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Jansen, E.

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# Understanding security force assistance: a matter of control?

Alies Jansen

Global Transformations and Governance Challenges, Leiden University, The Hague, the Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to explain the historically poor performance of the US Department of Defence's security force assistance (SFA) to state and non-state armed forces to counter terrorism. The article argues that the dominant understanding of SFA as a one-way, top-down relation between a principal (sponsor) and an agent (recipient) has neglected the socio-political dynamics and effects of the intervention. Studying the socio-political processes reveals the messy reality on the ground and how difficult, if not impossible, it is to fully control the operation and the participating recipients. Rather than controlling recipients, this article argues that SFA should be concerned with negotiating the multiple and diverse interests, needs, and priorities. This claim will be substantiated with an in-depth, qualitative case study of Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq between 2014 and 2018.

## KEYWORDS

Security force assistance; principal-agent theory; non-state armed forces; islamic state; Iraq; operation inherent resolve

## Introduction

After years of American investment in the training, advising and equipping of the Iraqi armed forces after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, US Commanders reported in 2013 that “[t]he Iraqi security forces are definitely capable of securing their country.”<sup>1</sup> Ironically, only a year later, in June 2014, at least 30,000 Iraqi soldiers and military leaders fled in less than 48 h when “a band of fewer than 1,000 ‘terrorists’ smashed their way into Mosul.”<sup>2</sup> The seizure of Mosul marked the “crowning achievement” of the rapid takeover of a Sunni jihadist group that announced itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). There, in the historical centre of the Middle East region, ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the Islamic caliphate in front of the city's Grand Mosque of al-Nuri.<sup>3</sup> Beside the symbolic importance, the takeover of Mosul also brought ISIL significant military leverage. The American multi-billion dollar investment in military equipment for the Iraqi forces fell into the hands of ISIL fighters, which made them even more lethal. Unfortunately, Iraq is no exception.<sup>4</sup> The Taliban's takeover of Kabul after more than 80 billion dollars and two decades of equipping the American-trained Afghan soldiers is one of the latest examples of security force assistance (SFA) failures.<sup>5</sup>

**CONTACT** Alies Jansen  e.jansen@hum.leidenuniv.nl

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Yet, the risks of training, advising, and assisting forces in Iraq and elsewhere has not inhibited policy-makers and military officers from working with state and non-state armed forces, the latter often euphemistically referred to as “friendly,”<sup>6</sup> “trusted,”<sup>7</sup> or “moderate” forces.<sup>8</sup> In fact, SFA has become a “*modus operandi*,”<sup>9</sup> a core component of the US Department of Defense’s foreign policy. In the case of Iraq, the US-led Global Coalition against ISIL (hereafter the Coalition) resumed the exact same strategy of working “by, with, and through regional partners” to retake the city of Mosul as part of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). Using the case study of OIR in and around Mosul between 2014 and 2018, this article aims to contribute new insights into the workings of SFA and the puzzle of why SFA missions often perpetuate the insecurity it aims to address.

The dominant belief is that SFA missions succeed when recipients with different interests are carefully selected and controlled, either through training and education or through punishment and exclusion. As such, the relationships that constitute SFA are predominantly understood as a classical principal-agent (PA) arrangement. This article takes a different approach to understanding the formation of actors that shape the outcome of SFA programmes. Instead of focusing on the need to select carefully and control the SFA recipients that are part of the formation, this article studies three other processes: the aligning of interests, the aligning of actions, and the managing of contradictions. None of these practices is a one-way, top-down exercise. All actors engage in these processes, which highlights different governing dilemmas that require a sponsor to negotiate with, rather than to exercise control over, the recipients. Hence, this article sheds light on the continuous attempts and failures in training and equipping state and non-state armed forces, because it redefines the effectiveness of SFA in socio-political rather than military terms.

The structure of this article is as follows. The next section briefly contextualises the shift towards SFA as a prominent tool in US military foreign policies. The second section discusses how SFA has been predominantly understood and introduces an alternative way of approaching it. The third section applies this approach to the case of Mosul to elucidate the dynamics of security governance through SFA. The conclusion summarises the insights as well as the implications of these insights for understanding and planning security force assistance around the world.

