



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

Building Militaries in Fragile States

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1. Introduction: The Pitfalls of Seeking Security on the Cheap

By Jason Fritz

In the years since the United States deployed massive amounts of troops to Iraq and Afghanistan beginning in the early to late 2000s, it has changed tactics, relying upon local security forces to fight its enemies abroad in order to avoid the costs of large-scale military commitments. The United States provides security assistance on every continent except Antarctica, and to every country in the bottom quartile of fragile states, except for Eritrea and Syria.¹ Support to these local forces takes many forms, from simple train-and-equip missions, to acting in an advisory role, to training and educating foreign armies, to institutional and ministerial reform. The U.S. government has invested heavily in building the military capacity of fragile states because it is much cheaper to support developing militaries than it is for the United States to stabilize these countries itself.

Yet, these efforts have produced mixed results at best. Mara Karlin, in her excellent new book, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States*, proposes to explain under what conditions efforts to build partner capacity succeed and fail when the United States is attempting to stabilize a fragile state undergoing civil conflict — specifically, conflict that challenges the government’s monopoly on the use of force. Offering an elegant and parsimonious model, Karlin argues that there are two overarching variables that help a partner military achieve sustainable control over the state: the nature of U.S. involvement and the external threat environment. The former is determined by how the United States organizes the foreign military (for internal or external defense), the U.S. role in selecting key partner military leaders, and the ability of the United States to limit its involvement to assistance only and not become a party to the conflict. The external threat environment describes the role of external actors in the conflict.

¹ “Fragile States Index: The Fund for Peace,” Fund for Peace, accessed March 14, 2019, <http://fundforpeace.org/>. See the “Security Assistance Monitor: A Citizen’s Guide to U.S. Security and Defense Assistance,” at <http://www.securityassistance.org/>, accessed 14 March 2019.

According to Karlin's model, building a partner's military capacity is more likely to be successful — measured as the partner's monopoly of force within its borders — when American involvement is greater and the role of antagonistic external actors is decreased. Thus, when U.S. involvement is low and external antagonism is high, building partner capacity is expected to be a complete failure. The remaining two combinations lead to two different varieties of partial failure: When there is limited antagonistic influence but U.S. efforts are not fully engaged, insufficient progress is made toward securing a monopoly of force for the local government. Conversely, heavy U.S. involvement alongside significant external antagonism result in a spoiler effect where both actors — the United States and the external antagonistic actor — cancel out the effect of the other.

Karlin draws her empirical evidence from a number of historical case studies, relying on unique archival research and interviews. The exemplar case of building partner capacity is Greece in the late 1940s, an intervention in which U.S. military officers wielded great power over the personnel decisions and force structuring in the Greek military as a condition of assistance. Coupled with limited external support for the communist rebels, the U.S. assistance was extremely effective in defeating the insurgency. Alternatively, complete failure in such efforts is exemplified by U.S. intervention in South Vietnam in the late 1950s. South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem refused to allow American interference in military leadership decisions. Instead, his paranoia led him to only appoint officers whose personal loyalty to him was unquestionable. American advisors continued to structure, equip, and train the South Vietnamese military to face external threats, while the insurgency — increasingly backed by North Vietnam — surged to unmanageable levels of capability. The assistance mission was a disaster, leading the United States to become more and more involved with direct military action, the consequences of which need no further discussion here.

Karlin illustrates her model's predictions of partial failure by examining two assistance programs in Lebanon. The first example was during Lebanon's civil war in the early 1980s, when the United States was significantly involved in leadership decisions and force structuring in the country but was ultimately defeated by the destabilizing effects of proxy forces supported by Israel, Iran, and Syria. In this case, antagonistic external actors were able to overcome American attempts to improve the Lebanese military. The second

example is from the subsequent U.S. efforts in the late 2000s after the withdrawal of the Syrian military from Lebanon. In this example, there were fewer outside actors pushing against U.S. efforts, but America failed to affect leadership decisions in the Lebanese military, which was unable to gain or maintain control over all of the state's territory.

Karlin's model is not meant to apply to cases where the United States is a direct combatant in a civil conflict. As she notes, these are rare events, most notably Vietnam (post-1961), Afghanistan (post-2001), and Iraq (post-2003). Karlin explains, "the nature of U.S. programs to strengthen militaries during a massive occupation is harder to disentangle given the numerous other variables that exist."² Nor is her model meant to apply to assistance that is focused on external defense. The measure of success in Karlin's model is the ability to control the state's territory, an outcome which does not apply in cases of state-on-state conflict.

How Much Involvement Is Enough, and for Whom?

In addition to the great explanatory power that Karlin's two-dimensional model provides and the key questions she raises for any policymaker considering embarking on a partner capacity mission, her study provides a great starting point for a suite of additional studies, including exploring how much assistance is enough and how the recipient country's legitimacy affects U.S. effectiveness.

First, given that assistance recipients are often concerned about how much U.S. involvement to accept, it would be invaluable to explore how much U.S. involvement is enough — and no more. There is ample research on the reticence of countries receiving U.S. assistance in appearing to be clients of the American hegemon,³ a point made by each of the reviewers below. A government seen as too cozy with the United States could easily be

² Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 17.

³ David A. Lake, *The Statebuilder's Dilemma: On the Limits of Foreign Intervention* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016). Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1–2, (2018): 89–142, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1307745>.

viewed as not legitimate by its people, endangering its ability to expand and maintain control over the entirety of the state. Understanding the effective limits of U.S. involvement — and how much antagonistic external meddling can be tolerated — is also important to the United States as it would help frame the challenges for individual assistance programs and create expectations about costs for decision-makers, Congress, and the public. It is also important to set expectations with partner governments so they can gauge how much involvement to expect, which, if communicated well, could limit accusations of clientelism to a foreign power.

A second potential path for future research is the addition of a third dimension to Karlin's model, also discussed by Walter Ladwig below: the recipient government's legitimacy. While measuring legitimacy remains a squishy endeavor, the reality is that some governments cannot be helped regardless of how much involvement the United States may offer or how little outside assistance insurgencies receive. Autocratic regimes that undertake coup-proofing measures with their military will not accept American influence on leadership decisions no matter what the United States does: the weakness of their military is essential in maintaining their rule. Karlin's case study in South Vietnam illustrates just this; however, Karlin identified the American advisors as the explanatory variable, not the very nature of Diem's rule, which precluded any serious U.S. involvement. Moreover, in fragile states the government is often created by divvying public goods among warlords or other powerful elites, who would otherwise be in conflict with one another, in order to create a coalition.⁴ Such coalitions are sensitive to changes in the power dynamics resulting from U.S. involvement. Replacing key military leaders may make the military a more capable force, but it degrades the political power structures that undergird the existence of the government. Assistance in this case is doomed to fail, as is the case in Afghanistan.

