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Challenges with Security Force Assistance in Niger: Understanding Local Context and Aligning Interests

Nina Wilén & Pierre Dehaene



Introduction

Since the attacks the 11th of September 2001 in the US, there has been a strong increase in security force assistance (SFA) to fragile states with the aim of professionalising security forces, preventing violent extremist organisations (VEO) from exploiting state fragility and, in cases where this has not succeeded, of fighting the latter. At the same time, a shift has taken place with regard to troop contribution to UN peace operations since the end of the 1990's, wherein stable, wealthy Western troop contributing states have been replaced by fragile and poorer states¹. This shift, linked in part to the failure of peace operations in Somalia and Rwanda in the beginning of the 1990s, and in part to regional actors' will to take over crisis management on the continent, has also motivated an increase in SFA to the newer peacekeepers.

This military assistance, which aims to fill the gap left by Western states, whose troops are generally well trained and equipped, often take the form of pre-deployment peacekeeping programs specifically concentrating on the newer peacekeepers². The partnerships between the states providing the training and equipment and the troop contributing states, is one of the key themes of the Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN peacekeeping, adopted by the UN member states in September 2018. From this perspective, improving SFA constitutes one of the fundamental levers of capacity building and overall performance for contingents to be deployed in peace operations.

These parallel developments: the shift in troop contributors and the fight against VEOs, have implied an increased focus on how to train troops in contexts of fragility in both policy papers and academic articles³. They have also highlighted a number of challenges related to training troops in fragile states, three of which we will discuss here.

On a macro-level, a lack of aligned interests between providers and recipients of SFA is problematic⁴. This is closely related to the fact that SFA providers often fail to acknowledge the inherent political dimension of SFA, which impacts power relations in the recipient state. Closely linked to the first challenge is therefore a second challenge which crosses the boundary between macro and micro-levels: the failure to take into account the local context and ensure a local ownership of the process. Understanding what type of training is useful and sustainable for the host state's forces requires a solid understanding of how local forces

¹ Jakob D. Kathman and Molly M. Melin, "Who Keeps the Peace? Understanding State Contributions to UN Peacekeeping Operations", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol.61, pp.150-162.

² The partnerships and relationships between states providing training and equipment and the receiving states is a key theme in the Declaration of shared commitments on UN peacekeeping, adopted by the Member States in September 2018. The theme of assistance thus overlaps with the perspective of the light coordination mechanism in peace operation matters, recommended by the UN to facilitate the relationship between States providing training and States contributing troops.

³ Mara Karlin, "Before you help a fragile state's military, ask these uncomfortable questions", *Defense One*, June 21, 2018. Available at: <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/06/pentagon-fragile-states-military/149180/>; Jahara Matsiek and William Reno, "How to build foreign militaries when the local government is terrible", *Task & Purpose*, February 7, 2019. Available at: <https://taskandpurpose.com/sfa-weak-states>.

⁴ Steven Biddle, Julia Macdonald, & Ryan Baker, "Small footprint, small payoff: The military effectiveness of security force assistance", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol.41, 2018, n°1-2.

operate and function. Attempting to reproduce Western states' security sectors may not be feasible or desirable in many contexts, yet realising how to contextualise SFA requires a thorough understanding of local realities and needs. A third challenge relates to coordination between different partner nations providing SFA. This challenge is also prevalent on both macro and micro levels, as a lack of coordination may have negative impacts on the standardisation of training, which in turn may result in a patchwork of different SFA initiatives. As a consequence, this is also likely to impede a fluid interoperability within the national army.

This brief will consider challenges related to SFA, drawing on empirical examples from Niger⁵. In the Sahel, the security situation has gradually worsened since the start of the Libyan crisis in 2011, Boko Haram's resurgence, and the beginning of the Malian conflict in 2012. In spite of large-scale external interventions in both Libya and Mali, and a robust peacekeeping mandate in the latter, the number of armed groups has increased, making the Sahel a hotspot for trafficking, terrorism and weapon smuggling amongst others.⁶ Niger's relative stability in this region, in combination with its strategic location as a transit point for migrants going to Europe, has made it an attractive security partner for Western states fighting terrorism and illegal migration.