## The context

The ultimate goal of SFA, as defined in 2013 in the US Joint Doctrine Note 1-13 and later used by NATO members in Allied Joint Doctrine 3-16, is to create security forces that are “competent, capable, sustainable, committed, and confident, and have a security apparatus tied to regional stability.”<sup>10</sup> At the invitation, and on terms set by the host-nation, the implementation of this goal is executed through activities that aim to train, organise, equip, rebuild, and advise. Eventually, these activities – together referred to as security force assistance – should make the host-nation strong and stable enough to manage internal and transnational threats.

For example, the SFA given during Operation Inherent Resolve provided the recipient forces with “everything that they need to be able to shoot, move, and communicate, which is all you need to defeat an enemy.”<sup>11</sup> Military vehicles that got lost when ISIL

took over cities like Mosul – such as main battle tanks, engineering vehicles, fighter jets, and helicopters – were replaced by the Coalition. Equipment also included ammunition, personal protection, missiles, and what else was needed to strengthen combat units.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the equipment, the Coalition opened multiple so-called building partner capacity training sites to supervise the recipients on how to use the combat materiel and execute large military operations, such as the Battle for Mosul.

Overall, the US spends approximately 20 billion dollars per year on security force assistance – although actual expenditures are likely higher given that some programmes are run by other departments that address development assistance, as well as covertly by Special Operation Forces, or the Central Intelligence Agency.<sup>13</sup> The extraordinary investments in partner capacity building might come across as altruistic endeavours, yet the practice is not solely concerned with assisting.<sup>14</sup> It helps the US and its Western allies with – in the words of the Department of Defence – “shaping the international security environment in ways that promote and protect U.S. interests.”<sup>15</sup> An example that demonstrates the linkages with the interests of, for instance, the US Department of Defence, is that the billions of funding for security force assistance to counter terrorism have grown fivefold since 9/11.<sup>16</sup>

This way of building partner capacity and promoting one’s own interests has its roots in the Cold War. Since then, SFA developed into partner engagements that are not only limited to so-called “weak states” or “ungoverned spaces”. In this regard, one can think of the training and equipment provided by NATO and the US to the armed forces of Ukraine, or the Israeli Defence Forces. Such co-operation, too, pose challenges that are often defined as PA problems, but the case study of OIR is taken as a specific example of programmes that try to counter terrorism by training, assisting, and equipping state and non-state armed forces. The latter are increasingly included because the belief is that non-state, local actors are sometimes better positioned to act in a conflict, especially when a state does not have a strong presence throughout the country.

However, to prevent the intervening actors from becoming instrumental to the very behaviours that fuelled the instability that SFA tried to address, US Joint Doctrine makes it a prerequisite to develop “a thorough understanding of the system for which change is sought.”<sup>17</sup> To this end, SFA is predominantly studied, both on an academic and policy level, through a PA lens,<sup>18</sup> – with only few notable exceptions, such as the work of Simone Tholens and Nina Wilén.<sup>19</sup> However, the following section demonstrates that a PA approach to “understanding the system” restricts the scope of the analysis of SFA, and hence our understanding of how to approach recipients.

### **Understanding SFA: controlling or negotiating with recipients?**

The PA theory emerged in the 1970s from the work of economists who studied the dynamic between an “agent” that would act on behalf of the “principal.” The theory’s central aim is to give specific predictions about, and explanations for, (potential) failures of PA relationships. That is, unintended outcomes are understood to be caused by “goal incongruity”: the diverging interests and incentives of the principal and the agent. However, unintended outcomes due to goal incongruity can be prevented. After all, the mismatch between interests and incentives can be reduced by coercing or

transforming the recipient. The resources and efforts needed to keep the recipients in line are called the “agency costs.”

To be sure, understanding military training and equipment in terms of “principals and agents,” “goal incongruity,” and “agency costs” underlines the importance of keeping recipients from misusing SFA. In this sense, the PA approach to SFA speaks to the demand for predicting and controlling “adverse effects” that would jeopardise the envisaged outcome in “unanticipated or unintended ways.”<sup>20</sup> At the same time, PA analyses of SFA are often based on certain assumptions that can also lead to misleading conclusions and a delusion of control.