And while some governments may or may not engage in coup-proofing or in efforts to maintain shaky political coalitions, their actions nevertheless prevent them from building legitimacy despite U.S. involvement in leadership decisions and force structuring. Such

⁴ Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

actions typically entail political exclusion or repression, both of which were on display in Iraq after the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2011. Instances where the recipient government seeking stability may be a major source of fragility warrant the inclusion of a third dimension that considers the nature and actions of the recipient government.

The Unlikelihood of Success

Karlin, an exceptional academic who was also a senior official in the Department of Defense, examines security assistance deftly, with the rigor of a scholar and the practicality of a practitioner. The three reviewers in this roundtable — Walter Ladwig, Tommy Ross, and Loren DeJonge Shulman — each express agreement with Karlin’s model, but remain skeptical in the entire endeavor of building partner militaries. They focus on different points of failure for these missions, but think policymakers would be well served if America’s leaders in the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom analyzed each case according to the questions posed in Karlin’s conclusion. However, if policymakers were to rigorously analyze each mission as Karlin suggests, the reviewers are skeptical that U.S. partners would be up to the task, that the U.S. government is organized to build partner militaries, or that exogenous forces can be adequately deterred. In any of these cases, they expect the United States to be more likely to fail in these missions than not.

Ladwig focuses his review on the recipient government and its propensity to accept outside involvement. He cites a number of studies that identify the partner government itself as the greatest obstacle to achieving state control and subsequent stability. Ladwig identifies that the country offering assistance and the recipient governments may have differing objectives that preclude the unity of effort necessary for deep outside involvement. Additionally, Ladwig points out that because assistance is an inherently political act, it may upset the political coalitions of the state, using the second Lebanon case as an example. Ultimately, Ladwig argues that although Karlin’s book is an excellent start, additional dimensions should also be explored when considering what makes for a successful foray into building partner capacity.

Ross and DeJonge Schulman both acknowledge that building partner capacity has become America’s default response to fragile states, largely because it is cheaper than direct combat

involvement. However, they also question whether the U.S. government is organized to conduct such assistance operations effectively. Ross notes that within the military, foreign assistance is marginalized — the U.S. government has invested little to create the capacity to conduct partner capacity missions at a scale commensurate with demand. Similarly, DeJonge Schulman doubts the ability of policymakers to fully analyze any specific mission adequately, per Karlin’s conclusion, in an environment where the operational tempo often precludes obtaining a rigorous understanding of the political conditions in the country in question. Furthermore, she is concerned about the existence of expertise at the country level, something that is necessary in order for the United States to make deep involvement effective (a point also made by Ross).

Finally, Ross focuses in on the role of external actors more deeply. In his analysis, Karlin’s model treats antagonistic external actors as exogenous to the internal conflict and U.S. influence. This is undoubtedly for the sake of parsimony. But Ross argues that U.S. actions can both limit and inspire external actions, a point that is underexplored in Karlin’s model and case analysis. He notes that the United States has “an underdeveloped suite of tools available to confront the activities of adversarial actors in a third country” and that U.S. planners may not be aware of the few tools that do exist. Ross ultimately proposes this as an additional area of exploration in future research.

Each of the reviewers acknowledges that assistance to foreign militaries has been a key aspect of U.S. security efforts in fragile states for nearly 20 years, and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. And yet, the United States has not had a great record in using that assistance to create stability in states of great strategic interest, particularly in the Middle East and throughout Africa. Karlin’s book provides a practical analytical path to predict the success of such assistance efforts. While scholars can enjoy the elegant model she presents and the lines of research the model uncovers, policymakers would be well advised to read and abide by the principles she lays out.

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2. The Politics of Security Assistance to Fragile States

By Walter C. Ladwig III

Reflecting the change in U.S. security strategy from direct intervention in internal conflicts to working “by, with, and through” local partners to manage internal security challenges, in recent years there has been a marked increase in the academic literature on security force assistance. Mara Karlin’s recent book, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States*, makes a significant contribution to this growing field of study, as well as our understanding of the conditions necessary for American military assistance programs to achieve their objectives. Specifically, the book seeks to understand when, why, and under what circumstances U.S. programs to strengthen partner militaries for internal defense have succeeded. Both during the Cold War and today, military assistance has been a key tool in America’s diplomatic tool kit, yet as Karlin notes, “the U.S. track record for building militaries in fragile state is uneven at best.”⁵

What accounts for this outcome? Blending a scholar’s detachment with the real-world insights of a senior Pentagon official, Karlin concludes that the limited impact of most security assistance programs is the result of a failure to properly conceive of the true scope of the undertaking. All too often, the task of strengthening a partner’s military is seen as a narrow technical undertaking focused on the provision of equipment and training. When these efforts fail to achieve the desired results, the answer is to simply provide *more* equipment and *more* training. Instead, *Building Militaries in Fragile States* contends that training and equipment on their own will only contribute marginally to military effectiveness if the armed forces receiving assistance suffer from poor organization and

⁵ Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 1.

dysfunctional leadership. Consequently, Karlin argues that efforts to transform the recipient military, rather than simply supplying it with material and instruction, are the hallmark of efficacious security assistance missions. Success in this endeavor will be determined by the actions taken by the United States as well as by those of external powers that seek to destabilize the fragile state. In particular, efforts to strengthen the militaries of fragile states will succeed in achieving a monopoly on violence within the country's borders when the following conditions are met:

1) American officials involve themselves in the partner's "sensitive military matters," such as the appointment of senior personnel and the organizational structure of the armed forces;

and

2) The efforts of hostile external powers to bolster insurgents or undermine the fragile state are deterred or moderated.

Conversely, when the United States shies away from trying to influence a state's higher-level defense policies and antagonistic external actors run rampant, security assistance missions are poised for catastrophic failure.

Karlin tests the explanatory power of this two-variable formulation by examining four case studies: U.S. involvement in the Greek Civil War (1947–1949); assistance to the armed forces of South Vietnam between 1956 and 1960; and two distinct efforts to strengthen the Lebanese army, from 1982 to 1984 (Lebanon I) and again from 2005 to 2009 (Lebanon II). She utilizes extensive archival research and copious interviews with senior policymakers to provide an impressive depth of insight into American efforts in each of the cases.

In the most successful of the four assistance efforts examined in Karlin's book, the Joint U.S. Military Assistance and Planning Group under Gen. James Van Fleet exercised considerable influence over the personnel policy and structure of the Greek armed forces. This occurred alongside internecine struggles in the communist world that led Yugoslavia to cut off support for the Communist Party of Greece (Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδας) and

deny their guerrillas sanctuary. The end result was a Greek military that was highly capable of carrying out the foreign internal defense mission and wielded uncontested sovereignty throughout the country's territory. Vietnam sits at the opposite end of the spectrum where the U.S. Military Assistance Group under Gen. Samuel "Hanging Sam" Williams steadfastly focused on the technical aspects of rendering assistance to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and purposely avoided attempts to influence personnel policy or organizational structures of the South Vietnamese military. Moreover, a misplaced focus on preparing South Vietnam's army for interstate warfare did little to develop its capacity to respond to North Vietnam's increasing support for armed guerrillas in the south. The failure of this early security assistance effort set the stage for the subsequent U.S. intervention to bolster a succession of fledgling governments in Saigon. The two cases out of Lebanon demonstrate partial failures, with American efforts to reform the local armed forces countered by external support for opposition armed groups in one case (Lebanon I), and America's failure to capitalize on the diminishing role of antagonistic external actors by intrusively intervening in the sensitive military affairs of the country generating sub-optimal results in the other (Lebanon II).

