Twenty Years of Externally Promoted Security Assistance in Iraq: Changing Approaches and Their Limits

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ABSTRACT
Iraq adds to the poor track record of externally promoted security assistance in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. By taking a long-term perspective, this article examines and problematizes the shift in paradigms from Security Sector Reforms (SSR) as a pillar of the liberal statebuilding intervention in Iraq to Security Force Assistance (SFA) as the remedy that the post-interventionist turn endorsed since the 2010s. In discussing this shift, the article also shows that in successive phases of externally promoted security assistance, different notions of security prevailed. As the intervention unfolded, human security instead of guiding SSR was quickly put to the side, as donors' security (2003–2008) and later regime's security (2009–mid 2014) prevailed. The late 2014–2019 prevalence of SFA in Iraq was instead characterized by the disjuncture of security assistance from other governance aspects in the country while it later became part of a tense geopolitical context (2020–2023). Overall, Iraq proves to be a laboratory for testing out concepts relating to security whereby external actors and factors are key to explaining the shift in security assistance, while internal local needs for security are largely ignored.

Introduction

Any reflection on 20 years since the 2003 United States (US)-led invasion and occupation of Iraq must consider how security conceptions, policies, and practices have influenced the evolution of international engagement in Iraq and, in turn, how Iraq has contributed to shifting security conceptions, policies, and practices. Iraq, together with Afghanistan, formed part of the heyday of the liberal peace agenda, becoming laboratories where concepts (including security) were tested and applied often in a reactionary mode against local dynamics but with little consideration for local needs in the planning. Resultingly, external security promoters (US, European states,

North Atlantic Treaty Organization – NATO, or the European Union – EU) have contributed to an insecure environment where local security providers have pursued different logics of security and, by doing so, created a security environment far from what was envisioned in 2003 – the Weberian monopoly over the legitimate use of force. Iraq has instead recently been described as dominated by the hybridization of armed actors of a very different nature (e.g. state/non-state; formal/informal; national/international) challenging traditional conceptions of security.[1]

Utilizing literatures on liberal peace, statebuilding, and stabilization, this article asks what role Iraq played in the international paradigm shift from liberal peace to stabilization. And on the other hand, what role this shift had on security assistance in Iraq. By taking a 20-year period of reflection on such an important case study for the (demise of the) liberal peace agenda, this article provides a unique and original empirical investigation of the development of intervention along with the development of intervention thinking. Additionally, the article advances the literature on security assistance, and international assistance more generally, while at the same time mapping the development of Iraq's security structures over a 20-year period. In doing so the article also poses the question of what security is to the international actors engaged in security assistance, pushing back against the projected vision of human security being at the fore.

By focusing on the US as the leading actor, this article analyses external security assistance in Iraq in continuation with the broader liberal statebuilding intervention. The decision of the US to disband the Iraqi army (see below) set the tone for the initial security engagement in the country, by setting a pattern of making up policies 'on the go' that characterized security assistance until 2011, the year of US troop withdrawal. Nevertheless, security assistance in Iraq continued when, more recently, the paradigm of liberal statebuilding has been disproved and rejected internationally. As far as the international community has downplayed its commitment in conflict-affected contexts, it has not fully renounced its military role, albeit played mostly remotely.[2] While Security Sector Reform (SSR) is anchored in the liberal statebuilding paradigm, aiming at a transformational objective, Security Force Assistance (SFA) is associated with stabilization, where stability is favoured over matters concerning governance. In both paradigms, as this article demonstrates, a pattern of external, rather than internal, needs guided the shift from one approach to the other.

In discussing the shift from SSR to SFA, this article examines the limits of security assistance in Iraq across four periods, coinciding with first, the

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[1]Sayigh, "Hybridizing Security"; Ahram, "Hybrid Security, Frozen Conflicts, and Peace in MENA"; Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units: A Hybrid Actor in a Hybrid State."
[2]Knowles and Watson, 'Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres'.

US-led invasion and occupation followed by the civil war period (2003–2008), second, the consolidation of state power under Prime Minister Maliki until the catastrophic rise of the self-styled Islamic State – IS (2009–2014), third, the battle against IS (2014–2019), and finally, the return to security assistance amidst growing popular contestation (2020–2023/present). The choice of further temporalization (within the 20-year reflection) is justified by the fact that each of the selected periods shows tension between differently articulated conceptions of security. While other studies have focused mostly on domestic conditions,[3] this article takes as a lens of analysis external (predominantly US) patterns of security assistance. By doing so, it does not intend to dismiss the agency of local actors in the unfolding of such processes, but it analytically limits the scope of the investigation to external security conceptions, policies, and practices.

Overall, the article demonstrates that if in theory SSR was meant to create the foundations for guaranteeing human security, it failed in this objective. Rather, security assistance in Iraq prioritized donors' security in the initial period (2003–2008), and it later aligned to serve the regime's security under the premiership of Nuri al-Maliki (2009–2014). The prevailing approach to security assistance in the 2014–2019 period was, instead, challenged by a tense geopolitical context coupled with a disjuncture of security assistance from the overall governance in the country.[4] At the same time, alongside SSR was a separate, but interlinked counterterrorism mission, which, laid the path for the implementation of policies embedded in SFA. The full formulation of the move from SSR to SFA materialized in the 2020–2023 period, which saw a readjustment of the external actors promoting security assistance, as the US began refocusing, at least partially, attention away from the Middle East. However, the case of Iraq suggests that while SSR and SFA do respond to different logics, their implementation is less dichotomous than expected. As SFA was introduced early on and in parallel to SSR in the US approach to security assistance, it may have also helped its mainstreaming across time and contexts.