One such assumption is that controlling the recipient forces, which can take on different forms, is crucial for the success of an SFA mission. After all, when outsourcing authority, the sponsor should make sure to capitalise most on the shifting balance in power. As such, the asymmetry within the playing field tends to be the main focus in a PA approach to SFA. Yet, this focus loses sight of the complexity of interaction between all actors involved, which are typically not two (sponsor and recipient), but multiple actors: foreign ministries, non-governmental organisations, and/or (private military) companies which provide the resources and training, and multiple state and non-state recipient forces which; in fact, frequently fractionalise, change and fluctuate, especially in the case of non-state armed forces.<sup>21</sup> This article argues that these SFA relationships are not solely military by nature and, hence, not simply a matter of command and control. They are also deeply socio-political and empowering the disparate actors influences these relationships and interactions during the missions.

The argument above will be substantiated with an analysis of the training and equipping of Iraqi forces by the US-led Coalition between 2014 and 2018 to take back the city of Mosul. Three key processes will guide the analysis. Inspired by the work on assemblages,<sup>22</sup> in particular the approach of Tania Murray Li,<sup>23</sup> these processes are (1) the aligning of interests, (2) the aligning of actions, and (3) the managing of contradictions. The first process refers to all endeavours undertaken to connect a variety of actors by trying to bring the interests and objectives of all component parts of SFA together, as well as maintaining the alignment. The second process refers to the efforts invested in attempting to align not only interests, but also how they are acted upon. The third and last process is about practices needed to justify operations and manage failures and contradictions to cultivate legitimacy. This may entail, for example, collecting and producing reports that help demonstrate the efficacy of an SFA operation, or the necessity of a particular decision or action.

These processes are not exhaustive in describing what happens during SFA operations. Instead, they help show what is necessary to make an SFA operation possible. Importantly, the analysis of the three processes demonstrates that SFA cannot simply be understood in terms of control. Much more is needed, especially the practice of *negotiating*, to keep everyone together and govern security. Before turning to the case, the next section elaborates on the materials and methods used.

## Materials and methods

To analyse the processes outlined above, this article relied on a variety of written sources that all convey important details on who did what. The document selection is made to

analyse the collaboration between the US and state and non-state armed forces. Policy documents and official communication by the US leadership form the starting point of this research.

Policy documents such as the Lead Inspector General quarterly report to the US Congress and Fiscal Year overviews and requests not only give insight into how the Coalition envisaged security, but also reveal the indicated means and methods needed to realise it, as well as how these means and methods changed over time. In addition, the analysis of recorded press briefings between 2014 and 2018 by the Coalition, made available via the US Department of Defense, are key primary sources for this research. These press briefings provide a valuable reflection of the concerns and questions in Western society represented by journalists from different newspapers or platforms on the one side, and the Coalition's way of either confirming or countering the knowledge spread to the wider public, on the other.

Information has been gathered and triangulated as much as possible with sources derived from experts on the ground. The article draws on the investigative journalism and research of organisations like the Rise Foundation and the Global Public Policy Institute. The work is further compared and contrasted with (translated) statements and speeches by Iraqi and Iraqi-Kurdish leaders, as well as bilingual reports from Iraqi non-governmental organisations such as the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights, Mosul Eye, and the New Iraq Centre. The sources discussed above have been gathered and analysed, not to provide an exhaustive account of the events and actors involved in Mosul during and after ISIL's occupation, but to shed new light on governing through SFA.