Not all Countries Are Interested in Cooperation

The real strength of Karlin's contribution is in advancing an analytical framework that focuses on the agency and the actions of the supporting and opposing external powers. In this manner, politics takes center stage in determining the efficacy of security assistance efforts, rather than more mundane technical aspects of the undertaking. Karlin makes a convincing case that American policymakers tend to err by viewing the task of building partner militaries narrowly through the lens of training and equipping the forces, rather than engaging with broader questions of organizational structure and leadership that are so critical to enhancing military effectiveness.⁶ In calling for security assistance efforts to be conceived more broadly, *Building Militaries in Fragile States* makes an important argument.

⁶ For recent works linking these factors and others to military effectiveness, see Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Risa Brooks and Elizabeth Stanley, eds., *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield*

At the same time, however, in privileging the politics and agency of external actors this approach neglects those same factors when it comes to the local partner. Although governments of weak states are sometimes portrayed as being puppets or pawns of major powers, they often prove to be savvy and strategic political actors who can, at times, succeed in advancing their own interests at the expense of their more powerful partners. Consequently, the mere willingness on the part of the United States to involve itself in a partner state's sensitive military affairs is only part of the issue. The local partner's willingness to allow such an intrusion and to accept American guidance is just as important, if not more so. The history of U.S. efforts to train and equip foreign militaries suggests that such compliance cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, there is a strand of literature dating back to the 1970s that identifies America's partner governments as the principal obstacle to developing local militaries for internal security missions.⁷

Although willing to accept U.S. military aid and training, local governments can be resistant to undertaking the kinds of transformational re-organizations that would improve military effectiveness, in part, because they often mistrust their own military. Governments that do not exercise a monopoly on violence within their territory and need significant external assistance to build military capacity typically suffer from a myriad of problems, like economic stagnation, incompetence, lack of legitimacy, abusive treatment of the population, or all of the above. The particular terrorist or insurgent group motivating U.S.

Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Austin Long, *The Soul of Armies: Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Military Culture in the US and UK* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Vipin Narang and Caitlin Talmadge, "Civil-military Pathologies and Defeat in War: Tests Using New Data," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 7 (August 2018): 1379–1405,

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002716684627>; Dan Reiter and William A. Wagstaff, "Leadership and Military Effectiveness," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 14, no. 4 (October 2018): 490–511, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orx003>.

⁷ Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977); D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Benjamin Schwarz, *American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and Illusions of Nation Building* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1991); William E. Odom, *On Internal War: American and Soviet Approaches to Third World Clients and Insurgents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Walter C. Ladwig, III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

involvement in a country's internal security may be just one potential threat to the local regime's hold on power, with additional challenges posed by rival elites or even the armed forces themselves. These different threat perceptions can lead the United States and a partner government to have different policy priorities, which can, in turn, undermine the effectiveness of U.S. security assistance. Consequently, advice to streamline the military chain of command or to appoint senior leaders on the basis of ability rather than political allegiance makes sense in terms of improving military effectiveness, but such actions can also appear reckless, if not downright suicidal, to the government in question. Instead, savvy leaders will ensure that the military is too divided to mount a coup, employ patronage to buy off rival elites, and centralize power in the hands of trusted loyalists, all of which is likely to diminish military effectiveness.⁸

The potential for divergent preferences is amply illustrated in Karlin's "Lebanon II" case, where the United States wanted the Lebanese government to be able to exert control over all of its territory, but the administration in Beirut prioritized maintaining its *modus vivendi* with Hezbollah over exercising complete sovereignty.

When attempting to build military capacity in a fragile state, how likely is it that Washington's preferences and those of a partner government will diverge? Available evidence suggests this will be a fairly common occurrence. As Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker have noted, many of the largest recipients of U.S. security assistance, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sudan, are plagued by corruption, dalliances with terrorist groups, or gross human rights abuses, while other U.S. partners are among the most significant sources of foreign fighters for the so-called Islamic State.⁹ Barbara Elias' study of the demands the United States made to the Iraqi and Afghan governments it was supporting in counterinsurgency efforts found that 50 percent of American requests

⁸ Daniel L. Byman, "Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 79–115, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137517>.

⁹ Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1–2 (2018): 89–142, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1307745>.

for military reforms in Iraq went unfulfilled and that the Afghan government's compliance rate with U.S. suggestions regarding its military strategy was below 25 percent.¹⁰

Indeed, in these two cases local partners pursued domestic policies that subverted U.S. security objectives. An inability to restrain Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian agenda, for example, prevented the military gains from the 2007 surge from being translated into positive political outcomes and laid the foundation for the rise of the Islamic State. In Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai's use of patronage politics was seen as a form of corruption, undercutting public support for the very government that U.S. and NATO forces were trying to assist.

As commander of the U.S. military advisory group, Gen. Van Fleet was clearly right to push the Greek government to cashier ineffective senior officers, restructure its armed forces, and adjust its military doctrines. It is less clear, however, that the United States will often find a government as receptive as the Greeks were to their patron's interventions. Not only did Van Fleet forge a close working relationship with his counterparts, as Karlin recounts, "the Greek government sought to wholly cooperate with the Americans."¹¹ It goes far beyond the remit of Karlin's book to determine why the Greek government was so willing to countenance American intrusion in sensitive military affairs, however, perceptions of the communist insurgency as the primary threat to the regime, coupled with a trust in the loyalty of the armed forces and unity among Greek elites would seem to be likely explanations.

In any event, the situation was far different in South Vietnam where — despite the worsening internal security situation — the Diem government took active steps to limit the effectiveness of the army and ensured that the primary target of the intelligence services was not the growing insurgency, but rather non-communist political dissidents. Why? Because the army and political rivals were seen to be as great a threat to South Vietnam's

¹⁰ Barbara Elias, "The Big Problem of Small Allies: New Data and Theory on Defiant Local Counterinsurgency Partners in Afghanistan and Iraq," *Security Studies* 27, no. 2 (2018): 249, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1386935>.

