FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE | Center for the Study of Intelligence and Nontraditional Warfare

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A Critical Analysis of the US Army's Security Force Assistance Mission During the War on Terror

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This article was initially presented as a paper at the Post-9/11 Irregular Warfare Lessons Learned Conference in Annapolis, Maryland from September 17-18, 2024. The conference was sponsored by FPRI's Center for the Study of Intelligence and Nontraditional Warfare and the Department of Defense's Irregular Warfare Center.

November 2024

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About the Authors

This article is the opinion of the authors and does not reflect the views of the United States Army War College or the United States Army.

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Dr. Nagl was a Distinguished Graduate of the United States Military Academy Class of 1988 who served as an armor officer in the Army for 20 years. His last military assignment was as commander of the 1st Battalion, 34th Armor at Fort Riley, Kansas training Transition Teams that embedded with Iraqi and Afghan units. He led a tank platoon in Operation Desert Storm and served as the operations officer of a tank battalion task force in Operation Iraqi Freedom, earning the Combat Action Badge and the Bronze Star. Dr. Nagl taught national security studies at West Point's Department of Social Sciences and in Georgetown University's Security Studies Program and served as a Military Assistant to two Deputy Secretaries of Defense. He earned his Master of the Military Arts and Sciences Degree from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, where he received the George C. Marshall Award as the top graduate, and his doctorate from Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar.

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U.S. special operations service members conduct combat operations in support of Operation Resolute Support in Southeast Afghanistan, April 2019. RS is a NATO-led mission to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces and institutions. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Jaerett Engeseth)

Key Findings

The U.S. Army struggled to build capable host-nation security forces in Iraq and Afghanistan because it did not give those security force assistance (SFA) missions the priority and support they deserved.

Both the selection and training of U.S. advisors were highly flawed. The Army also struggled to ensure the selection of high-quality personnel into the host-nation forces. Much of the SFA effort was conducted in an ad hoc manner, without sufficient funding or strategic prioritization.

Today, the Army has corrected many of the issues that plagued its SFA formations during the War on Terror by creating a permanent Security Force Assistance Command and six Security Force Assistance Brigades. It is essential for the Army to maintain and support these formations to ensure that the bitter lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan are not forgotten.

Introduction

In 2014, the Iraqi army, into which tens of billions of American taxpayer dollars had been invested, collapsed in the face of an offensive by the terror group the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Only a major coalition intervention prevented the fall of Baghdad. In 2021, within just a few months of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Afghan National Army (ANA) collapsed in the face of an offensive by the Taliban. Between 2002 and 2021, some $88 billion had been invested in the ANA.[1] In both cases, the U.S. military had devoted vast amounts of time and money to the training of the host-nation's security forces. Yet, with a few notable exceptions (the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Force and some units of Afghan commandos), both armies severely underperformed once they could no longer rely on extensive American air, ground, and logistical support. Why did the U.S. effort to train and advise these forces fail so spectacularly?

The disorganization and lack of priority given to the training of host-nation forces by the military are major factors. The U.S. Army failed to prioritize the creation of permanent security force assistance (SFA) formations because, as an institution, its focus has always been on the conduct of large-scale conventional warfare. Even when it turned toward counter-insurgency missions during the War on Terror, the U.S. Army concentrated on its own fighting role rather than preparing host-nation troops to take charge. At lower levels, capable U.S. officers preferred and sought combat assignments leading U.S. forces rather than serving in advisory posts. Leaders also had incentives to place poorly performing personnel into advisor teams, effectively removing them from their units. All these factors combined to make the creation of a capable force to train and advise the Iraqi and Afghan security forces more difficult.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the train, advise, and assist mission fell to the Regular Army for the first time in decades.

Security force assistance is not a new mission for the Army. From training the Philippine Constabulary, to advising the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, to assisting Salvadoran armed forces, the U.S. Army has substantial experience in building up foreign armies.[2]

Still, the Army's task during the War on Terror was significantly more ambitious than its previous attempts to bolster host-nation forces. Since the Vietnam War, the Special Forces have had the primary responsibility to train and advise host-nation forces. However, the size of the effort in both Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a change in the mission of the Special Forces to include more direct-action operations, made this previous arrangement impossible. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the train, advise, and assist mission fell to the Regular Army for the first time in decades.