### **Case study: SFA to counter terrorism in Mosul**

When Mosul fell into the hands of the self-declared Islamic State in June 2014, the Coalition (re)initiated SFA programmes: they replaced the military vehicles that were lost, provided equipment to fortify combat units, and opened training sites to supervise the recipients on how to use the combat materials to execute large military operations, in this case the Battle for Mosul. Iraqis dubbed this mission "We are coming, Nineveh," drawn from Prime Minister al-Abadi's pledge to liberate Mosul in 2016, "which will be the fatal blow to Da'esh."<sup>24</sup>

However, the Coalition presumed that this "fatal blow" would not materialise by the Iraqi Security Force (ISF) alone, given their earlier collapse when they faced ISIL. The Coalition, thus, decided to train, advise, and assist the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Tribal Mobilisation Forces as well. The training and equipping of these Iraqi forces will be analysed on the basis of the three processes described above. The order in which they are discussed reflect the author's choice rather than a chronological, or linear reality in which they took place. In fact, the processes usually overlap and exist simultaneously.

### ***Aligning interests***

In order to defeat ISIL, forging alignments with non-state forces was crucial given that the ISF largely lost its monopoly on the legitimate use of force after its collapse during

the fall of Mosul. Many Iraqis decided to turn to militias for protection against ISIL, so it was difficult for the Coalition to rely solely on the ISF. The Coalition therefore brought together antagonistic non-state actors through a shared threat perception of ISIL that accommodated their diverse interests.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, by placing them under the official Iraqi command, the Coalition was able to forge alignments with multiple actors, without jeopardising the sovereignty of the Iraqi government, who invited them to intervene. To prevent the alignments from becoming fractured, the Coalition had to tailor and adapt its approach carefully to the interests of all actors, as will be explained below.

Before doing so, it is important to highlight that the aligning of interests did not just mean securing the thin ties between the abovementioned actors but also within certain groups. Telling is the example of the ISF whose units competed, with one another over “resources, power, influence, and prestige.”<sup>26</sup> Their rivalry became visible three weeks into the Mosul Offensive when approximately half of the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) had been killed or injured in the fight. Allegedly, other forces avoided dangerous areas, not only out of fear of having to endure heavy casualties, but also to undermine the reputation of the CTS as the country’s most professional and technically capable armed force.<sup>27</sup> This situation did not reflect what the Coalition had envisaged for the operation, and illustrates the need to improve the management of internal contradictions and conflicting interests among the partners.

The need to manage contradictions better became all the more important when the fragmentation and diversity within the ISF became further institutionalised in 2016. In that year, al-Abadi passed Executive Order 91 which integrated the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) into the ISF. The PMU formed a military conglomerate of old and newly formed non-state armed groups who organised themselves in response to the call of both Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani and the then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to engage in a “sacred defense.” The parallel military organisation of approximately 150,000 (predominantly Shia) Iraqis proved militarily strong, which granted them popular support and eventually led to their integration into the ISF as an “independent military formation.”<sup>28</sup> The Coalition, long reluctant to support sectarian militant groups, was now (directly or indirectly) supporting the PMU through the Iraqi government.

This situation threatened the Coalition’s alignments with its Western allies, who wondered whether the support to the PMU would create the very conditions that gave rise to Sunni extremism in the first place and would negatively affect the Mosul Offensive. To restore trust amongst its Western allies without jeopardising its alignment with the ISF, the Coalition decided to train and equip Sunni tribal forces, modelled after the Sunni “Awakening” programme during the fight against al-Qaeda in the early 2000s, but this time “the government of Iraq is in charge of the program.”<sup>29</sup> Despite initial resistance from Maliki as well as Sunni forces,<sup>30</sup> the so-called Sunni Tribal Mobilisation Forces received assistance by the Coalition directly. The Coalition presented the Tribal Mobilization Forces as “grassroots reconciliation” forces who brought a counterweight to the Shia dominance in the PMU<sup>31</sup> and as forces that were “key to maintaining long-term stability.”<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the Sunni and Shi’a forces, the Coalition also supported the Kurdish Peshmerga. The Kurdish case is indicative of how the practice of aligning interests was not limited to the Coalition in particular, or state actors more generally. Masoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government, strategically made use of the emerging SFA formation and the existing contradictions amongst the actors. In

an international campaign to solicit support, Barzani confirmed the US-constructed threat representation of ISIL as a “barbaric terrorist organisation,” and claimed that the Kurdish militias were “the only force in the area with the means and will to protect thousands of lives from the horrors that these terrorists bring.”<sup>33</sup> Besides, the Kurdish forces were also the only “trusted standard-bearer of secular Western values.”<sup>34</sup> Barzani’s endeavours to align interests appeared effective. Western policymakers were quick to respond and framed the training and equipping of the Kurdish Peshmerga as an “indispensable tool in an existential struggle in the defence of Western security and values” – legitimising the support of a group that for years had tried to obtain independence from the Iraqi state.<sup>35</sup>