Niger has taken part of a number of different types of SFA during the past 5 years, including counter terrorism training, pre-deployment training for peacekeeping and regional interoperability training in multinational exercises, such as the annual Special Operation Forces (SOF) exercise in the region: Flintlock⁷. Niger is also taking part of two regional coalitions aimed at fighting extremist groups in the region: the G5 Sahel Force and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)⁸ and contributing troops to MINUSMA, the UN's peace operation in Mali. The state's security forces are therefore playing important roles in a variety of different areas aimed at stabilizing the region.

In early 2018, as a response to the increasingly fragile security environment, a new Nigerien force generation project started, with the aim to create 12 Special Intervention Battalions (BSI) over a period of five years. Several Western Partner Nations (WPN) have decided to focus most of their SFA efforts within the framework of this initiative⁹. In this brief, we draw on the experiences of Belgian Special Operation Forces (SOF), as a provider nation within the framework, and attempt to identify challenges and lessons learned. The study is mainly based

⁵ Author 1 is Director of the Africa Program at Egmont Institute of International Relations and an Assistant Professor at Lund University in Political Science. She has conducted fieldwork in Niger as embedded with the Belgian Special Forces in March and October 2019 for 4 weeks. Author 2 is a PhD student at King's College in London. He is also an active soldier in the Belgian Armed forces with extensive field experience from Niger.

⁶ Øystein Rolandsen, Nicolas Marsh, Ilaria Carrozza, "Small States' Security Force Assistance in the Sahel", PRIO Policy Brief, n°13, 2019.

⁷ The multinational military exercise Flintlock is a US Africa command (AFRICOM) initiative, with the aim to reinforce West and North African states' operational capacity in their fight against terrorism and violent extremism. Every year the exercise gathers more than 2000 militaries from over 30 states who train together and share experiences.

⁸ The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), comprises elements from five African armies: Benin, Cameroun, Niger, Nigeria, and Chad. Its main objective is to fight the Nigerian jihadist group Boko Haram.

⁹ Nina Wilén, "The Belgian Special Forces in the Sahel: A Minimalist Footprint with a Maximalist Output?", Egmont Institute, *Africa Policy Brief*, n°26, May 2019.

on primary sources such as personal experience from implementing and planning SFA, interviews with military personnel, and internal documents including programmes of instruction and planning files. This material is complemented by secondary sources such as reports, academic literature and ‘grey’ material.

The first section gives a brief overview of the academic debates regarding the challenges of implementing SFA. The second section examines three empirical examples of challenges encountered in Niger: 1) Interest misalignment with regard to military structures; 2) standardising training in an operational environment with limited resources; 3) adapting equipment to local contexts. In the conclusion, the different findings are discussed and avenues for further research are suggested.

I. Understanding the local context and the political impact

The fact that many recipients of SFA are fragile states with, at times, weak democratic traditions, have prompted debates about the risks related to strengthening coercive institutions and the conditions under which they should - if at all - be reinforced. Research has shown that Counter Terrorist (CT) aid to personalist regimes significantly increases levels of terrorist activity¹⁰, while training of military officers abroad may increase the probability of a military coup because of the way training increases the military’s power relative to the regime¹¹. Governments of fragile states with weak democratic institutions are often repressive against their political opposition with security forces playing an important, politicized role, in order for regimes to stay in power¹². All of these aspects point to the difficulties of aligning interests between provider and recipient of SFA.

The risks of non-aligned interests are linked to the idea of SFA as a type of apolitical capacity building which simply increases partner effectiveness in a straightforward way¹³. Yet, SFA is fundamentally political in nature. In a fragile context, it is all the more unlikely that Western SFA can “overcome deep-rooted political problems that prevent long-term defence-institution building”¹⁴. Empowering large numbers of local and regional actors is also likely to have long-

¹⁰ Andrew Boutton, shows how US counter terrorism aid to personalist regimes can have perverse effects, as the regimes which depend on this type of aid for their survival, perceive the terrorist threat as a source of revenue. See Boutton, “Of terrorism and revenue: Why foreign aid exacerbates terrorism in personalist regimes”, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol 6, n°4, 2016, pp. 1-26.