U.S. Army Rangers assigned to the 75th Ranger Regiment, take down the last American flag on Bagram Airfield , Afghanistan, July 2021. For 7,195 days, from October 2001 to July 2021, Rangers from the 75th Ranger Regiment were constantly deployed in support of the Global War on Terror. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Landon, Carter)

Early SFA Efforts in Afghanistan

The Army's advisory mission in Afghanistan began with the war itself. Special Forces Operational Detachment Alphas were attached to various Northern Alliance militias, leading to famous photos of Green Berets kitted out in the accoutrements of 21st-century war while mounted on Afghan ponies. The SFA mission in Afghanistan grew after December 2001, when President Hamid Karzai announced the creation of the Afghan National Army. Later, the Office of Military Cooperation–Afghanistan was formed to train the Afghan National Security Forces. Early decisions, in particular the choice to turn the Northern Alliance into the Afghan Military Forces (predecessor of the ANA), would have a major negative effect on the SFA mission before it ever got off the ground. Many of the Afghan units were more loyal to their warlord commanders than to the Kabul government. The higher leadership of the ANA and Minister of Defense Mohammad Fahim engaged in rampant corruption and nepotism, further hindering the attempt to build a capable security force.[34]

The early advisor mission was not at the top of the U.S. priority list in Afghanistan. In fact, the Bush administration initially opposed any long-term involvement or nation-building in Afghanistan, preferring a counter-terror strategy.[5] Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, in particular, sought to minimize U.S. investment in the Afghan National Security Forces.[6]

As an official report later noted, in its early phases, the U.S. mission sought to limit the "time, energy, resources, and commitment in Afghanistan by developing a smaller, Afghan-sustainable national security force. The United States believed that the greatest threat to Afghanistan's stability was factional fighting. . . . The United States, therefore, believed Afghanistan needed a small, light infantry force that could be rapidly deployed by the national government to intervene in internal affairs."[7] The United States also sought to internationalize the SFA mission, bringing in French, British, and Turkish trainers to assist.

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Despite its small scale, by early 2003 the training effort had expanded beyond the capabilities of the Special Forces, and conventional forces were brought in. The Army formed Task Force (TF) Phoenix, led by a brigade of the 10th Mountain Division, to take over the training of Afghan forces. TF Phoenix had a difficult task, as it had no experience or training in how to train and assist partner forces.

The short, ten-week training period also was insufficient to turn out quality soldiers and units.[8] Still, the Central Corps of the ANA—trained by TF Phoenix and its Special Forces predecessors—did obtain some level of proficiency and carried out a few high-profile security operations in 2004. But before long, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the major demands it put on the force, began to negatively

A Combat Logistics Battalion 4, 1st Marine Logistics Group (Forward), Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle provides security during a combat logistics patrol through Helmand March 5. The patrol supported counter insurgency operations in the area. (DVIDS)

impact the training and advisor mission in Afghanistan.

No active combat brigade could be found to replace the 10th Mountain Division, which was rotating home. Instead, soldiers from the Oklahoma National Guard took over. These troops had limited training in how to advise foreign forces and limited knowledge about Afghanistan and its culture. Some of the training received by the National Guardsmen "was beneficial and related to the mission," as one advisor noted, but "culture training would have been good if it . . . covered Afghanistan instead of Iraq." Such anecdotes underscore the poor quality of preparation some National Guard soldiers received before deploying.[9] The Army's effort to prepare advisors for Afghanistan had persistent shortcomings, particularly in cultural and language skills. The same would be true for Iraq.

Early SFA Efforts in Iraq

Just as the SFA mission in Afghanistan was getting off the ground, the Iraq War began to take up most of the U.S. military's attention and resources. The U.S. political leadership in Iraq impeded development of the Army's training and advisor program when Ambassador L. Paul "Jerry" Bremmer disbanded the Iraqi Armed Forces. This forced the coalition to effectively build the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) from scratch. The projected size of the New Iraqi Army also dwarfed the ANA. The U.S. goal in October of 2003 was to train and equip 200,000 ISF personnel and turn over the security mission to them by September 2004.[10]

This figure would be raised to 390,000 by the end of 2007.[11] In general, the early training efforts emphasized turning out a large quantity of soldiers over a quality force. U.S. trainers were also not yet equal to the task. As in Afghanistan, there

were significant lapses in the training that advisors received before deploying to Iraq.[12] The dearth of cultural and language training was aggravated by a major shortage of translators. What's more, the early effort suffered from a lack of command unity. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), which oversaw all training of Iraqi Security Forces, did not directly coordinate with Combined Joint Task Force-7 (CJTF-7), the command tasked with the occupation of Iraq prior to the creation of Multinational Force Iraq (MNF-I).[13] This disconnect was most severe in the police training program, which was initially overseen by the State Department.