This section demonstrates that the social processes inherent to SFA are more complex than the dyadic and hierarchical relationship between sponsors and recipients the PA model suggests. Not only because working “by, with, and through” local forces required the Coalition to align interests of groups that were characterised by fragmentation and competition. Also, because the strengthening of state and non-state actors created an SFA formation in which each of the actors tried to position themselves strategically. The training and assisting created a reciprocal dynamic in the interaction between the actors and made that neither the alignments meshed fully, nor their legitimacy became consolidated or stable. This observation has important implications for how we understand the workings of SFA. If interventions are assembled through existing structures (both social, material, and ideational), actors at different levels (both state and non-state), and the ongoing interaction between them, then their trajectory is not easily predicted and controlled. This conclusion moves the PA dilemma of control to the background and highlights the continual processes of bringing and keeping heterogeneous actors together, whilst balancing and negotiating short and long-term socio-political and military interests, needs, and priorities. Without this process of aligning interests, SFA formations will quickly fall apart.

### ***Aligning actions***

To manage the complex socio-political processes and the tensions arising from strengthening dissimilar state and non-state armed actors, the Coalition had not only to invest in the aligning of interests, but also of actions. To ensure that the actors would not misuse the equipment and training they received, an important process was the vetting of recipients. Vetting procedures have become obligatory to all SFA programmes since 2010 and are rooted in the Leahy Law of 1997. This law aims to guarantee that no support, or assistance is given “to any unit of the security forces of a foreign country if the Secretary of State has credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights.”<sup>36</sup>

In the case of the Peshmerga, the vetting was organised through the Kurdistan Training Coordination Centre. The Ministry of Peshmerga formally selected those who took part in the training, but in addition the US screened all Kurdish units for “associations with terrorist groups or with groups associated with the Iranian government.”<sup>37</sup> To its Western allies, the Coalition presented the vetting as a sufficient intervention to ensure the aligning of actions. For example, during a press briefing in October, General Anderson responded to critical questions that:

the only people that have been trained and equipped by us are those that have passed some fairly stringent vetting, that ensure that they have not only agreed to, but have shown in the past respect for the law of armed conflict. There have been no human rights abuses; have not acted against the Coalition or Coalition members before-hand. So we're very, very careful about that.<sup>38</sup>

However careful the Coalition was, it quickly became clear that a SFA formation that included groups that had a different tolerance for risk, operated according to different standards and objectives, ascribed to different norms, and had different perceptions of the appropriate use of force, provoked an incompatibility dilemma.

One of the dilemmas that the Coalition faced was that the support of the Kurdish militias indirectly led to a rapid expansion of claimed Kurdish territory, something Barzani himself described as “regaining what was originally ours.”<sup>39</sup> The Kurdistan Regional Government started to frame the support by the Coalition as the recognition and legitimisation of Kurdistan. When the Kurdish People's Protection Units (PYD) declared a federal state in northern Syria in March 2016, the Coalition was asked during a press briefing how this political declaration affected the overall operation against ISIL. What is striking is that US Commanders isolated the military responsibilities from the politics of SFA: “This is a political matter, not something that OIR really has a hand in. That's really internal Iraqi politics.”<sup>40</sup> According to Colonel Steve Warren, it was more important to ensure that the Kurdish forces did not misuse the assistance in order to defend their self-claimed federal state. Luckily, the partner militias were vetted and had given “no reason to believe they will stop fighting ISIL.”<sup>41</sup>

To be sure, the vetting procedures are indeed an important instrument to try to align the military actions of all forces and minimise unintended military consequences. However, this section demonstrates that despite the controlling mechanisms like vetting, the military training and equipment did influence Kurdish political endeavours and, in fact, caused tensions amongst different actors. These socio-political consequences negatively influenced the military mission of defeating ISIL with a strong and aligned force. Questions on such short- and long-term effects remained structurally unanswered, according to a European diplomat.<sup>42</sup> This underlines earlier academic critique on the US-led Coalition and its ignorance of the wider context in which it operated,<sup>43</sup> but also highlights the fact that socio-political tensions were *caused* by the mission, and were – purposefully or not – left unaddressed.