¹¹ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 36.

government as the Viet Cong. Even if Gen. Williams and his group of military advisors had wished to involve themselves in South Vietnam's sensitive military affairs, would a government that had tightly centralized control over all aspects of defense, security, and economic policy in the office of the president readily welcome the council of American interlocutors? The rich historical detail in the Vietnam case study suggests that Ngo Dinh Diem would have exerted significant energy to thwart such efforts, as he did in fact do in the early 1960s.¹² It may be the case that some future American partners will be as welcoming as the Greeks, however, the history of U.S. security assistance efforts in Vietnam and Lebanon reviewed in this book should disabuse anyone of the expectation that unconditional cooperation will be the norm.

Questions About U.S. Partners

In the conclusion, Karlin outlines eight questions a policymaker should consider before initiating an effort to strengthen the military of a fragile state. Pondering these issues before commencing any security assistance mission will indeed help ensure that such an undertaking takes account of broader political military matters affecting military effectiveness, rather than concentrating narrowly on training and equipping foreign forces. The majority of these questions, however, focus on either the U.S. government or the antagonistic external actor. As the preceding discussion indicates, it is necessary to subject the local partner to the same type of scrutiny. What does the partner government see as its primary security threat? Does it trust the armed forces or see them as a potential rival? Is enhancing the military's effectiveness a key goal for the local regime? Will American involvement in sensitive military affairs be welcomed or resisted? If the answers to these questions point to significant divergences in priorities or preferences between the United States and a partner, should the United States attempt to compel changes in the local government's behavior through rewards or punishments or should it simply walk away? The answer to this latter question will vary from situation to situation, nevertheless, policymakers should give it real consideration before rendering security assistance to a

¹² For more on Ngo Dinh Diem's difficult relationship with his American patrons, see Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

fragile state. That such issues go beyond Karlin's analytical framework is not a critique of *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, but rather an indication of the multi-dimensional challenges posed by security force assistance.

Building effective military organizations can be difficult enough in one's own state. These challenges are only compounded when seeking to enhance the effectiveness of another country's armed forces. Mara Karlin makes an extremely valuable contribution to the growing literature on security force assistance by articulating a two-dimensional framework that can help assess when an effort to build a partner's military is likely to be successful. Well written, deeply researched, and incorporating the perspectives of both a scholar and a practitioner, *Building Militaries in Fragile States* should be widely read by those in the Pentagon, Foggy Bottom, and on Capitol Hill who fund, execute, and oversee America's extensive military assistance programs.

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3. To Remind You of My Love: Reforming the Impulsive Affection of U.S. Efforts to Build Partner Militaries

By Loren DeJonge Schulman

The movie *Downfall*, about the final days of Adolf Hitler, contains a scene that has been turned into countless memes with various subtitles. In the original, Hitler learns that the defeat of Germany is imminent and explodes at his senior generals. My favorite meme is titled, “Hitler Learns About Sequestration”: The madman is informed of the imminence of the enormous budget cut and laments the loss of military superiority, crying “What are we going to do, build partner capacity?”¹³

In her recent book, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States*, Mara Karlin explores America’s history with capacity building missions and considers how it fits a world of limited defense resources. In the eyes of policymakers I have worked with, efforts to build partner capacity lie somewhere between a magical antidote to all of America’s security problems and an inevitable — and less expensive — back-up date. Respected leaders have hailed building the security capacity of U.S. allies and partners as “a key and enduring test of America’s global leadership in the 21st century,”¹⁴ consistent with its history and ideological underpinnings. Put more bluntly, Karlin notes up front that “[t]he United States faces a long-term decline in defense spending going forward” and “U.S. direct military intervention [to bolster fragile states] is politically unacceptable.” Thus, America needs a way to pursue its security interests on the cheap, and “building partner militaries is one key way to do so.”¹⁵

¹³ “Hitler Finds Out About Sequestration,” Youtube, Fiscal Cliff, Nov. 28, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zCDDYVTjLI.

¹⁴ Robert M. Gates, “Remarks as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates,” Nixon Center, Washington, DC, Feb. 24, 2019, <http://archive.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1425>.

¹⁵ Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 4.

Karlin goes on to make the case that the United States needs to learn from how it has pursued this form of security assistance in the past and examine what factors contribute to and take away from its mid-term success. Her takeaways are clear and approachable: “If the United States gets deeply involved in a partner state’s sensitive military affairs and if antagonist external actors play a diminishing role, then the partner state military is more likely to establish internal defense.”¹⁶ Her checklist of questions for policymakers to consider before they engage in such operations in the future are sensible and to the point: What is the purpose of the program, what is the potential for the United States holding influence over the partner military, and how unified is the U.S. vision of the program?¹⁷ Policymakers reading Karlin’s book may feel reassured that this is the how-to guide for intelligently building partner militaries that they have been waiting for, and it is, no doubt, the best and simplest advice I have seen in the literature.

Just Say “No”

However, having spent many of the same years as Karlin in the Pentagon and Situation Room considering how to support partner militaries and how to establish a U.S. policy framework for doing so, I have an alternative takeaway from Karlin’s sophisticated research and analysis:

Don’t do it. Don’t build partner military capacity in vulnerable states. Don’t even think about it unless you are willing to spend an immense amount of time directly involved in a foreign military’s most sensitive decisions. And don’t do it unless you are painfully honest about the goals of the program.

However, if you must engage in such an effort, policymakers should lower their expectations substantially regarding the scope and timeframe that the U.S. program is expected to have.

¹⁶ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 12.

¹⁷ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 201.

Karlin is candid about the high barriers to success in her recommended approach and explores in detail how the United States does not typically pursue capacity-building missions how it ought to: with leaders who are highly invested and who give the necessary time to establish deep involvement in the effort. She takes it as a given, however, that these programs will continue and, thus, should be radically altered or pursued with much less optimistic outlooks than in the past — a logical assessment. But having seen firsthand how policymakers initiate and oversee such programs, I have grown deeply skeptical that they can ever set themselves up for success. Rather than seeing it as a simple handbook, I would rather policymakers view Karlin’s research as a cautionary tale with a high price tag.

Karlin’s lead finding is that programs that aim to build partner militaries in fragile states require that the United States get deeply involved in the partner’s sensitive military affairs — this includes who is appointed within the security apparatus, what those leaders do, how they organize, and more.¹⁸ Intimate involvement, time commitment, deep and ongoing participation by the right senior U.S. personnel, these are all prerequisites to an effective program based on her analysis of the case studies. The cases themselves make for compelling storytelling and Karlin’s extensive personal experience in the policy field shines through in the nuances she identifies as critical learning points for her readers. The importance of persistent, intensive, and even intrusive participation by the United States in these programs is clear in each chapter.

The problem is that such commitment is effectively what U.S. policymakers are hoping to avoid by pursuing such capacity-building programs. “Building partner capacity ... remains important. Whenever possible,” the 2012 Defense Strategy reads, “we will develop innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches to achieve our strategy objectives.”¹⁹ While policymakers are drawn to capacity-building missions as a way to avoid putting U.S. forces at risk, in my experience, they are also attracted to solutions that minimize their own intellectual and calendar resources. Put bluntly: Policymakers often like capacity building because it feels like a press release-worthy way to kick the “risk can” down the road

¹⁸ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 198.