This article first provides a reading of the differences between SSR and SFA. It then connects the analysis of the prevailing approaches to security assistance in Iraq over the last 20 years with an interrogation of the notions of security that prevailed over time. By providing a long-term reading of security assistance in Iraq, the article argues first, that across the periods identified, human security – which has been omnipresent at least in theory and rhetoric among security assistance providers – has constantly been dismissed or set aside for the pursuing of 'other securities' amidst a multiplicity of interpretations and an inevitably plural

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[3]Al-Marashi, "Demobilization Minus Disarmament and Reintegration."
[4]Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 67.

understanding of security. Secondly, it concludes by pointing out the relevance of external factors over internal ones in explaining the shift to security assistance. The article builds on the authors' academic engagement in Iraq since 2009, and meetings and interviews with key actors that have provided and received security assistance since the invasion and occupation in 2003.

Changing Paradigms and Notions of Security

While there is no definitive definition for SSR, nor a common approach to it, it generally includes policies and programmes targeting a country's security apparatus (the army, the police, and the judiciary) and its overall governance with the twofold objective of restoring the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force and guaranteeing that the security apparatus follows the rule of law, responds to a civilian authority, and is accountable to the people.[5] Within the broader spectrum of policies informing international interventions in conflict-affected contexts, SSR has gained centrality based on the rationale that a responsive and transparent security apparatus is a key pillar of a consolidated and functioning state capable of ensuring national security without harming the population.[6]

The linearity of the view linking SSR to (successful) statebuilding has been contested mostly on the grounds of the poor track record of security assistance in different contexts. From a problem-solving point of view, the academic and policy literature has found the limits of SSR in issues related to sequencing, coordination of goals and resources among donors and between donors and recipients, local ownership, financing, and contextual assessment.[7] From a critical perspective, other scholars have interrogated the very assumptions and model upon which SSR is built, as well as the security objectives it pursues and the foundations of the relationships it creates.[8] What these critiques highlight, is that SSR often follows donors' priorities, serving external actors' visions and security needs, rather than local ones. Additionally, the technical approach guiding the implementation of SSR has paid little to no attention to local power relations.[9] Overall, these critiques point to the fact that SSR not only reflects, but also promotes a state-centric view of security designed upon a Weberian ideal-typical state whereas

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[5]See for instance, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF)'s website, available at: https://securitysectorintegrity.com/security-sector-governance/security-sector-reform/; Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 65.

[6]Jackson, "Security Sector Reform and State Building"; UNSC, "S/RES/2151."

[7]Detzner, "Modern Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform in Africa"; Eckhard, *The Challenges and Lessons Learned in Supporting Security Sector Reform*; Gordon, "Security Sector Reform, Statebuilding and Local Ownership"; Schnabel and Born, *Security Sector Reform: Narrowing the Gap between Theory and Practice.*

[8]Jackson, "Introduction"; Ansorg and Gordon, "Co-Operation, Contestation and Complexity in Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform."

[9]Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 66.

the reality on the ground in many conflict-affected contexts is often at odds with Western models of security.[10]

If SSR is central to liberal statebuilding interventions, a recent trend in the literature has moved beyond SSR to reflect a changed approach to security assistance in line with the 'post-interventionist' turn experienced since the 2010s.[11] Within the broader spectrum of terms, SFA is among the most used to signal the gap with SSR. As Rolandsen, Dwyer, and Reno define it, SFA is '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'.[12] Within the current understandings of most donors, and in line with the overall paradigm shift that occurred in the twenty-first century concerning the role of the international community in conflict-affected contexts, the 'training and equipping' in SFA prevails over the 'reform' component of SSR; large scale deployments of military and civilian personnel are replaced by a small ad-hoc (mostly military) presence; and effectiveness (capacity and professionalism) predominates over respect for human rights and rule of law and more generally the governance of security in receiving states. Overall, SFA reflects an understanding of security geared towards the 'self-policing of security risks' on behalf of the society intervened upon, rather than towards an international model that aspires to provide solutions to security problems.[13]

Like its predecessor, the new approach to security assistance is not free from criticism. In common with SSR, the academic literature criticizes SFA for donors' competition and mismatch with local realities and the favouring of technical over political solutions. The pragmatism that guides SFA has been accused of potentially 'exacerbat[ing] the fragmentation of armed forces' and 'further blurring lines between state and "non-state" armed actor'.[14] Moreover, the cost-efficient calculation behind SFA is counterweighted by less transparent remote missions.[15] Additionally, the relationship between SFA and peacebuilding is ambiguous, as external providers target military assistance at armed groups with little concern for their stance towards society, the state, and their political relations.[16] More importantly, perhaps, as Matisek and Fowler recognize, SFA endorses 'the over-securitization of nation- and state-building in the twenty-first century via military assistance'.[17]

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[10]Costantini, *Statebuilding in the Middle East and North Africa*.
[11]Chandler, "Resilience and Human Security"; Belloni and Costantini, "From Liberal Statebuilding to Counterinsurgency and Stabilization."
[12]"Security Force Assistance to Fragile States," 566.
[13]Chandler, "New Narratives of International Security Governance," 2.
[14]Rolandsen, Dwyer, and Reno, "Security Force Assistance to Fragile States," 565.
[15]Burgos, "Pushing the Easy Button."
[16]Knowles and Matisek, "Western Security Force Assistance in Weak States."
[17]"The Paradox of Security Force Assistance after the Rise and Fall of the Islamic State in Syria–Iraq," 123.