The initial U.S. strategy in Iraq sought to draw down the number of American troops as quickly as possible and to replace them with Iraqi Security Forces.

The initial U.S. strategy in Iraq sought to draw down the number of American troops as quickly as possible and to replace them with Iraqi Security Forces. This policy reached its zenith under GEN George Casey. At the same time, Casey also sought to reform and improve the training and advisory effort in Iraq. Most significantly, all training for the ISF was centralized under the newly created Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq (MNSTC-I). This smoothed out many of the unity-of-command issues. However, the MNSTC-I headquarters staff was drawn from the 98th Reserve Division. The 98th Division was "an imperfect choice, a Cold War–era creation filled with part time drill sergeants whose mission was to increase basic training throughput in times of a national emergency."[14] According to GEN David Petraeus, MNSTC-I's first commander, while 98th Division soldiers demonstrated impressive attitudes and commitment, it took "a good four [to] six months to get … to a basic level in terms of capability and functionality" in the various tasks members of the division had to perform, everything from combat advisor teams to headquarters functions.[15]

One of Petraeus' first tasks was to conduct a review of what the ISF's size and capabilities should be, the first such review conducted since the beginning of the war. Petraeus also sought to reorient the Army to an internal security role.[16] The desired size of the ISF was revised upward to 271,000 from the 171,000 planned by the CPA.[17] Starting in 2004, American advisors were also placed directly with Iraqi combat units for the first time. A total of thirty-nine advisory support teams were created to carry out this mission.[18]

By late 2004, MNF-I headquarters officially considered the training and advisory mission as the main effort of the campaign. Correspondingly, the size of the advisor mission was massively increased. The plan called for around 250 military transition teams (MiTTs) to be deployed to support Iraqi Army units and some formations of the National Police.[19] Substantial debate ensued about the number of advisors to be deployed, at what echelons they would partner with Iraqi forces, and how these transition teams would be formed. Though the advisory effort had been made the centerpiece of Casey's campaign plan, concerns about the overall readiness

Soldiers assigned to 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), prepare a M119 Howitzer for a live fire exercise in Western Iraq, Sept. 25, 2024. CJTF-OIR Advises, Assists and Enables Partner Forces to defeat ISIS in designated areas of Iraq and Syria and set conditions for long-term security cooperation frameworks. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Collin MacKown)

of the force led to approval for only 2,500 of the 5,000 personnel requested for advisor teams.[20] Casey decided that each team should be shrunk from twenty soldiers to ten. This allowed teaming with almost every Iraqi Army unit, but only at the battalion level and above. This, in turn, meant that no U.S. troops would be directly advising Iraqi companies or platoons, the primary units of action in a counterinsurgency campaign. The third major debate pivoted on whether advisors should be *individual* augmentees or drawn from standing *units*. Casey chose an individual augmentee system, which meant the teams were thrown together from all over the Army and had no organic logistical support capacity. Often, as was the case with the soldiers from the US Army Reserve Training Division, the members of the teams that were advising the Iraqi units on operations in combat had never performed the tasks themselves as a member of a unit.

The choice to both use individual augmentees and limit each advisor team to ten soldiers would be fateful. According to Petraeus, "Because of the modest manning [the teams] also did not have any organic command and control, support structure, any logistics, all of the components of the different tasks provided by battalion staff."[21] Furthermore, "at certain points, when we had a two-vehicle rule and you had to have four people in each vehicle, if there were people on leave, or casualties, or what have you, they could literally not get out the gate."[22] In short, the decision to create such small teams, and to unmoor them from the higher echelons of command

and logistical support, severely impacted their ability to conduct the mission. (That was rectified in mid-2005 when the MiTT Teams were attached to the coalition units in whose area of responsibility the Iraqi units were operating.)