¹⁹ “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense,” Department of Defense, January 2012, http://archive.defense.gov/news/defense_strategic_guidance.pdf.

without a lot of wrangling on their part. What Karlin proposes is not easily delegable by senior policymakers, diplomats, and service-members in the way that a standard train-and-equip program typically is. Nor would it be a cookie cutter, one-size-fits-all approach. Such efforts, particularly if America were to engage in personnel management of the partner country, would regularly demand uncomfortable conversations and negotiations. That may be possible, but serious policymakers should ask themselves if such efforts are realistic or reasonable.

U.S. security sector assistance programs are already hindered by inadequate investment in or distribution of relevant expertise. When such expertise is available, personnel rotations limit the necessary investment in building relationships and intimate familiarity with the partner government that Karlin's suggestions would require.²⁰ Recent reforms — such as the decades-late security force assistance brigades and the regionally aligned forces model introduced by the Army in 2013²¹ — make a small dent in an overwhelming demand for expert personnel, yet they were strongly resisted by the institutional military. Under Karlin's approach, leaders and forces with regional expertise would be under even higher demand because of the high level of sophistication needed to engage partner countries on all elements of their leadership, force structure, and operations. She acknowledges this approach is unsettling because it smacks of colonialism.²² It also requires a partner country with the willingness to tolerate inevitable tensions in this relationship. Karlin writes that “healthy skepticism about the U.S. ability to do all these things is warranted.”²³

Yet, understanding what is required to produce a successful capacity-building mission is often at odds with how the United States goes about deciding to build partner militaries.

²⁰ Noah B. Cooper, “Will the Army’s New Advisory Brigades Get Manning and Intel Right?” *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 5, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/will-the-armys-new-advisory-brigades-get-manning-and-intel-right/>.

²¹ Brian Hamilton, “Army Moves Closer to Establishing First Security Force Assistance Brigade,” U.S. Army, May 18, 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/187991/army_moves_closer_to_establishing_first_security_force_assistance_brigade.

²² Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 199.

²³ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 200.

While such programs have a thousand fathers and mothers, in my experience in government, they are often born out of a crisis in which the U.S. government feels under pressure to do something — anything — to assist or respond, but not overly commit or risk U.S. personnel. In such instances, U.S. senior policymakers expediting these decisions are not spending a lot of time trying to understand the scope of their overall commitment, the long-term costs, and the availability of the right personnel. Nor are they even designing long-term goals. Too often, deputies around the table in the Situation Room are clamoring to just announce some kind of program and show a transport plane offloading brigades and pallets to remind the partner of America's love.

Swimming Against the Tide

Karlin is, of course, right that the U.S. government can and should do better. Her checklist of questions that senior policymakers must ask before initiating such a program is well aligned with the presidential policy directive on U.S. security sector assistance developed over many years (including by the author of this review) in the Obama administration.²⁴ In producing this document, many earnest wonks, such as myself, attempted to apply a systematic logic to initiating, overseeing, evaluating, and ending capacity-building programs — starting with understanding why, exactly, anyone would want to embark on one given the mixed track record. Karlin establishes the broad desired outcome of such missions as the partner state having a more enforced and sustainable monopoly on violence — a logical and sound proposal.²⁵ Realistically, although they do not always admit to it, policymakers consider several reasons for initiating such programs, from building capacity as Karlin proposes, to maintaining and strengthening U.S. access and influence, to enhancing U.S.-partner interoperability, to promoting partner support for U.S. interests.²⁶ Such objectives may align in implementing a capacity-building effort or may wildly diverge

²⁴ “Presidential Policy Directive 23: U.S. Security Sector Assistance Policy [Fact Sheet],” White House, 2013, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=747214>.

²⁵ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 11.

²⁶ Dafna H. Rand and Stephen Tankel, “Security Cooperation & Assistance: Rethinking the Return on Investment,” Center for a New American Security, August 2015, https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS-Report_Security-Cooperation_FINAL.pdf?mtime=20160906081917.

as time goes on. They may also contradict with the objectives of other national security institutions at the outset — typically, the Department of State seeks a long-term, placating effort while the Department of Defense drives a short-term, self-interested program. Policymakers may also lean too heavily on near-term objectives that suit urgent U.S. security interests. Or they may demand the kind of long-term attention that is rare in U.S. foreign policy contexts. While Karlin — and the drafters of the security assistance policy directive — are right to insist on unity of vision at the outset, it must be acknowledged that in practice that does not often happen in U.S. security sector assistance today.²⁷

Karlin closes her book by stating that there are times when it will not be possible to transform a partner's security sector, and in such cases, the United States should either pursue train-and-equip programs while significantly lowering expectations or avoid such programs altogether.²⁸ This is necessary medicine. But the rhetoric around building partner capacity and the urgent need for more train-and-equip programs across the globe over the last two decades suggests this will not be an easy pill to swallow. While I am hopeful Karlin's lessons on the real need for humility in any effort to transform another state will sink in, I recall the eagerness and desperation that surrounded initiating these programs and expanding them over the last two decades. Every year I served in government, the combatant commanders complained to the president or the secretary of defense that they needed to train-and-equip partners more and that the State Department was getting in the way.²⁹ Every month, a partner complained that U.S. efforts were too slow, too underwhelming, too unrelated to their security needs, too bureaucratic. Every year, the solution to these challenges was more, faster, and even more yet — rarely with a consideration of why and to what end. Few considered that there was a reason why the U.S. government built in hurdles to sharing weapons systems and tactical knowledge with other countries. I remain concerned that the United States will not lower its expectations and

²⁷ Ilan Goldenberg, Alice Hunt Friend, Stephen Tankel, and Nicholas A. Heras, "Remodeling Partner Capacity: Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Counterterrorism Security Assistance," Center for a New American Security, November 2016, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS-Report-RemodelingPartnerCapacity-Final.pdf?mtime=20161107141028>.

²⁸ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 202.

²⁹ Thomas K. Livingston, "Building the Capacity of Partner States through Security Force Assistance," Congressional Research Service, May 5, 2011, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R41817.pdf>.

raise its standards for these capacity-building missions, but rather will drive an increasingly hectic pace.

Karlin offers thoughtful ideas for future research that deserve attention, to which I would add two.³⁰ First, in her book she emphasizes the need for the United States to carefully and regularly consider under what conditions it might become a co-combatant with a partner military to address the original security challenge. Reading this book in light of U.S. operations in Yemen and Niger made me wonder: Where does one cross the line from typical assistance to co-combatancy?³¹ U.S. advise and accompany missions surely come close. Put another way, what is the line between providing enablers — logistics, intelligence, fuel — and co-combatancy? And most importantly, does traditional American security assistance, often aimed at short-term U.S. security interests, in any way incentivize these steps toward co-combatancy?