The progressive shift from SSR and SFA is useful to trace the extent to which over the last 20 years understandings of security and the practice of security assistance have swung from one interpretation to the next, with only few cornerstones, the most important of which being, perhaps, counter-terrorism. However, too rigid a distinction between the two may be counter-productive: elements of SFA can be traced back to the period when SSR predominated and the opposite is true, as this article illustrates by taking a long-term perspective on this area of intervention in Iraq. Additionally, some actors have more consistently than others operated according to the logic of SFA (the US), rather than SSR (the UN or the EU) across time. What is more, even within each approach, the search for coherence clashes with the reactionary, changing, and experimental nature of such interventions. This article draws on the case of Iraq to show precisely the extent to which both approaches have seen security assistance responding and reacting to various, and at times contesting, formulations of security.

2003–2008: Security Assistance and Statebuilding

In between the launch of the intervention in Afghanistan and the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the US Security Strategy of 2002 (followed by the EU Strategy in 2003) marked a rupture with the Cold War's prevalent under-standing of security, namely, away from the threat of foreign attacks by strong states to include weak, fragile or failed states as the key threat to inter-national peace and security.[18] While not explicitly mentioned, the 2002 US Security Strategy is permeated by the centrality of human security, the novel and broader interpretation of security introduced by the UN in 1994, shifting the attention from the state to the individual.[19] Thus, the strat-egy identifies the 'nonnegotiable demands of human dignity', in 'the rule of law; limits on the absolute power of the state; free speech; freedom of worship; equal justice; respect for women; religious and ethnic tolerance; and respect for private property'.[20] The US, as the self-proclaimed champion of human dignity, utilized the language of universality and morality in guiding its role in security assistance. Following this reasoning, the invasion of Iraq was presented in a universalistic and morally based tone, the regime of Saddam Hussein constituting an international threat, not only to the US.[21]

Attempts at rebuilding the Iraqi security sector were part and parcel of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq from its very beginning. The first measures of the US-led *Coalition of the Willing* included disbanding the Iraqi army as well as the Iraqi intelligence infrastructure (the Coalition

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[18]Fukuyama, *State Building: Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century*.
[19]UN, *Human Development Report*.
[20]White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 3.
[21]https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020912-1.html.

Provisional Authority's Order no. 2, 23 May 2003). The dissolution of the many security entities that granted the regime of Saddam Hussein brutal control over the population was meant to begin the reconstruction of Iraq with a clean slate. However, it soon appeared clear that the order left the country without a military apparatus capable of defending it from external threats; it let loose more than one million armed men without the means to support their families;[22] and, as many of these soldiers came from the four Sunni-majority provinces, it unleashed concentrated pockets of armed actors ready to resist the US' policies. Moreover, many of the disbanded military became key members of the various iterations of IS over the years.[23] The military disbandment was functional to the task of rebuilding it completely together with the overall governance of the security sector.[24] The Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction reports that 'from 2003 to 2012, the United States obligated $27.30 billion and expended $26.16 billion in this reconstruction area'.[25] However, Major-General Petraeus, who was in charge of Mosul at the time, argued these policies prevented him from implementing a process of state-building and helped to radicalize the population.

SSR failed to meet the objective of building a secure Iraq for its people, despite the financial and political resources dedicated to reforming its security apparatus being vast. Firstly, local security dynamics conditioned the unfolding of SSR. In 2003–2004, a Shia-centered insurgency against the occupying forces in part of Baghdad and the south of the country and a Sunni-centered insurgency operating mostly in Baghdad, Falluja, and Ramadi engulfed the country. The complexity of the situation is clearly conveyed by General Petraeus' comment on SSR in Iraq:

> helping organize, train and equip nearly a quarter-million of Iraq's security forces is a daunting task. Doing so in the middle of a tough insurgency increases the challenge enormously, making the mission akin to repairing an aircraft while in flight – and while being shot at.[26]

The security situation in Iraq not only slowed down the process, but also constrained the possibilities for the reform of the security sector. For instance, the US favoured a militarized counterinsurgency approach over a community-based one when dealing with the reform of the Iraqi police as this could help US forces against the local insurgency.[27]

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[22]Pollack, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Failure in Iraq," 8.
[23]O'Driscoll, "Autonomy Impaired."
[24]Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 68.
[25]SIGIR, *Learning from Iraq. A Final Report*, 92; NATO, "Relations with Iraq." In addition to the US, who remained the leading actor operating in SSR, NATO at the request of the Iraqi Interim Government established a Training Mission (NTM-I) in 2004, dedicated to the training and mentoring of military and police personnel. Over the period 2004–2011, NATO allies reached 5000 military personnel and 10.000 police personnel, with over 17.5 million in trust fund contributions.
[26]Petraeus, "Battling for Iraq."
[27]Perito, *The Iraqi Federal Police*; Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic."