The most significant issue plaguing the early SFA mission was the lack of qualified personnel assigned to serve as advisors.

But the most significant issue plaguing the early SFA mission was the lack of qualified personnel assigned to serve as advisors. The Army's incentive system for promotions was a major driver of this problem. The Army did not accord serving as an advisor with the same value and prestige as serving in a combat unit. According to Dr. Brian Babcock-Lumish, who was an advisor to Iraqi military intelligence officers, serving as an advisor was viewed as "career suicide."[23] As late as 2005, an official chronicle notes, "the Army did not categorize transition team assignments among the 'key developmental or branch qualifying jobs officers required for promotion.'"[24]

As in Vietnam, talented and ambitious officers and enlisted soldiers sought to avoid being posted to MiTTs to avoid harming their careers.[25] In addition, the individual augmentation arrangement for these units incentivized commanders to offload poor performers by having them assigned to advisor units. Training also continued to lag. Since there was initially very limited stateside training program for advisors, Casey ordered the creation of a two-week program, known as the Phoenix Academy, to provide at least some training for advisors when they arrived in Iraq.

By 2004, the shortcomings of the combat advisor training program had become clear. To this point, any specialized stateside training that advisors received—and some received none—was focused on battle drills.[26] Advisor training was initially located at the Combat Readiness Center at Fort Bliss. Advisors received very little training that was relevant to their role. The 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the 1st Infantry Division was assigned to take over the advisor training mission at Fort Riley. Why exactly the 1st BCT was chosen is not exactly clear. It was a heavy BCT, equipped with Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles, and had no experience in the security force assistance mission. Moreover, it was about to deploy to Iraq. Indeed, the brigade was so close to going to Iraq that its command element was waiting for buses to the airfield when they were informed of their new mission.[27]

Still, 1st BCT adapted quickly. The brigade was reorganized and shrunk to fit its new role. The new training effort *did* increase the quality of advisors deployed overseas. And yet, despite substantial improvements in training, the quality of personnel assigned to advisor training continued to lag, for several reasons.

The MNSTC-I training and advisory program as it existed in 2005 favored quantity over quality in fielding the ISF. Part of this concern with quantity was undeniably political: Casey's goal was to build up the ISF as quickly as possible and begin the drawdown of American troops. A more time-consuming

A soldier from the New Jersey Army National Guard's 3rd Battalion, 112th Field Artillery Regiment, 44th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, works with his counterparts from the Iraqi Division of Artillery's 1st Brigade, during a classroom exercise in western Iraq, July 30, 2024. Advising, assisting, and enabling are key components of Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve's mission to enhance partner capacity in Iraq to ensure the enduring defeat of Da'esh. (U.S. Army photo)

approach to training the Iraqis—for example, borrowing from the Special Forces' experience training the Iraqi 36th Commando Battalion (and eventually the Iraqi Special Operations Forces)—would have run counter to the goal of handing over security as quickly as possible. MNF-I even put pressure on the Special Forces to increase the number of Iraqi soldiers going through basic training, so as to grow the ISF as quickly as possible.[28] In addition, the planned Iraqi Army was almost bereft of support units and logistical infrastructure (which Petraeus was pushing hard to develop) and was forced to rely on contractors.

The practical effect of MNSTC-I's training effort in 2004–6 was to create large numbers of Iraqi combat units that were of uneven quality, incapable of carrying out operations independently, and largely reliant on logistical support from the U.S. military or contractors. The only exceptions were the Iraqi Special Operations Forces units trained by the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force–Arabian Peninsula and some Kurdish formations.

MNSTC-I's metrics for assessing the capability of Iraqi units were also inadequate.. In the early months of the establishment of MNSTC-I, a system of evaluating the Iraqi units was developed.