Secondly, it's worth exploring whether some of the most desirable elements of building partner capacity — its relative low cost and small U.S. footprint — have lent themselves to a commensurate level of oversight at both the executive and legislative levels. Each branch has pursued more effective monitoring and evaluation efforts, though it's yet unclear whether this has resulted in fundamental changes to these programs. The true test will be, to paraphrase my old boss Bob Gates, when, if ever, America stops a program due to low return on investment.³²

Building partner military capacity is, at its heart, an optimistic mission set, filled with the American can-do spirit that, with hard work, things can get markedly better. This optimism is well intended, but should be governed by experience. Karlin's book provides those lessons and adds enormously to a literature on capacity building that is far too small, given the place of this mission in U.S. security strategy. With her personal experience, relatable

³⁰ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 197.

³¹ Loren DeJonge Schulman, "Washington Is Never Quite Sure Where It Is at War," *Atlantic*, Nov. 1, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/niger-aumf-war-terrorism/544652/>.

³² Robert M. Gates, "Speech as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates," American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, May 24, 2011, <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1570>.

storytelling, and blunt assessments, her study punches above its concise and readable weight in a way that is approachable to policymakers and vital to scholars.

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4. When Building Militaries Goes Wrong: A Look at Yemen

By Tommy Ross

In September 2014, thousands of Houthi insurgents poured into the streets of Sanaa, Yemen's capital, winning a decisive victory over the Yemeni military they had fought for years in the country's northern provinces. Up to that point, Yemen's government and military had been challenged on two main fronts: by Iranian-backed Houthi militias in the north and by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula terrorists to the east. As the Houthis swept through Sanaa, the United States government — the Yemeni military's chief backer — saw its strategy against the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp's valued proxies and al Qaeda's most effective offshoot crumble in the wreckage.

Yemen's collapse left the United States scrambling to pick up the pieces: Yemen represented a battleground against two threats — al Qaeda and Iran — that topped America's list of national security priorities. Seeing few other options, the United States quickly cast its lot with a coalition of Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, that were mounting a military campaign against the Houthis that is ongoing. In shifting its efforts from building the capacity of the Yemeni military to providing aid and operational support to the Saudi-led coalition, the United States remained engaged, but at a cost to both its objectives and its

principles:³³ The coalition’s poor tactics and disregard for civilian lives have “exacerbated the terrible conditions of Yemen’s civil war, characterized as the ‘worst humanitarian disaster’ in nearly 50 years.”³⁴

America had invested robustly in Yemen’s military leading up to its collapse: Yemen had become the leading recipient of the Defense Department’s “1206” counterterrorism capacity-building assistance program.³⁵ U.S. security assistance programs collectively spent over half a billion dollars to enhance Yemen’s military capacity in the five years (Fiscal Years 2010–2014) leading up to the Houthi victory.³⁶ The U.S. government had also pursued robust diplomatic engagement with Yemeni leaders to drive its national political dialogue and urge military restructuring, so much so that the U.S. ambassador during the period, Gerald Feierstein, was commonly referred to as “Sheikh Feierstein” in Yemeni political circles³⁷. And the United States maintained a substantial military presence in Yemen, with over 100 troops based in the country to pursue counter-terrorism operations and train Yemeni forces.³⁸

On paper, the U.S. effort in Yemen seemed sound: It invested substantial capacity-building resources, sustained diplomatic attention to, and military engagement with, key Yemeni counterparts, maintained consistent effort over several years, and even sought to ground

³³ Nicholas Niarchos, “How the U.S. Is Making the War in Yemen Worse,” *New Yorker*, Jan. 22, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/22/how-the-us-is-making-the-war-in-yemen-worse>.

³⁴ Melissa Dalton and Hijah Shah, “U.S. Support for Saudi Military Operations in Yemen,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 23, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-support-saudi-military-operations-yemen>.

³⁵ Nina Serafino, “Security Assistance Reform: ‘Section 1206’ Background and Issues for Congress,” Congressional Research Service, RS22855, Dec. 8, 2014, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22855.pdf>.

³⁶ “Security Aid Pivot Table: Yemen, 2010–2014,” *Security Assistance Monitor*, <http://securityassistance.org/data/program/military/Yemen/2010/2014/all/Global/>.

³⁷ Tom Finn, “A New President and an ‘American Sheikh’ Deal With Post-Saleh Yemen,” *Time*, Feb. 29, 2012, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2107926-1,00.html>.

³⁸ See Jane Ferguson, “U.S. Military Picks, Trains Yemeni Fighters,” *CNN*, July 14, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/07/13/yemen.training/index.html>. See also Eric Schmitt, “Out of Yemen, U.S. is Hobbled in Terror Fight,” *New York Times*, March 22, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/23/us/politics/out-of-yemen-us-is-hobbled-in-terror-fight.html>.

its approach in a whole-of-government strategy that designed military assistance in concert with civilian capacity-building and humanitarian aid initiatives.³⁹ And yet, the Yemeni military floundered, unable to make meaningful gains against al Qaeda before succumbing to the Houthi advance.

So what went wrong?

Building Militaries in Fragile States, the excellent new volume by Mara Karlin, offers an important analytical lens through which to view efforts like the U.S. military capacity-building initiative in Yemen, as well as a framework to help policymakers avoid similar outcomes in the future. It examines historical cases studies — in post-World War II Greece, 1950s South Vietnam, and two separate periods of engagement in Lebanon — to draw lessons about where U.S. assistance initiatives have failed, what elements have been vital ingredients of success, and what lessons may be most relevant to future initiatives. “When, why, and under what circumstances,” her book asks, “have U.S. efforts to build partner militaries for internal defense succeeded?”⁴⁰

The timeliness and relevance of such a book should be immediately apparent but, in an era of growing unilateralist sentiments and declining aid budgets, perhaps it deserves emphasizing. Even as U.S. national security strategies have shifted focus toward lofty ideas about prevailing in great-power competitions with China and Russia through the development of break-through technologies and the adoption of new ways of warfighting, the fact remains that partner military capacity-building is the go-to strategic option for confronting myriad national security threats around the world. Some form of capacity building occupies a central position in U.S. approaches to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan, Islamic State militants in both Iraq and Syria, Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region of Africa, and al Shabaab in Somalia, as well as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Iranian proxies in Yemen. It is an essential element in the U.S. strategy in Ukraine, and plays an

³⁹ “Uncertain Political and Security Situation Challenges U.S. Efforts to Implement a Comprehensive Strategy in Yemen,” Government Accountability Office, GAO-12-432R, Feb. 29, 2012, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/590/588955.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 1.

important role in countering Chinese aggression in the South China Sea region. In fact, it is hard to find a single going concern in the current U.S. security landscape in which capacity building does not feature prominently. And this picture represents a trend, not an aberration. As Karlin notes,

the United States will surely continue attempting to strengthen partner militaries. The increasingly decentralized international environment and America's weakening global economic position coupled with the proliferation of fragile states and transnational threats will further ensure its reliance on this approach.⁴¹

And yet, despite America's strategic dependence on capacity-building, there is scant evidence that it understands how to do it effectively. Numerous recent studies have highlighted the mixed track record of U.S. capacity-building initiatives, and many have underscored substantial gaps in the policies, doctrine, and best practices shaping these initiatives.⁴² "The theory on strengthening partner militaries in weak states," as Karlin puts it, "can best be described as an 'undeveloped' concept whose history is less positive than its vision."⁴³

Karlin's work makes a valuable contribution toward strengthening the underpinnings of this theory. She argues that two factors will most determine the success or failure of a capacity-building effort: "if the United States gets deeply involved in the partner state's sensitive military affairs, and if antagonistic external actors play a diminishing role, then the partner state military is more likely to establish internal defense."⁴⁴ Unquestionably,

⁴¹ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 9.