### ***Managing contradictions***

Managing contradictions, like the ones described above, were a crucial element in order to continue with the SFA programmes. In fact, the need for managing contradictions began even before the training and equipment of state and non-state armed forces had actually started. After all, the historical trajectories of the different recipients raised concerns at the international level from the very beginning. US Coalition commanders had dismissed such concerns by emphasising how aligned interests transcended previously existing divides, including those between Shi'a and Sunni. Former Secretary of Defence Ash Carter argued, for instance, that both Iraqi and Kurdish parliamentarians fully understood “the need to empower more localized, multi-sectarian Iraqi sectarian forces” to ensure the defeat of ISIL.<sup>44</sup>

However, when messages from the field reported failures in aligning interests, the Coalition had to invest in framing contradictions that threatened the mission. One rationale that was repeated over the course of the entire mission, is that the Coalition followed the orders of the Iraqi sovereign state on whose invitation the SFA programmes took place.<sup>45</sup> For example, on the incorporation of the PMU into the ISF, Major General Rupert Jones reassured his public that:

Prime Minister Abadi is giving clear orders and instructions to the PMU. (...) Whatever orders they are given as part of the operation, we will work closely with the government [of] Iraq. We'll support the Iraqi security forces in whatever – whatever that mission might be.<sup>46</sup>

When US-supported militias announced that they would not follow Abadi's orders, the Coalition discredited this information as "rumours." PMU commanders, for instance, made known that their troops would redeploy more than 2,000 fighters from Syria to join in the fight for Mosul,<sup>47</sup> whilst the Iraqi government had ordered them to remain outside of the city.<sup>48</sup> The announcement raised concerns during the American press briefings, but Major General Joseph Martin argued that the PMU forces were still "operating under the command and control of the government of Iraq."<sup>49</sup> In fact, Martin was "not aware of them being inside of the city [of Mosul]."<sup>50</sup> In hindsight, however, the Iraqi government had less control than the Coalition thought or claimed. Senior ISF officials who led the Nineveh operation acknowledged in 2018 that PMU forces had obeyed orders from senior Shi'a leadership, overriding the ISF officials. "In fact," argued one Iraqi commander, "there is not a big difference between the Federal Police and the [PMU] because sometimes [when] the [PMU] are not asked to be part of a battle, they just change their uniform and become a Federal Police."<sup>51</sup>

Remarkable is that the rationale of acting under Iraqi sovereignty gave the Coalition leeway to apply a similar line of reasoning when failures in the aligning of actions occurred. For example, when the PMU had turned to torturing and executing local Sunnis in cities like Fallujah, Tikrit, Dour, and al-Alam,<sup>52</sup> the Coalition commanders announced that they were "very concerned" about the news.<sup>53</sup> Referring back to their control mechanism, Colonel Christopher Garver added that all those trained are subject to vetting procedures and receive instructions on how to behave in accordance with international norms and laws. At the same time, the Coalition argued that they were only in Iraq to assist the government. It was the responsibility of Prime Minister al-Abadi to start investigations into allegations of human rights violations.<sup>54</sup> This argument was used repeatedly and shows how the lines of responsibility were kept diffused.

The examples in this section show that failures in aligning interests and actions during the SFA mission did not lead to better control mechanism but active framing of what went wrong (or not) and who was responsible (and who was not). This was facilitated by acknowledging and highlighting, or disregarding and ignoring specific reporting in order to legitimise the anti-ISIL formation. What is important is that the Coalition, while trying to manage contradictions and failures, again separated socio-political consequences from the military intervention. The Coalition deflected responsibility by pointing to the sovereignty of the Iraqi government, instead of acknowledging that the SFA programmes co-constituted the situation it was trying to change. Recognising that the SFA perpetuated insecurity would represent a fundamental problem for the anti-ISIL

Coalition and would have jeopardised its existence. Neglecting this co-constitutive character facilitated the continued involvement of the US and its international partners. However, continued involvement needed to be legitimised with a different logic when the end of the mission approached, as will be discussed in the following section.