Secondly, the US favoured a 'train and equip' approach, anticipating the SFA trend that consolidated following 2014, rather than one aimed at strengthening the rule of law (i.e. parliamentary and independent oversight, inclusive governance, transparency, accountability).[28] As part of the counter-insurgency strategy, external support was channelled towards building the numerical capacity of the trained forces at the expense of their motivation and preparedness and the overall governance.[29] Thus, in April 2004, when called to confront Sunni insurgents in Falluja, Ramadi, Samarra, and Tikrit, and the *Jaish al-Mahdi* in Najaf and Sadr city (an impoverished Baghdad neighbourhood), the Iraqi security forces 'failed to turn up for duty, declared neutrality and refused to engage the insurgents, or joined them to fight on the same side'.[30] Even though the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) had a reported strength of 560,000 personnel as the transfer of responsibility to the Government of Iraq approached, they were still relying on intelligence, logistics, and sustainment provided for by external actors, foremost the US military forces.[31]

Third, tactical objectives prevailed over strategic ones in guiding US-led security assistance in Iraq. In parallel to the deployment of an additional 25,000 troops as part of the 'surge' (January 2007–July 2008),[32] the US relied upon non-state security providers in order to defeat the Sunni insurgency in central Iraq. In al-Anbar governorate, Sunni tribal forces (also known as the Sons of Iraq) played a key role in retaking ground from the insurgents. Through the Commander's Emergency Response Program fund, the US initially paid for this 100,000 strong force, which was supposed to be then reintegrated into the formal security apparatus, something that never occurred (see below).[33] More generally, the presence of non-state security providers was pervasive in the country, despite the 2005 Iraqi Constitution explicitly prohibiting the formation of militias outside the framework of the armed forces (art.9). Some of them were directly confronting the occupying forces (such as *Jaish al-Mahdi*); others formally joined the security apparatus but continued to respond to a separate authority (such as the *Badr Organization*); and the Kurdish *Peshmerga* operated in yet another grey area, between federal and regional security structures.[34]

The reliance on militias was key in combatting the insurgents and morphing terrorist groups in the country. However, predating a criticism

[28]Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 69.

[29]Sedra, "Security Sector Reform in Afghanistan and Iraq," 8.

[30]Herring and Rangwala, *Iraq in Fragments: The Occupation and Its Legacy*, 197.

[31]SIGIR, *Learning from Iraq. A Final Report*, 94; Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 70.

[32]In January 2007, former US President George W. Bush ordered the deployment of additional American troops in Iraq in order to deal with an increasingly violent insurgency.

[33]Benraad, "Iraq's Tribal 'Sahwa'"; Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 70.

[34]Al-Nidawi and Knights, *Militias in Iraq's Security Forces*.

later targeted at SFA, it was detrimental to the strategic objective of having a functioning state-centred, civilian-led, and norm-abiding security apparatus. The National Police provides a striking example of the reach of the militias into the formal security apparatus. Indeed, Shia militias managed to infiltrate the National Police. As such, rather than being a check on it, it became complicit to the sectarian violence that escalated in the years 2005–2006.[35] This occurred under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior, who skewed the recruitment process based on political and sectarian appointments. As a result of the abuses against the civilian population, the National Police lost its legitimacy and had to undergo a renewed process of reforms, including being renamed the Iraqi Federal Police.[36]

Human security was supposed to guide the largest statebuilding intervention since the end of World War II: focusing on the individual but identifying the state as among its guarantors, creating the condition for human security to prosper justified the overall liberal statebuilding intervention. The 29,500 civilian deaths from violence in 2006 alone, one of the worst years in Iraq, marked the distance from the acclaimed 'freedom from fear' while the blatant delay in reconstruction did not meet the prospect of 'freedom from want'. The experience of Iraq accompanied and fed a larger scholarly debate questioning the centrality of human security and its utility in guiding policies and actions.[37] In Iraq, human security soon clashed with the imperative of guaranteeing the very survival of the Iraqi state and the interests of the US, threatened by a growing insurgency and terrorism. SSR, which in theory was aimed at linking the imperative of an efficient state and the aspiration of human security, ended up having the aim of securing the Iraqi state and its continuation through formal institutions, at the expense of the relationship with society, a gap that continued to grow in the following years. Moreover, despite having an SSR doctrine, the US began following SFA principles in seeking to bring forward a declaration of victory, leading, however, to strategic incoherence.[38]

2009–2014: Security Assistance in Between Human and Regime Security

In 2008 the Iraqi Security Forces (together with Coalition-led military transition teams and supported by Coalition and Iraqi airstrikes) launched Operation *Saulat al-Fursan* (Charge of the Knights) in al-Basrah against the Shia insurgency led by the *Jaish al-Mahdi*. The dual success of the *Sahwa*

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[35]Perito, *The Iraqi Federal Police*, 6.
[36]Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 71.
[37]Paris, "Human Security"; Paris, "Still an Inscrutable Concept"; Krause, "The Key to a Powerful Agenda, If Properly Delimited"; Duffield and Waddell, "Securing Humans in a Dangerous World"; Chandler, "Review Essay."
[38]Gentile, "A Strategy of Tactics."

movement in al-Anbar and of the operation in al-Basrah consolidated the control of the Iraqi government over its territory and strengthened the premiership of Nuri al-Maliki (2006–2014). Under the US' SSR plan the *Sahwa* forces were to be integrated into the Iraqi Security Forces, however, this plan clashed against local interests, and following US withdrawal, Maliki effectively dissolved the forces with those that were integrated given low-level positions. At the same time, US troops were first redeployed to military bases, and then began withdrawing from the country, with the last troops leaving Iraq in December 2011,[39] as foreseen by the US-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement approved by the Iraqi Parliament in November 2008. The move reflected al-Maliki's growing hostility towards the presence of foreign troops in the country as well as the US' search for an exit strategy. However, externally promoted SSR was far from having reached the objective of having a functioning security sector in place.[40] On the contrary, the withdrawal of US troops left the country with 'no clear direction in the transition to police primacy for the provision of internal security'.[41]