This system, known as the Transition Readiness Assessment, evaluated Iraqi units on a scale of one to four, color coded from green to black. The categories assessed included the usual readiness requirement categories that were part of the U.S. military readiness evaluation system, but did not include

any subjective criteria about a unit's willingness to fight or sectarianism (not typical problems in U.S. units). However, there was space for advisors to leave comments. According to a British advisor interviewed for the U.S. campaign history, "You're going to find a bunch of categories that are color-coded green for good to go. Yet the text boxes that go with them is going to say something horrific like, 'The ISF in MND-Southeast are completely dominated by Shi'a militias.'"[29]

The rising sectarian violence in 2006, and the inability of the ISF to quash it, prevented the planned transition to Iraqi security responsibility and the drawdown of American troops.

The rising sectarian violence in 2006, and the inability of the ISF to quash it, prevented the planned transition to Iraqi security responsibility and the drawdown of American troops. As a result, the United States shifted its strategy. Large numbers of American troops were deployed to secure Baghdad and its surrounding belts. But the Surge did not apply just to American forces; there was a corresponding Iraqi Surge, bringing forces from other parts of Iraq into Baghdad. The new commander of MNSTC-I, GEN James Dubik, told Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that he thought Iraq "would need a force of around 600 to 650,000 to secure the country."[30] Still, due to concerns about both sectarianism and fighting ability, only certain Iraqi units could be redeployed to assist in Surge areas.[31]

As challenged as the SFA mission in Iraq was, its counterpart in Afghanistan was faring even worse. As late as 2005, despite attempts at professionalization, the United States still relied on tribal militias in much of Afghanistan.[32] Attempts to increase the overall quality of the ANA had also been shrugged aside by Secretary Rumsfeld. Instead, as in Iraq, focus shifted to increasing the quantity of security forces trained. (In fact, that was the key metric in the early years, not the more important one of the number of soldiers still in the ranks, as casualties and AWOIs grew. In fact, when General Petraeus did an evaluation in the fall of 2005, he found that the number being trained was not enough to even maintain the current reported strength of the Afghan Army units.)

The goal shifted to accelerating the activation of Afghan National Army kandaks (battalions). This effort allowed the Afghan government to begin standing up regional corps in addition to the preexisting Kabul Corps. Advisor teams in Afghanistan differed from their counterparts in Iraq. They each numbered nineteen men instead of ten. But there were never enough soldiers to fill all of the billets. Even when the size of the teams was reduced to sixteen, many remained understrength.[33] One American advisor, interviewed later for an official "Lessons Learned" project, lamented that "he only had seven men for one battalion, which was estimated to be 500 soldiers (average Afghan infantry size). It was hard to develop and govern that amount with only seven men and he wishes he had junior officers to assist in interacting with the lower levels. He said he would have

Iraqi Air Force Staff Maj. Gen. Abbas Fadel Damer, Al Asad Air Base commander, addresses a group of Iraqi army artillerymen during joint artillery training exercise at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, on Oct. 26, 2023. The exercise was conducted to offer training to partner forces in support of the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve's mission in the enduring defeat of Daesh. (U.S. Army photo by 2nd Lt. Daphney Black)

needed at least twenty-five advisors to do the job they were trying to do."[34]

The increasing number of Afghan units also raised the number of embedded training teams that needed to be stood up. As a result, many American advisors were forced to hop between Afghan districts, limiting their time with any single unit and hindering their ability to build relationships with Afghan forces, or to meaningfully improve their performance.[35] NATO Allies also failed to allocate sufficient advisors to lower the pressure on the U.S. force. By October 2008, 60 percent of the ANA lacked the ability to independently conduct operations above the company level.[36] While the combat abilities of the ANA were limited, its logistical capacity remained even more deficient. The doctrine for ANA logistics was copied and translated word for word from American manuals, but was not operationalized.[37] The abilities of many advisors also continued to lag. Most personnel deployed as advisors still had little training in the role. Many were tasked with the advisory mission despite having military occupational specialties different from the roles they were training Afghan soldiers for.[38] On his return home from commanding MNSTC-I, GEN Petraeus, who toured Afghanistan in 2005, was disturbed by the serious deficiencies he observed in the training of ANA and ANP forces:

> *What I found there was that, although that war had begun a year and a half earlier, and it had a year and a half head start on what we were doing in Iraq and a very, very low level of violence, despite all of that, it was way behind. . . . When I visited training sites,*