## Outcome

On 10 July 2017, Prime Minister al-Abadi announced that Iraq had recaptured ISIL's *de facto* capital. Mosul was liberated and the Coalition congratulated the country on its "true unity of effort under Prime Minister (...) Abadi's direction."<sup>55</sup> However, whilst the Coalition congratulated the Iraqi government with true unity of the forces, the post-ISIL process revealed that unity was in fact never established among the plethora of armed groups. Much rather, the resulting "hyper-militarised environment" had severe repercussions.<sup>56</sup> Allegations of war crimes against nearly all armed groups were reported during the post-ISIL phase<sup>57</sup>; counter-insurgency practices were described as disproportionate, leading to civilian deaths;<sup>58</sup> and revenge measures were taken against suspected sympathisers of ISIL and their families.<sup>59</sup> Tension between Baghdad and Erbil escalated when Barzani issued another referendum on independence and the ISF responded by launching a military operation in collaboration with the PMU to regain disputed territory.<sup>60</sup> This situation risked allowing ISIL the opportunity to regroup in Mosul, as was happening in other areas of Iraq.<sup>61</sup>

In order to safeguard the enduring defeat of ISIL, the Coalition argued it had to prolong its presence. Notably, the Coalition did not publicly recognise the fragmentation and competition of the parties to the SFA formation, but stressed that the Iraqi security forces were not yet strong enough. The ISF in particular was "years, if not decades" away from becoming an independent force that could "manage insurgent threats without Coalition support."<sup>62</sup> While the US started to withdraw its troops from Syria in October 2019 and the Iraqi government voted to do the same in Iraq, the Trump administration announced that their presence would be prolonged rather than shortened. In fact, President Trump argued that pulling back the estimated 5,000 US troops would be "the worst thing to happen to Iraq." "At some point, we want to get out," he continued, "[b]ut this is not the right point."<sup>63</sup> But what is the right moment? In August 2018, a year after al-Abadi officially announced victory over ISIL, a spokesman for the Coalition explained that their forces remain active in Iraq "as long as we think they're needed."<sup>64</sup>

Not much later, in February 2019, President Trump suggested the troops should stay at the al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq as it was a "fantastic edifice" that had cost the US a fortune. "We might as well keep it," he argued.<sup>65</sup> It is Trump's statement that follows that is illustrative: "one of the reasons I want to keep [the al-Asad Air Base] is because I want to be looking a little bit at Iran."<sup>66</sup> Under the guise of "enduring defeat," the "systematic weaknesses of the ISF," and the "fortune spent on an incredible base," the US now shifted its priority to paying close attention to Iran and Iranian proxies with whom it had collaborated during the fight against ISIL. Shi'a military groups responded to this shift and started targeting the US embassy, while proclaiming "Soleimani is our leader" and "Death to America."<sup>67</sup> Tensions rapidly escalated and eventually resulted in the execution of both the Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani and PMU leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020 by a US drone strike. While the US claimed it "exercised

its inherent right of self-defense,”<sup>68</sup> experts stressed that the strike entailed a violation of what the US-led Coalition had continually stressed as the most important requirement for all military actions taking place in Iraq: Iraqi sovereignty.

Although the military mission to defeat ISIL in Mosul was completed, security remained contested. SFA facilitated a form of militarisation, in which recipients were trained, assisted, and advised without taking into account such actions’ socio-political effects. In turn, the militarisation of the effort enabled a wide variety of actors to empower themselves, which paradoxically legitimated a prolonged presence and an open-endedness of the Coalition’s intervention. The SFA in Mosul had created a space to contest, negotiate and govern security and, as a result, reinforced the very insecurity that the Coalition aimed to mitigate.