While the fragility of the Iraqi state persisted and was particularly evident in the security sector, it was no longer a sufficient condition for maintaining a large intervening presence in the country, after years of inconclusive financial and political commitments. At the same time, state fragility became instrumental for domestic advocates of regime security. Indeed, state and regime security have been quite distinct objectives in Iraq since 2003. Threatened internally or externally based on material and/or ideational factors, regime security coalesced around an elite pact that proved resilient to cyclical shocks in the country, including the dramatic falls in oil prices in 2014 and 2020; the rise of IS, the round of protests in 2019, or the Covid-19 pandemic. In such circumstances, local political actors manipulated SSR so that state weakness could turn into regime strength. This was particularly evident during al-Maliki's mandates, albeit the country has progressively seen a similar logic of centralizing security around the figure of the General Commander, corresponding to the Prime Minister, irrespective of changing individuals.

The withdrawal of US forces coincided with the consolidation of al-Maliki's premiership, with clear signs of his authoritarian tendencies emerging.[42] SSR went from being led by the US in the period 2003–2008 to being dictated by al-Maliki and his close associates and served mostly the objective of centralizing control around himself, positioning regime security at the

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[39] A small number of US military personnel remained in the country under Chief of Mission authority operating under the Office of Security Cooperation – Iraq, whose mission was to advise, train, assist and equip Iraqi Security Forces.

[40] Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 72.

[41] UNDP, "Support to Security Sector Reform – Phase I Final Narrative Project Report," 7.

[42] Dodge, *From War to a New Authoritarianism*.

centre of security reforms.[43] In parallel with an increase in the number of people employed in the security sector,[44] its control became increasingly dependent on al-Maliki and his close entourage of loyalists. After the 2010 election, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Interior, and the three security arms in the country – the Office of the Commander in Chief, the Provincial Command Centres, and the Iraqi Special Operations Forces, were all under al-Maliki's command.[45]

The centralization of the country's security apparatus around the figure of al-Maliki went in parallel to its sectarianization and politicization, another indication of the objective being regime rather than state security. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), leading a programme in support of SSR in the country from 2012 until 2015, complained that 'this particular administration [al-Maliki's] had created an environment where parliamentary capacity and oversight was severely restricted'.[46] Positions of command were not based on expertise, and postings were not determined by military tactics or individual competencies, rather, they were assigned based on sect and party belongings as well as loyalty to al-Maliki. This trend was particularly felt in those areas with a significant portion of Sunni Arabs. Mosul is a good example of the repercussions of this: the city witnessed the frequent replacement of the top military and police officials for political reasons.[47] The forces deployed in and around Mosul had no ties or knowledge of the area, contributing to their quick disintegration with the arrival of IS.

The conquering of large swathes of Iraqi territory by IS in 2014 and the failure of the Iraqi security apparatus to respond to it are evidence of the debacle of years of SSR in the country. The depletion of the Iraqi security sector was a key condition for the success of IS, however, the loss of intelligence coordination and airstrike capabilities as a result of the US withdrawal also had an impact.[48] An audit of the military requested by al-Maliki's successor, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi (2014–2018), revealed the existence of at least 50,000 ghost workers,[49] while other estimates are as high as 300,000.[50] The audit also revealed the extent of corruption within the security apparatus, with positions open for purchase and equipment for sale on the black market.[51]

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[43]O'Driscoll, "Autonomy Impaired."
[44]In 2012, the number of people employed in the security sector reached 933,000, that is, 12% of the total adult population. See, Dodge, *From War to a New Authoritarianism*, 120.
[45]Dodge, "State and Society in Iraq Ten Years after Regime Change," 245.
[46]UNDP, "Support to Security Sector Reform – Phase I Final Narrative Project Report," 8.
[47]Knights and Almeida, *Reshuffling Iraqi Generals*.
[48]Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 74.
[49]Transparency International, *The Big Spin: Corruption and the Growth*, 20.
[50]Wehrey and Ahram, *Taming the Militias: Building National Guards*, 8.
[51]Transparency International, *The Big Spin: Corruption and the Growth*.

2014–2019: Security Assistance Amidst the Battle Against the Islamic State

Ultimately, Maliki paid the price for his sectarian mandate, as despite winning the 2014 election he was replaced as Prime Minister by Haider al-Abadi.[52] With his replacement, alongside the military campaign to defeat IS, a new phase of security assistance was launched. On 10 September 2014, the US launched the *Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS*, with the aim of 'degrading and ultimately defeating Daesh' in Iraq and Syria[53] and later established the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) as the military mechanism to coordinate the operations against IS, mostly consisting of airstrikes.[54] Indeed, the Coalition endorsed the view that 'the military victory over ISIS will be accomplished *by* the indigenous forces' stressing that they 'will accomplish [… their] mission *with* those indigenous forces, and improved regional stability will be attained *through* those partners' [*emphasis* in the original].[55] With few forces on the ground, the Coalition provided extensive military assistance (training, equipment, intelligence) to the Iraqi army, the Iraqi air force, the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), the Federal Police, and the Kurdish Peshmerga,[56] confirming an international trend towards remote warfare, as per the paradigm of SFA.

