeper mechanisms. Brooks (2007), Lockyer (2011) and Talmadge (2015)

all argue that the provision of equipment and training is likely to enhance the military effectiveness of the recipient armed forces. But recent research produces a more nuanced picture. Some scholars note the failure of US-led SFA to develop armed forces capable of defeating domestic non-state opponents in Afghanistan, Somalia, and other states (Reno 2018). In highly fragile states, SFA risks inviting moral hazards and widely diverging long-term strategic goals between donor and recipient (Biddle et al. 2018). Karlin (2017) concludes that the outcome of the programme is influenced by the external environment – whether there is a third-party spoiler present – and the nature of the SFA programme – whether it is superficial or penetrating deep into the organisational structure of the target organisation. A RAND report, which includes an investigation of SFA in Mali, suggests that the long-term impact of SFA programmes may be strengthened if they are designed so that they contribute towards nation building (Watts 2015).

Dealing with immediate security challenges or seeking political influence might negate long-term goals of building a professional security apparatus under democratic control. For example, providers may ignore challenges to implementation that local political contexts present, which many of the contributors to this Special Issue identify as a problem. Tholens (2021) demonstrates the unintended consequences of misreading the local political context in Lebanon. She analyses how SFA alters power relations between the beneficiaries within the Lebanese security sector.

Budget concerns and domestic political pressures in provider countries may drive these programmes as much as concerns about effectiveness. Moreover, if SFA is motivated by a desire to improve relations with the recipient state, or to be a good ally, then the providing state may not place a high priority on the effectiveness of an SFA programme. Mere presence is the real objective and greater effectiveness may involve higher cost or risk to deployed personnel (for example mentoring trainees while on patrol). A desire to cultivate friendly relations with the recipient state may lead the provider to overlook abuses committed by trainees and avoid implementing reforms designed to reduce corruption or improve transparency and accountability (Knowles and Matisek 2020).

In sum, research into SFA effectiveness and impact needs to be more specific in terms of which objectives are measured, recognising that there are multiple agents and instance involved on the provider side, and each may have multiple objectives. Analyses need a high level of precision in terms of specifying level of inquiry. Impact can be measured at the level of the individual recipient, the unit, the targeted security branch, the whole sector, the country or even the region. Different methodological tools will be required depending on which level is chosen. Finally, researchers must distinguish between objectives reached and unintended consequences triggered by SFA: A recipient unit's operational capacity can be enhanced, while a consequence might be that the level of violence in the relevant area increases as their propensity to commit human rights abuses multiplies.

Conclusion: the future agenda for research into SFA in fragile states

This Special Issue points to the central role that fragile states and their politics will play in the real story of SFA. SFA sits at the intersection of important considerations, such as how authority is exercised and the role that outsiders' efforts to increase their coercive capacities

play in that domestic political process. The influence that SFA has in the domestic affairs of these states also means that it plays an increasingly significant role as great powers intensify their competition for influence in these states. The case studies presented here provide vital insight into the interests of various actors, including ones that are not of obvious importance from the point of view of official documents, but are critical actors in how these programmes actually work. Challenges related to SFA and fragmentation of the recipients' security sectors is woven throughout the contributions, and is at the core of its theoretical contribution about how to conceptualise the principal-agent construct that shapes discussions about SFA.

These contributions to the Special Issue point to avenues for further research. For example, the observation that coalitions of providers may participate for varied reasons, including some that undermine the goal of SFA effectiveness, suggests that there is much to be learned about how and why particular provider coalitions form. Marsh's and Rolandsen's overview of fragmented SFA in Mali (2021), for example, contains insights that are useful for thinking about other coalitions such as for peacekeeping. The ostensible function (i.e., effectiveness) may be secondary to the domestic agendas of contributors. Or it could be that networks of policy experts and security officials in these countries share common outlooks and engage in an *ad hoc* trading of favours in pursuit of other objectives (such as a common EU military strategy, post-NATO) that prizes cooperation for cooperation's sake. Indeed, further research is needed to see if SFA in fact empowers groups that are effective at increasing state capacities to control territory and people. This is part of a larger agenda to study pathways out of the fragile state condition. But, these may turn out to be highly coercive and authoritarian pathways in which SFA play unintended parts.

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<https://www.prio.org/Projects/Project/?x=1788>

² Train and equip programmes targeting rebels occur either when rebels acts as quasi-states with consolidated control over territories and populations or when they serve as proxies to check or topple state leaders.