## Discussion

The case study analysis brings into view the multiplicity of heterogeneous actors that are part of SFA and demonstrates that the connection between these actors is not easily reduced to principal-agent relations. Instead, relations are fluid and fragile, not only between, but also within groups. Stabilising these relations is not a matter of “we command, you obey,” it is not a top-down affair. The analysis demonstrates that the actors involved co-exist, interact, and mutually shape the execution and outcome of SFA. This means that relationships amongst actors are contingent and fundamentally unpredictable. Instead of controlling recipients, it was decisive for the Coalition to negotiate carefully amongst different, and sometimes competing, interests, needs, and priorities. To demonstrate what negotiation looked like in practice, the article zoomed in on three processes: aligning interests, aligning actions, and managing contradictions. More than control, these three processes are conditional factors for SFA to take place.

The case study analysis also demonstrates the consequences of neglecting these key conditional processes. Although the military operation was successful in the sense that Mosul was recaptured, insecurity remained. “No amount of military force will end the terror that is ISIL unless it’s matched by a broader effort – political and economic – that addresses the underlying conditions that have allowed ISIL to gain traction,” said President Obama at the very beginning of the SFA programmes.<sup>69</sup> The case study analysis not only underlines the importance of addressing the conditions (both military and non-military) that led to conflict; it also demonstrates that military efforts that were executed through the SFA programmes led to new socio-political changes, contradictions, and conflicts in the environment it sought to stabilise. Both the inadequately addressed socio-political context (e.g. existing competition), as well as the socio-political consequences of SFA (e.g. conflicts over land and political power) led to a situation in which all actors started jockeying for influence in the post-ISIL power vacuum.

## Conclusion

What conclusions and recommendations can we take away from the observations above? First of all, the article demonstrates that the PA focus on the practice of controlling recipients’ limits our understanding of SFA in several ways. SFA is not a one-way exercise from sponsor to recipient, and security is not achieved when sponsors and recipients

simply overcome conflicting interests. Instead, security is a multi-layered phenomenon, understood and prioritised differently by the various actors that take part in SFA. These disparities inevitably generate plural security governance, where interacting components of an SFA formation continuously produce and negotiate individual and, at times, conflicting interests.

Second, the dominant understanding and approach of SFA as a predominantly military enterprise has neglected a thorough understanding of the socio-political processes that are of as much influence on the short- and long-term success of SFA missions. However, this article demonstrates that socio-political processes cannot be settled or controlled, but require continuous consideration of how best to address the competing parties who try to pursue their diverse and particular interests. Addressing these dynamics are a prerequisite for any SFA mission. Not doing so, the case study demonstrates, can come to the expense of those who are unable to negotiate their interests, needs, and priorities: civilians.

This observation raises a third and final important aspect to take away: the outcome of SFA operations and the way they set or reinforce power relations. This remains important, even though the US has now withdrawn most of its forces from Iraq, and terrorism no longer seems to be the main focus of its foreign policy. SFA continues to play a prominent role in great power politics, for example, with the US being a key supplier of military equipment and training to the Ukrainian forces. Regardless of the nature of conflict, SFA interventions that aim to achieve security will reflect the security of those who are able to negotiate its outcomes and risk to exclude the security of those who are not. This complex social reality of security remains largely concealed in PA studies of SFA.

Building on these insights, this article concludes with the explicit recommendation for policymakers and defence professionals working on SFA to pay equal attention to both military *and* socio-political processes. These processes shape the conditions, the effects, and the outcomes of SFA. Understanding these processes and how they interact is therefore paramount. By extension, it is recommended to approach SFA as an inter-ministerial exercise. The responsible government body, in this case the Department of Defence, should partner with other relevant governmental departments and agencies to collectively come to a more holistic understanding of the broader context and the effects of SFA. Not doing so, as this article demonstrates, risks worsening rather than improving the insecurity in a given region – both on the short- and the long-term.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Alies Jansen* is a PhD candidate in Global Transformations and Governance Challenges at Leiden University. Her research on transformations in security interventions is situated at the nexus of critical security studies, social theory, and science and technology studies.