I asked the contractors or the military trainers: "Just give me the training schedules for the six- or eight-week period of training of military or police." And in one case, the main police training site, I kept looking at it. There seemed to be something missing—and then I realized what it was-- shooting weapons! They never pulled a trigger during the entire six-week course of instruction, although they did on the training schedule march for an hour in the morning and march for an hour in the afternoon. This was just nothing short of astonishing. I asked them: "You know, you're sending police into what is developing into a considerable insurgency. . . . They are going to need to use a weapon, and you never even have them pull a trigger?" And they said, well, we just don't have time. They'd have to go to the range, we would have to build a range, and it would involve weapons and ammunition. I just was not satisfied. And then, as I said, I noted that on the training schedule they had the police marching for an hour in the morning, and and also for an hour in the afternoon. Which was essentially, drill and ceremony daycare, or something like that. Supposedly, it was physical fitness or something like. I asked them if they were trying to create a ceremonial unit like the Old Guard, or a police force that could actually operate in a counterinsurgency.[39]

Many police never even made it to the eight-week training course and were instead thrust into combat untrained, often without weapons.[40]

Creation of the Advise and Assist Brigades

After the success of the Surge, the SFA effort in Iraq was further reformed. Instead of deploying MiTTs, the military began to deploy standing BCTs augmented for the SFA role. BCTs assigned to this role were designated as Advise and Assist Brigades (AABs). This system solved many of the tensions that existed between MiTTs and the BCTs responsible for their area of operations. It also made American brigades responsible for the ability of the ISF units in their areas. Although there were some drawbacks to this change—in particular, deploying AABs deprived regular BCTs of many of their noncommissioned officers and field grade officers, which negatively impacted their readiness—similar reforms were undertaken in Afghanistan as the drawdown in Iraq accelerated. In Afghanistan, the Army deployed brigades augmented to perform the SFA mission. These brigades were "not intended to operate as combat forces.

Much like TF Phoenix, they were purely advisory. Rather than owning an area of operations, a modular brigade augmented for security force assistance would provide advisers who operated under the security 'umbrella' of another brigade combat team conducting counterinsurgency operations."[41] This format meant that some brigades would

deploy as combat formations, while others would be drawn from to create advisor teams.

> **The reforms instituted in Iraq and Afghanistan diminished many of the institutional failings of the previous systems for Security Force Assistance.**

The transition to AABs rectified two of the biggest issues with the previous SFA efforts in both Iraq and Afghanistan. First, it fixed the personnel issues. Second, it linked advisor units, and by extension their host-nation counterparts, to the logistics and enablers that had previously been controlled exclusively by BCTs. The previous augmentee system had meant that soldiers, often lacking the necessary expertise, had been drawn from all over the Army to fill advisor billets. The use of standing BCTs meant that the most qualified people were finally being assigned to work as advisors, and it meant that officers received credit for promotion while serving in an advisory role. Equally important, it meant that advisors now had higher echelons of support to call on and were not at the mercy of units executing an entirely different set of missions.

In short, the reforms instituted in Iraq and Afghanistan diminished many of the institutional failings of the previous systems for Security Force Assistance. Still, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, it may have been too little too late. By the time the AAB concept was instituted in Iraq in 2009, the drawdown was already well under way. This meant that advisors were often assigned to only the brigade level and above. Still, even at higher echelons of command, when partnered with effective host-nation leaders, advisors could have a significant impact on the capability of the units they worked with.[42]

As briefly noted above, the use of regular BCTs for the SFA mission was not without drawbacks. The most important from an institutional perspective was the impact on force readiness. Only experienced officers and noncommissioned officers were needed to form AABs. This meant that to deploy a BCT for the advise-and-assist mission, the whole leadership cadre of a brigade was ripped out, leaving the bulk of its junior enlisted and junior officers stateside. This negatively impacted the training, discipline, and morale of units assigned to this mission. Ultimately, the readiness impact of drawing advisors from standing brigades forced the Army to add a permanent SFA capability outside of the Special Forces: Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs).