⁴² See, for example, Dafna Rand and Stephen Tankel, "Security Cooperation and Assistance: Rethinking the Return on Investment," Center for a New American Security, August 2015, https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS-Report_Security-Cooperation_FINAL.pdf?mtime=20160906081917. See also Rose Jackson, "Untangling the Web: A Blueprint for Reforming American Security Sector Assistance," Open Society Foundations, January 2017, https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS-Report_Security-Cooperation_FINAL.pdf?mtime=20160906081917.

⁴³ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 10.

⁴⁴ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 12, emphasis removed.

other variables — level of effort, duration and consistency, partner stability, program execution — will influence an initiative’s outcome, but Karlin’s two factors are indeed critical, and deserve closer scrutiny.

The Politics of Building Military Capacity

One of the more important insights of Karlin’s work is that building military capacity is fundamentally a political activity: “by emphasizing training and equipment and by distancing itself from key political issues,” the United States “wastes time, effort, and resources.”⁴⁵ In her view, the remedy is for America to become “deeply involved in the partner state military’s sensitive affairs — influencing personnel and organization.” One might conceive of this deep political engagement along two lines: exerting influence on individual partner decisions, such as those relating to personnel assignments, and exhorting or facilitating systemic reforms of the institutional processes, policies, and structures that organize a partner’s defense enterprise.

Karlin’s strong emphasis is on the former, and she carefully documents how U.S. involvement in personnel decisions shaped the outcomes of interventions in Greece, South Vietnam, and Lebanon. For anyone who has observed the success of U.S. military initiatives fluctuate as top leaders in key roles have changed, her observation is intuitively compelling. Yet, a heavy-handed focus on personnel decisions brings risk. As Karlin herself acknowledges, “Such involvement is rife with colonial undertones,” adding that “Sovereign backlash and resentment on the part of the partner state over the intrusive U.S. role may be a challenge.”⁴⁶ Her account of the selection of Gen. Alexander Papagos to lead Greece’s military offers one such example, illustrated by his refusal to accept the job unless the United States committed to taking a diminished role in Greek affairs. Moreover, when the United States is overly involved in personnel decisions, a partner’s responsibility for and accountability to its own chain of command can be undermined, as top leaders risk being seen as U.S. puppets. These risks should not suggest that America avoid opining on

⁴⁵ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 193.

⁴⁶ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 199.

personnel assignments, but its approach must be carefully calibrated based on the broader context of the relationship.

Perhaps a more promising area for the kind of deep engagement Karlin advocates is institutional reform. As her study highlights, institutional reform played a key role in each case study she presents: The United States drove force restructuring, supported operational planning, provided professional military education, and built systemic logistics capacity as ways of building the capabilities of defense institutions to steer, support, and sustain military operations in the field. Bad decisions about how to approach institutional reforms were as consequential in South Vietnam and Lebanon as were good decisions in Greece.

While Karlin often challenges the conceptual foundations and practical outcomes of security sector reform, her views on the importance of organizational considerations converge with lessons emerging from the community of practitioners over the last several years. Practitioners have increasingly recognized the importance of strong political institutions to the success of capacity-building. For example, the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness asserted that, for aid recipients, “The capacity to plan, manage, implement, and account for results of policies and programmes, is critical” to achieving aid objectives — a principle confirmed three years later in the Accra Agenda for Action.⁴⁷ The U.S. Department of Defense has embraced institutional capacity-building as a key element of its own capacity-building activities, at least in theory, in recently issued policy and doctrine.⁴⁸ Yet, while some progress has been made in expanding U.S. attention to strengthening institutions in practice, as a discipline, it remains at the margins of the government’s security sector capacity-building activities.

⁴⁷ *The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness*, 2005, and *The Accra Agenda for Action*, 2009 are available at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/34428351.pdf>.

⁴⁸ See, for example, “Department of Defense Directive 5205.82: Defense Institution Building,” United States Department of Defense, issued Jan. 27, 2016 and updated May 3, 2017, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodd/520582p.pdf>. See also, “Joint Publication 3-20: Security Cooperation,” United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, May 23, 2017, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_20_20172305.pdf.

Indeed, the failure to invest in strengthening institutions was a key contributor to the failure of broader capacity-building efforts in Yemen, an example that illustrates the distinction between influencing sensitive military decisions and driving institutional reform. Without question, the United States engaged on personnel issues, persistently advocating for the removal of ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh's family members, who remained in key defense posts. However, while America welcomed institutional reform efforts to the military made by Saleh's successor, President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, it avoided providing any substantial technical support for those reforms. Moreover, the focus on ousting undesirable personnel crowded out necessary institutional reforms, such as addressing "retirement and rotation of generals, the ghost soldier issue [wherein personnel rosters were inflated with imaginary soldiers to facilitate corruption], and the balancing of units in terms of both size and equipment," leaving Yemen's military "a side-lined shell of an institution."⁴⁹

When it comes to institutional capacity building and influencing partner decision making alike, the United States is unlikely to achieve successful outcomes through phone calls and fly-in meetings. Rather, as Karlin's case studies demonstrate, boots on the ground are essential. A 400-person strong Joint U.S. Military Advisory and Planning Group oversaw engagement in Greece; in South Vietnam, a Military Assistance Advisory Group of nearly 350 personnel was augmented by a Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission of another 350 personnel; in Lebanon, over 100 military personnel were deployed in support of capacity-building efforts at their 1983 peak. The U.S. military conducted the mid-2000s effort in Lebanon, on the other hand, with only a small permanent detachment and without a dedicated senior officer overseeing the effort, leading to a limited effort with limited impact.

This history underscores a key question: How should the United States organize and deploy personnel to guide high-priority capacity-building missions? Currently, outside of contingency environments, the U.S. approach is incoherent and insufficient.

⁴⁹ Florence Gaub, "Whatever Happened to Yemen's Military?" *European Institute for Security Studies*, Issue Brief 9, April 2015, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_9_Yemen.pdf.