Security assistance in Iraq realigned once more to international concerns due to the rebound of terrorism, which in the form of IS tied together local (Iraqi), transnational (Iraqi and Syrian), and international (terrorist attacks in Western countries) dynamics. If in 2003 it was the regime of Saddam Hussein that was presented as a threat to international security, in 2014 it was the potential dissolution of the Iraqi state at the hands of IS that became the threat against which the US gathered a new coalition. This occurred in parallel to the generally recognized debacle of interventionism as known over the previous years, which shook the moral ground from where Western countries have been preaching their role as 'champions of human dignity'. Thus, the rebound of terrorism threatened the security of Western countries also from an ontological perspective. As Steele puts it, like any other state, 'the US has an interest in protecting its vision of who it is' based on 'an account that recognises the importance of physical

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[52]Hadad, *Path to Government Formation in Iraq.*
[53]See the Global Coalition website: https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/.
[54]Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 75.
[55]CJTF-OIR, "Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve – Our Mission."
[56]Knights, "The U.S., the Peshmerga, and Mosul." During the Global Coalition efforts to combat IS, military assistance and equipment was sent directly to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). For instance, the coalition has run the Kurdistan Training Coordination Centre (KTCC), a 300-person training mission with troops from Germany, Italy, UK, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Hungary and US The capacity of the KRI to act as a direct recipient of foreign assistance has been a long-term controversy between the region and the federal government.

existence and social needs, but places the driving force for both upon the securing of self-identity through time'.[57]

SFA became the predominant approach that allowed the US and other countries that have played a significant role in the country to address not only the direct and material consequences of IS but also the threats it posed to their ontological security. Riemann and Rossi argue that 'SFA can be understood as a routinized foreign policy practice aimed at easing existential anxiety and (re)generating a sense of agency. […] Approached from an ontological security perspective SFA […] represents itself as an inward facing response to identity threats and therefore as a practice of self-identity reinforcement' for those states that have a history of global military engagement.[58] At times of increased uncertainty also due to increased geopolitical tensions (see below), SFA provided continuity and order to Western states' sense of self-identity: SFA enabled the US and other intervening states to proclaim their commitment to Iraq (thus, acting in continuation with their previous stance) while limiting their engagement in accordance to changing circumstances.

As a result of the combined efforts of the Coalition in SFA, the devastated Iraqi security sector could officially proclaim the defeat of IS when Mosul was eventually liberated in December 2017. The ISF, particularly the US-trained CTS, managed to regain some public trust and were hailed by the population at large for their success against IS, despite being heavily dependent on coalition airstrikes and artillery.[59] However, the advancement of IS and the response to it had important repercussions for the Iraqi security scenario. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, *Hashd al-Shaabi* in Arabic) gained prominence in the public and political realm due to their role in defeating IS. Their formation stems from al-Maliki's efforts to establish Shia-centered Popular Defense Brigades, organized as voluntary forces provided with the necessary financial and logistical support and under the control of the Prime Minister (Cabinet Decree 301 issued on 11 June 2014).[60] Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani's call for the Iraqis to defend their country against IS was instrumental to accelerate the recruitment process and provide the PMF with some legitimacy.[61]

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[57]*Ontological Security in International Relations*, 2.
[58]"Remote Warfare as 'Security of Being'," 502.
[59]Witty, "The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service"; Witty, "Iraq's Post-2014 Counter Terrorism Service." At the forefront of the battlefield against IS, the CTS paid a high price, with many victims among its ranks. At the same time, The CTS and its commander, Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, became symbols of integrity and competence among the population to the point that when prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi demoted the General in October 2019, it triggered a new wave of protests.
[60]Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, *Honored, Not Contained. The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces*, 3.
[61]On 13 June 2014, Ali al-Sistani through his clerical representative ʿAbd al- Mahdi al-Karbalai called for the Iraqis to defend their country from IS, without, however, any reference to the *Hashd al-Shaabi*.

The PMF are a highly diversified group of well-established and newly formed militias responding to different tribal, political, and/or ethnic and religious command lines, consisting of around 30–50 groups and an estimated 150.000 members.[62] Loosely coordinated within the Popular Mobilization Commission, the PMF has at its core and leadership a group of Shia militias, often referred to as the resistance formations (*fasa'il al-muqa-wamma*).[63] Their relationship with Iran – and individual political parties – determines their controversial position within the Iraqi state.[64] While various attempts have sought to formalize their membership within the official security framework,[65] some of these militias continue to operate outside of and against the state's authority, by, among others, violating the rights of the civilian population, such as preventing the return of the internally displaced people in Jurf al-Sakhar,[66] or participating in the violence against the October 2019 protest movement;[67] attacking foreign states on the Iraqi territory;[68] and even launching a drone strike against the former Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Khadhimi in November 2021.

If the resistance formations exemplify the controversial relations between the militias and the state at the national level, at the local level this relationship is even more complicated. Minorities – whether Yazidis, Shabaks, Christians, and so on – in Iraq have routinely felt unrepresented within the Iraqi security architecture and have feared for their security. Sunnis have also felt marginalized within the security apparatus, especially under the premiership of Maliki. In Nineveh, where the rise of IS in 2014 challenged the ethnoreligious plurality of the governorate, the lack of security and representation are all displayed with considerable negative consequences. It is within this

[62]Mansour and Jabar, *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*; O'Driscoll and van Zoonen, "The Future of Iraq"; Ezzedine, Sulz, and van Veen, *The Hashd Is Dead, Long Live the Hashd!*; Haddad "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units: A Hybrid Actor in a Hybrid State," 40–42.

[63]Haddad, "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units: A Hybrid Actor in a Hybrid State," 32. Belonging to this group are *Badr Organization*, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, are *Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada*, *Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba*, *Kata'ib al-Imam Ali* and *Kata'ib Jund al-Imam*.