Security Force Assistance Brigades

The SFABs initially were created to provide Security Force Assistance capability in Afghanistan without impacting the readiness of the Army's line BCTs. Since then, they have been deployed much more widely and have begun to assist with SFA operations beyond the counterinsurgency capability

they were initially designed to provide. Today, the Army has stood up a total of six Security Force Assistance Brigades. Five brigades are in the active force—one aligned with each of the five geographic combatant commands. The 6th SFAB is an Army National Guard formation. Calls for a permanent SFA capability had been made as far back as 2007, but it took more than a decade for the Army to create it.[43]

The SFABs represent a drastic improvement in capability and quality over the Army's previous efforts to conduct security force assistance. Perhaps the greatest area of improvement is in the selection of advisors. In the early days of the advisory effort, soldiers were drawn from all over the Army to serve as advisors without serious regard for the temperament or skills necessary to do the job; some were certainly unfit for the role. In contrast, today's advisors have been through a rigorous selection process to ensure they are fit to serve in an advisor unit. Potential combat advisors are evaluated in eleven different fitness categories, ranging from discipline to open-mindedness and patience.[44] The Army has also offered substantial bonuses to soldiers who join SFABs or reenlist in an SFAB as a further incentive to attract qualified candidates and retain the highly experienced personnel who are best for the advisor mission.[45]

1st SFAB was sent to Afghanistan in March 2018, the first deployment for any SFAB. During its deployment, fifty-eight advisory teams worked with "more than thirty Afghan battalions, fifteen brigades, multiple regional training centers, a corps headquarters and a capital division headquarters."[46] Deployments from other SFABs followed over the next few years, before the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Since the end of the war in Afghanistan, SFABs and their subcomponents have been deployed dozens of times all over the world.

After the end of the war in Afghanistan, SFAB deployments got smaller, with single advisor teams or a few advisor teams being deployed, as opposed to a whole brigade. Doctrinally, the SFABs have also shifted more to a role in support of large-scale combat operations, rather than counterinsurgency missions.[47] In a major war, the SFABs will be able to rapidly partner with allied forces and link them with U.S. enablers. In turn, the SFABs will be able to provide U.S. commanders with substantial intelligence and link them with allied commanders.[48] They will also provide partner forces with an important symbol of American commitment.

The SFABs represent a drastic improvement in capability and quality over the Army's previous efforts to conduct security force assistance.

The existence of the Security Force Assistance Command is secure. The Army, and U.S. Africa Command in particular, sees the value in SFABs.[49] However, the SFABs are still in some institutional danger. Probably the greatest issue facing them is recruitment.[50] There is a limited supply of experienced personnel, and the Security Force Assistance Command has struggled to attract them from other branches of service. This has led to units being

U.S. special operations service members conduct combat operations in support of Operation Resolute Support in Southeast Afghanistan, April 2019. RS is a NATO-led mission to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces and institutions. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Jaerett Engeseth)

significantly undermanned. According to a senior Security Force Assistance Command official, the recent force reduction from around 800 soldiers per SFAB to 500 soldiers per SFAB was only a reduction to their actual level of manning.[51] This recruiting crisis represents a significant threat to the future of the SFABs. It is essential for the Army to encourage capable and experienced soldiers to become advisors.

Conclusion

The military's effort to train, advise, and assist Iraqi and Afghan security forces will be remembered as one of the greatest missed opportunities of the War on Terror. From the start, the advisory effort in both Iraq and Afghanistan was ambitious but lacked the resources to effectively train and advise indigenous forces in both countries. Early advisor units had little training, never had enough translators, and were teamed with local units at too high of an echelon. In both wars, the advisor system was hastily created and tasked with a mission beyond its capabilities. The Army's attempts to reform this system between 2001 and 2017 were equally ad hoc and never fully corrected its flaws. By the time a permanent SFA capability was created in the Army, the War on Terror had been raging for sixteen years. Had the Army acted faster in reforming the advisor training pipeline, reorganized training and advisor units on a permanent basis,

allocated them sufficient personnel, and treated the security force assistance mission as the main line of effort, the Iraqi and Afghan security forces likely would have performed far better than they did. Today, the SFABs are at risk due to the Army's changing focus toward conventional operations.

The United States faces significant conventional threats, and the Army must pivot to face them. At the same time, long-term, high-stakes strategic competition makes small wars on the periphery more likely, since neither side may be willing to risk a full-scale war. The Army must be wary of repeating its failure after Vietnam to institutionalize and protect its capability to conduct counterinsurgency and stability operations. If it does not, the next time the Army finds itself deployed in counterinsurgency operations, it will have to relearn all the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan.