The military is neither structured nor paced to meet the demands of deep engagement with partner militaries. Among military services, only the U.S. Army has organized itself to maintain a meaningful contingent dedicated to capacity-building missions despite a consistent global demand. Other services meet requirements on an *ad hoc* basis with personnel who generally lack training for the mission. Even the Army's Security Force Assistance Brigades are poorly suited to address the institutional concerns Karlin prioritizes. They are composed of junior personnel with limited exposure to institutional processes, and are designed to carry out tactical-level, small unit training activities.

Reconsidering how the military is structured to meet demands of high-stakes capacity-building efforts should be an urgent priority for the Defense Department. Military forces have been stretched in recent years by the demands of sustaining two contingency operations while downsizing, and services have sought to streamline their structures rather than take on what they view as new missions or responsibilities. Yet, as discussed above, the capacity-building mission is not new and it is not going away. Approaching this mission with *ad hoc* force-management decisions and insufficient training is a recipe for repeated failure.

Mitigating the Effects of Outside Actors

Karlin also postulates that the success of a capacity-building effort will depend on diminishing external influences, and makes a convincing argument about the importance of this variable in examining her four case studies. This is a point so intuitive as to be almost self-evident: Who could argue that the degree to which U.S. capacity-building efforts are successful will vary according to the degree to which other actors seek to impede them? And yet, it is a point routinely neglected in the planning and execution of capacity-building initiatives.

It is tempting to regard the activity of external actors as a variable beyond America's control. Indeed, Karlin's case studies present little evidence of any actions by America that decreased outside influences, though in some instances U.S. actions may have provoked deeper third-party involvement. Yet, given the importance of this variable in shaping capacity-building outcomes, the United States can hardly afford to ignore it.

No case better illustrates this imperative than Yemen, where America's inability to mitigate the influence of third-party actors, including both allies and antagonists, has condemned capacity-building efforts to failure. Iran has been able to maintain steady support for its Houthi allies that has been robust enough to help them beat back the Yemeni military and withstand the onslaught of the Gulf coalition. Meanwhile, prior to the state's collapse, the U.S. government was never able to effectively coordinate the efforts of other donors and stakeholders with similar objectives, particularly Saudi Arabia. That challenge has become even more acute as the Saudis have undertaken a sustained, and sometimes indiscriminate, military campaign with the help of U.S. equipment and logistical support.

Unfortunately, Yemen looks more like the rule than the exception. The U.S. security assistance enterprise is poorly positioned to address the activities of third-party actors, for two reasons. First, it has historically neglected to invest in understanding the identities, motivations, and tactics of external actors. And second, it lacks sufficient tools to shape their behavior.

Security assistance efforts, historically, have often been planned and executed without adequately assessing the context in which they are to be implemented, to their great detriment. As the Defense Department has recently begun to acknowledge, it is essential that capacity-building efforts begin with detailed assessments of the partner's security environment, including a political economy analysis that identifies external influences and how they operate. Such analysis should not only assess potentially antagonistic influences, but also perceived allies. It is often the case that perceived allies can undermine a capacity-building effort through miscoordination and misunderstanding as much as an antagonist can through more nefarious means.

Grounding capacity-building initiatives in detailed assessments of the partner's security environment creates opportunities to build mitigation measures that address external influences into the initiative's design. Such measures might range from donor coordination strategies to ensure actors with shared interests are on the same page, to concerted efforts to drive out antagonists. Identifying and addressing these concerns from an initiative's

inception will substantially improve its prospects for overcoming the challenges Karlin's book identifies.

A more challenging question is how to diminish antagonistic influences once they are understood. The United States has an underdeveloped suite of tools available to confront the activities of adversarial actors in a third country. Moreover, planners of capacity-building initiatives may lack access to or awareness of those tools that do exist. Karlin's conclusions thus point to an important area for further research: namely, what strategies for mitigating antagonistic external influences have the potential to be successful, what tools are needed to support those strategies, and how can they be integrated into the planning of capacity-building initiatives?

Conclusion

Conditions for building military capacity in a fragile state are rarely ideal, and often cannot be overcome. Karlin's book offers a useful framework for approaching these initiatives in a way that identifies potential challenges from the outset and addresses some of the most common spoilers.

Moreover, it suggests the United States would profit from being cautious about engaging in capacity-building missions at all. When there is little room to exert the necessary influence over a partner, for example, Karlin counsels, "the United States must either recognize that it is pursuing light security sector reform or avoid launching such programs altogether."⁵⁰ Likewise, there is great wisdom in recognizing when positive conditions have changed, cutting one's losses, and walking away. Two of Karlin's case studies — 1950s South Vietnam and 1980s Lebanon — serve as cautionary tales of the risk to American lives posed by an inability to acknowledge failure and an insistence in doubling down.

One important contribution of Karlin's work is to offer a straightforward litmus test to help policymakers assess whether and when it is wise to walk away. Her two leading variables should be posed as questions to policymakers: Is the United States able to sufficiently

⁵⁰ Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 202.

influence partner military decisions and institutional reforms, and can it sufficiently mitigate the hazards posed by external actors? To these can be added Karlin's warning to avoid being drawn in as a co-belligerent. There are sometimes good strategic reasons to overlook these tests, but they should at least provoke a reassessment of policy.

One wonders what it will take to prompt such a reassessment in Yemen. The United States has become a co-belligerent there in a deeply troubling way, enabling massive human rights violations with little apparent ability to influence operational plans or tactics. It remains in close cooperation with Saudi Arabia despite strong evidence pointing to the Saudi leadership's involvement in journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder,⁵¹ continuing indications of widespread civilian casualties caused by coalition operations,⁵² and congressional exhortations that such support be terminated.⁵³ The deep engagement Karlin's book advocates is implausible in Yemen, and external actors are prevalent, diverse, and, in many ways, antagonistic to U.S. interests. As is so often the case, a chorus of voices would meet any policy reassessment with an impassioned warning of threats from al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Iran that might be left behind were America to extricate itself from the conflict. Yet, at some point, as Karlin persistently argues, policies must factor in actual results. And surely the results of the current U.S. policy approach in Yemen cry out for another way.

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⁵¹ Mark Mazetti, "Years Before Killing, Saudi Prince Told Aide He Would Use 'a Bullet' on Jamal Khashoggi," *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/us/politics/khashoggi-mohammed-bin-salman.html>.

⁵² Lee Keath, "Civilian death toll in Yemen mounting despite US assurances," *Associated Press*, Nov. 10, 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/24ee4b33373a41d389e2599c5aa7bbfa>.

⁵³ See Catie Edmondson and Charlie Savage, "House Votes to Halt Aid to Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen," *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/13/us/politics/yemen-war-saudi-arabia.html>. See also Scott Detrow, "Senate Votes To End U.S. Support for War in Yemen, Rebuking Trump and Saudi Arabia," *NPR*, Dec. 12, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/12/676152310/senate-poised-to-vote-to-end-u-s-military-support-for-war-in-yemen>.

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