[64]Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 78.

[65]In November 2016, the Iraqi Parliament approved the Law on the PMF, according to which the PMF are part of the Iraqi armed forces and subject to military laws. Accordingly, the law excludes them from the political process. Later on, in March 2018 al-Abadi issued Executive Order 85, with which he reiterated the Prime Minister's control over the forces and specified their structure, rights and duties. Under Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi (2018–2020), a prime minister's written statement (18 June 2019); Executive Order 237 (1 July 2019); Executive Order 328 (14 September 2019) and Executive Order 331 (17 September 2019) were issued in order to regulate the role of the PMF.

[66]Jurf al-Sakhar is a small town in a strategic position south of Baghdad, which became an IS stronghold in 2014. Once defeated, the town witnessed the pervasive control of *Kataib Hezbollah*, which prevented the return of IDPs into the city.

[67]The 2019 protests saw unprecedented levels of violence against peaceful protestors by the official and non-official security forces, leading to over 500 demonstrators being killed and over 20,000 injured. This contributed to the population's shifted perception of the PMF from courageous fighters against IS to sources of insecurity. Aqeedi, "The World Paid Attention to the Wrong Iraqi Protests"; Revkin and Aymerich, *Perceptions of Police, Security and Governance in Iraq*.

[68]Knights, Malik, and Al-Tamimi, *Honored, Not Contained. The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces*.

context that the PMF naturally became the avenue to provide within-community security, giving minorities the ability to form community-related security structures that fall within the state security architecture, but remain tightly tied to local realities. The defeat of IS in Iraq thus left a nationally polarized and locally fragmented unaccountable system of security on the ground, which defies the state-centric focus of SSR, on the one hand, and, on the other, SFA is more apt to reflect while however prone to being exploited to serve external interests.

2020–2023: Security Assistance in Between Geopolitical Rivalry and Popular Contestation

Building on the defeat of IS, the US-led Global Coalition restored security assistance programmes in Iraq intending to prevent it or a similar organization from threatening the stability of Iraq again. In addition to bilateral programmes, at the request of the Government of Iraq, NATO launched its Mission Iraq – NMI – (October 2018), with the mandate of training, advising, and building the capacity of ISF.[69] However, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic put a stop to NATO's activities, and it was not until 31 October 2020 that it became fully operational.[70] The UN, through its various agencies, foremost the UNDP, supported the Government of Iraq to refocus its national security strategy around the concept of human security. In 2017, the EU launched the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) Iraq to support civilian related aspects of the security sector reform.[71] However, such re-engagement revived old contradictions and tensions unleashed in a novel context.

Whereas the US has progressively lost its influential role in Iraqi political developments especially as its troops withdrew in 2011, Iran has gradually increased its leverage through political, economic, and military means.[72] The US and other Western countries' increasing recurse to SFA in post-2014 Iraq occurred as tensions between the US and Iran stalled any political progress in Iraq, caught in the middle of such confrontation. With continued attacks on US personnel, particularly following the US assassination of Iranian Major General Qassim Suleimani and PMF commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020,[73] the US began a troop drawdown with other actors such as NATO and the EU (and its member states) increasing their role.[74] Under these circumstances, NATO announced that it was

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[69]NATO, "NATO Mission Iraq"; Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic," 77.
[70]Thruelsen, "Misaligned in Mesopotamia."
[71]EUAM, "About EUAM Iraq."
[72]Knights, *International Engagement in Iraq Is Tied to Military Presence.*
[73]Knights, Malik, and Smith, *Changing of the Guard.*
[74]Dent, *US Policy and the Resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.*

increasing its mission in Iraq from 500 to 4000 personnel. Yet, consistent with security assistance to Iraq, NATO's plans, and even the significant expansion of its mission, clashed with local security dynamics,[75] a misalignment that Rolandsen, Dwyer, and Reno identify as a 'classic problem within SFA'.[76]

This misalignment is foremost due to the fact that external security assistance to Iraq is operating in a context where on the one hand, non-state security providers have further complicated the picture and, on the other hand, geopolitical concerns have become more preponderant compared to the years of the liberal statebuilding intervention. Thus, the NATO mission in Iraq trains exclusively those forces belonging to the Iraqi security forces responding effectively to the government of Iraq.[77] However, as one interviewee put it, 'the PMF is the "elephant in the room" of the EU mission in Iraq', and not only.[78] Viewed mostly through the lens of being a proxy of Iran, the PMF remain outside the purview of external assistance, signalling slight hypocrisy in how the PMF is approached in comparison to the Kurdish Peshmerga: both forces are legally part of the state's security architecture, however, there is one set of rules for the Peshmerga and another for the PMF, which acts to further separate the PMF from the state rather than bring it in under its direct control.[79]

At the same time, the PMF, and particularly, factions within it, offer a clear example of Iran as a non-conventional SFA provider. Iran has long offered equipment, training, and advice to some of these factions, with whom it shared common threat perceptions – the entrenchment of a US-led regional security order in the Middle East, Israel, and geopolitical competition in the Gulf area.[80] Compared to its Western counterparts, Iran's SFA relies upon its own security arrangements, characterized by an oligopoly, rather than the monopoly of security, as well as upon the dense informal network that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has with the PMF, playing a key role in the development and functioning of SFA.[81] With the primary SSR role the domain of Western actors, Iran has developed a longer-term SFA approach focusing specifically on non-state actors, which further undermined the already shaky foundation of SSR in Iraq. This is similar to the role of rising powers in other contexts, where a narrower,

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[75]Thruelsen, "Misaligned in Mesopotamia."

