

Rethinking Security Force Assistance in the Middle East

[Mara Karlin, Lt. Gen. \(Ret.\) James Dubik, USA, and Brig. Gen. Brian J. Mennes, USA](#)

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Read or watch a discussion on how the United States can improve its mixed record of success with train-and-equip programs in the region, including remarks by the Army's director of force management.

On March 16, Mara Karlin, Lt. Gen. (Ret.) James Dubik, and Brig. Gen. Brian Mennes addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Karlin is associate director of the Strategic Studies Program at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Dubik is a senior fellow at the Institute for the Study of War and a professor in Georgetown University's Security Studies Program. Mennes is the director of force management on the U.S. Army Staff. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MARA KARLIN

The United States faces a major global security challenge: a growing number of fragile states cannot maintain internal security. Yet state-building is costly—in terms of blood and treasure—and time consuming. Moreover, Washington is increasingly focused on the threat from high-end competitors such as China and Russia, as described in the recently released National Defense Strategy. It therefore needs to tackle state fragility in a way that is low-cost and not resource intensive. Over the past seventy years, the United States has tried to work "by, with, and through" others to create stability in other states, but its track record is not very good.

My recent book, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, offers two main findings. First, building a military is like all state-building efforts: it is a political activity rather than a technical one. America failed in security force assistance when it viewed such efforts as a narrow technical exercise, avoiding sensitive political issues and eschewing involvement in the partner country's internal affairs. Second, U.S. officials must deal effectively with antagonistic outside actors seeking to undermine these efforts by offering material support or sanctuary to spoilers.

The United States has succeeded in security force assistance when it was deeply involved in all matters pertaining to the partner military's mission, organization, and assignment of personnel, and when it was attentive to outside interference. Success also resulted when unity of vision was achieved between interagency actors in Washington and in the field, when the right people were assigned to the task, and when officials regularly assessed the program, its objectives, and the need for direct U.S. combat involvement.

Sometimes it may not be possible to meet these criteria for success. If the United States chooses to go forward under such circumstances, it must adjust its expectations accordingly, recognizing that the partnership may yield only limited security-sector reform. In some cases this may mean that the costs outweigh the benefits, and that working with the foreign military in question is not worthwhile.

LT. GEN. (RET.) JAMES DUBIK

The U.S. experience in Iraq provides a number of insights into the challenges of security force assistance. When the coalition launched Operation Together Forward II in August 2006 to secure Baghdad against insurgents, two battalions of the Iraqi army refused to move from Mosul to the capital, and much of the force that did deploy was more of a hindrance than a help—many troops did not even fight. And when Operation Charge of the Knights was launched in March 2008 to drive the Mahdi Army out of Basra, one of three Iraqi brigades almost fell apart; it had to be retrained and recommitted to the fight with U.S. advisors. Yet Iraqi forces were eventually able to prevail with significant coalition assistance.

The 2008 operation succeeded where the 2006 operation failed due to the Iraqi army's growth in size, capability, and confidence. By March 2008, Iraqi forces had expanded from 380,000 troops to about 560,000. Size matters when one cannot offset troop shortages with quality leaders, equipment, and training.

In terms of capability, Iraq's training program was shortened from fifteen to ten weeks after Operation Together Forward II, mainly by cutting tasks unrelated to combat. Soldiers then joined up with their leadership and embedded trainers for two to three weeks of live-fire training. Afterward, they deployed into the battlespace as a unit, paired with a partner unit so that soldiers continued to learn as they fought.

As for morale, confidence at the "tip of the spear" is a byproduct of the soldier's confidence in himself, in his training, equipment, and leaders, and in the system that is supposed to support the frontline fighters—to include the political leadership. If each echelon does its job, it creates confidence and combat power.

This period also saw three shifts in the U.S. approach to building the Iraqi army. The first was a shift in focus from training and equipping combat units to building an enterprise—that is, increasing the institutional and ministerial capacity needed to train personnel, procure equipment, develop leaders, and field and support effective units. The second shift was from a transition focus to a security focus. The thinking was that if coalition forces could establish security, the transition to Iraqi leadership would take care of itself. The third shift was a new emphasis on achieving sufficiency. The Iraqis only had to be good enough to beat the enemy in front of them, and could be expected to improve with time as a result of continuous, iterative training—both in the classroom and while operating with U.S. partner units.

As the United States ramped down its train-and-equip efforts in Iraq leading up to withdrawal, it continued to develop institutional and ministerial capacity in order to achieve long-term effects. Unfortunately, these efforts were abandoned in 2011, when the Office of Security Cooperation refocused U.S. efforts on sharpening the tip of the spear. The outcome of this shift once again underscored the fact that training and equipping an army is necessary, but not sufficient for success.

BRIG. GEN. BRIAN MENNES

While creating a partner security force requires a great deal of technical expertise, it must always be done in accordance with a higher strategic and policy purpose. Ideally, the partner force would be aligned with U.S. policy goals, and its security goals would be aligned with the interests of the population they are serving. This, unfortunately, is often not the case.

About a year-and-a-half ago, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Milley recognized that the United States needed to professionalize the way it conducts security force assistance. According to him, U.S. forces should be prepared for combat against peer competitors like Russia, while partner forces should be capable of countering smaller, local threats to security. For this reason, the National Defense Strategy and Secretary of Defense James Mattis have highlighted growing partner capacity. The way the United States is currently sending brigades forward is extremely inefficient; troops are trained for high-end warfare but then go off to do security force assistance tasks for which they are unprepared.

The creation of dedicated Security Force Assistance Brigades was meant to augment the Special Operations Forces that are already conducting security force assistance and experiencing a high operational tempo in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq. The SFABs represent an attempt to create a military organization whose form fits its function.

SFABs are organized like Brigade Combat Teams, but only leadership positions are filled with experienced officers and NCOs. Each SFAB has 816 personnel, organized into 12-man advisor teams. They train exclusively on the security force assistance mission, receiving language and cultural training to help them perform more effectively with their foreign counterparts. The goal is to increase both U.S. capacity and quality when conducting the assistance mission. At the same time, this arrangement preserves the combat readiness of U.S. maneuver brigades, which will no longer be sent forward to conduct security force assistance. If needed, however, SFABs can be expanded in a crisis or war, and their assigned cadre, when augmented with additional personnel and equipment, could form the basis for more Brigade Combat Teams.

As Carl von Clausewitz said, one needs to understand the peace one hopes to create before going to war. In this case, the United States needs a roadmap for how the security forces it is training and the forces they are fighting will relate to each other once the war is over. The answer is not always clear, but this question needs to be part of the discussion.

This summary was prepared by Erika Naegeli.