This report is the opinion of the authors and does not reflect the position of the United States Army War College, the United States Army, or the Department of Defense.

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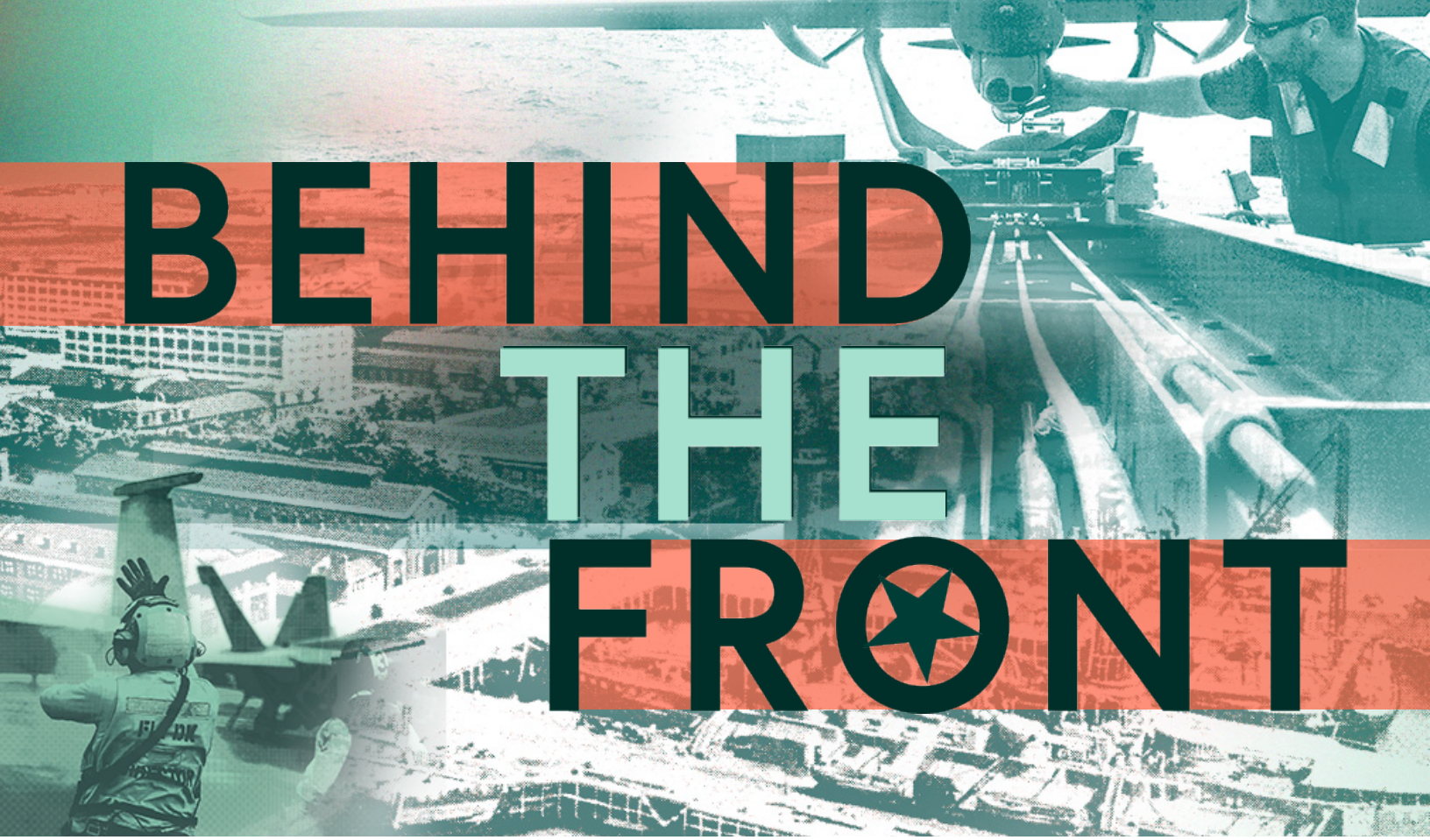

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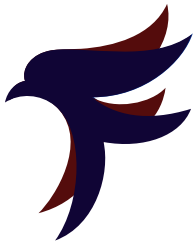

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