[76]Rolandsen, Dwyer, and Reno, "Security Force Assistance to Fragile States," 565.

[77]NATO, "NATO Mission Iraq."

[78]One of the author's interview with a practitioner working in security sector assistance in Iraq, Skype, 16 July 2021.

[79]O'Driscoll and van Zoonen, "The Future of Iraq."

[80]Costantini and Donelli, "Sponsor-Proxy Dynamics between Decentered Multipolarity and Non-State Actors."

[81]Wilén, "Analysing (In)Formal Relations and Networks in Security Force Assistance."

longer-term approach is developed to operate with the dynamics of Western SSR focus.[82]

In all, SFA has not contributed to bridging the gap between state and non-state security providers and between geopolitical rivals.[83] On the contrary, the ISF and some units within it, such as the Counter Terrorism Service, are seen as a product of US policies in the country, whereas to part of the Iraqi leadership and the wider public, the PMF is the guarantor of the post-2003 Shia-centered regime aligned with Iran.[84] SFA's limits stem from a fragmented security landscape, whose roots stand in the strategic incoherence of the initial phase of security assistance in Iraq. However, SFA itself is at the forefront of contributing to exacerbating the fragmentation of the Iraqi security apparatus, a critique that travels across cases.[85] At the same time, and together with SFA, what is left of SSR in the country seems geared towards standing ground against losing more to Iran, rather than pressuring for reformed security governance in the country.

Conclusion

Security assistance in Iraq has lacked a consistent approach, has been largely reactionary, and vital elements key to its success have been missing. The lack of planning for SSR alongside the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq led to the country becoming a laboratory for testing out concepts relating to security assistance (and more generally), with failures compounding themselves. Key shortcomings from each period described in this article fed into the next, with lesson learning seemingly absent. External security assistance in Iraq has both influenced and been influenced by shifting security conceptions, policies, and practices. Failure has been a key aspect that has led to adaptation, yet adaptive practices have lacked foresight and planning. Nonetheless, international actors, and their practices, have become entrenched in Iraq and security assistance has continued long after the demise of liberal peace.

Each of the four periods of analysis described in this article shows the marginality of human security in the design and implementation of security assistance. From the very beginning (2003–2008), the disbanding of the Iraqi army created the foundations for further insecurity. Such an abrupt start made security assistance far more difficult and led to the abandonment of SSR's focus on human security for a harder interpretation of security focused on guaranteeing the very survival of the state. If human security was in theory a core objective of security assistance, the intervention

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[82]Seabra, "Falling Short or Rising above the Fray?"
[83]Costantini, "SSR in Iraq Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic."
[84]al-Hashimi, "The Popular Mobilization: Challenges and Solutions."
[85]Rolandsen, Dwyer, and Reno, "Security Force Assistance to Fragile States," 565.

planning did not reflect such an objective and soon adopted elements anticipating the SFA approach that was later consolidated. The marginality of human security continued in the period 2009–2014 when security assistance moved from providing security for the state to providing it for the regime. In focusing on withdrawing from Iraq, the US empowered Maliki to centralize power and control security before withdrawing troops, renouncing any planning towards creating the conditions viable for responsible withdrawal.

The sidelining of human security became even more marked in the period following the rise of IS when the fight against terrorism served the objective of not only guaranteeing the survival of Iraq but also the ontological security of external security providers. In the 2014–2019 period security assistance had a very specific focus on counterterrorism and thus was more aligned with international needs, rather than local ones, which is evident through international actors moving increasingly towards the SFA approach. Additionally, despite the evident need for national reconciliation after the experience of IS and its effects on Iraqi society, security assistance was not connected to an overarching peacebuilding framework. The cementing of the move to SFA in the 2020–2023/present period was paired with reinforcing this misalignment between Iraqi and international desires for security assistance and in the post-IS era, security assistance has become more a tool to counter Iran, than part of a peacebuilding framework for the country.

While this article has traced the progressive shift from SSR to SFA that accompanied the move from liberal peace to stabilization throughout the 20 years since the invasion and occupation of Iraq, it also nuances a dichotomous reading of the two approaches. The reactionary character of external security assistance mitigated the ideological drivers of other aspects of the intervention, resulting in policies and practices adapting to changing local dynamics, but irrespective of local needs. This explains for instance the early turn to 'train and equip' adopted to face the insurgency in Iraq, which marked the first departure from a human security perspective. Second, while this article has largely focused on the US as the key actor in security assistance, several other actors have been involved in security assistance in Iraq. The tendency towards one or the other approach has varied from one actor to the other, resulting, however, in interests and operations not always fully aligned, as the period from 2020 better illustrates.

The severity with which initially expansive external security conceptions, policies, and practices clashed with local dynamics resulted in the narrowing of security, that later travelled across other conflict-affected contexts, from Libya to the Sahel. The current stabilization approach, and within it the centrality it grants to SFA is more eschewed towards security objectives, neglecting important aspects of the overall governance of the country. 'Security' focused security assistance has not resulted in the desired security and has failed to focus on the society and its needs, leaving security to be captured

by parochial interpretations that rip apart rather than unite Iraq and its people. Overall, the rhetoric of providing human security never became a reality and in practice security assistance has lessened, rather than improved, human dignity in Iraq.

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Disclosure Statement

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