¹¹ Jesse Dillon Savage and Jonathan D. Caverley, show a correlation between the US international military education and training (IMET) and the Countering Terrorism Fellowship (CTFP) and the probability of a military coup. See Dillon Savage and Caverley, “When human capital threatens the Capitol: Foreign aid in the form of military training and coups”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol.54, n°4, 2017, pp.542-557.

¹² Kersti Larsdotter, “Security Assistance in Africa: The Case for Less”, *Parameters*, vol.45, n°2, 2015, pp.25-34.

¹³ Steven Biddle, Julia Macdonald, & Ryan Baker, “Small footprint, small payoff: The military effectiveness of security force assistance”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol.41, 2018, n°1-2, p. 95.

¹⁴ Jahara Matsiek and William Reno, “Getting American Security Force Assistance Right. Political Context Matters”, *Joint Force Quarterly*, vol. 92, 2019, p.68.

lasting effects for the stability in larger regions,¹⁵ meaning that the impact is not restricted to the host state. The importance of understanding the local context in which SFA activities are implemented can thus not be overstated. Yet, SFA efforts are “rarely rooted in the reality of local partners’ capability, capacity and legitimacy”¹⁶, which ultimately poses problems on a practical level for the implementation of SFA.

II. Interest misalignment, standardisation and adapting to local contexts

In the following paragraphs we are illustrating three empirical challenges which are drawn from the Belgian Special Forces Group’s (SF Gp) experience of SFA in the context of Niger and discuss the implications of these against the backdrop of previous research findings. The three examples represent: interest misalignment with regard to military structures; adapting equipment to local context, and standardising training in an operational environment with limited resources.

a) Interest misalignment with regard to military structures

A clear example of a lack of understanding of the local context which resulted in an interest misalignment between the Nigerien forces and WPNs was the prioritization of standing up Combat Companies before support-, and logistics companies in the new Special Intervention Battalions. From a Western point of view, it is necessary to have a Staff and Support Company sustaining Combat Companies to ensure general logistical support needed for a Combat Company in theatre. As such, the Staff and Support company is commonly the first (or second) company in a battalion to be stood-up.

However, in Niger, understanding the concept of the Staff and Support Company as the priority, is foreign. Each Combat Company has always supported itself out of necessity and efficiency of personnel. Each Company is therefore supposed to be able to maintain and repair equipment, and if this is not the case, soldiers will – for example - acquire support from local artisans when convoys or patrols are passing through villages. Similarly, soldiers procure food and water from local merchants while in a convoy, making the Support Company useful, but not a priority when standing up new battalions in wartime. Given the lack of manpower and the multiple fronts that the Nigerien forces have to cover, the Combat Companies are considered a priority for the Nigeriens.

¹⁵ Emily Knowles & Abigail Watson “No such thing as a quick fix. The aspiration-capabilities gap in British remote warfare”, Oxford Research Group, *Remote Warfare Programme*, London, 2018, p.1.

¹⁶ Emily Knowles and Jahara Matsiek, “Western Security Force Assistance in Weak States”, *The RUSI Journal*, vol.164, n°3, 2019, p.12

This interest misalignment between the Western partners and the host country shows the importance of understanding the local context and of being able to think on multiple levels: accepting that states may have different priorities. However, it is also clear that demanding local citizens to support military companies with technical support and/or food supplies in an ad-hoc manner, is not without problems. This is especially the case, as there does not seem to be a standardised means of payment, nor of identifying who should supply what, when. Yet, in this case, after lengthy discussions with various WPN Head Quarters over several months, setting up Combat Companies before Support Companies was recognized as a workable way forward, thereby anchoring the approach to local realities. Finally, three Combat Companies will be stood up before focus is placed on the Staff and Support company.

b) Standardising training in an operational environment with limited resources

The security issues surrounding Niger on all frontiers have resulted in the Nigerien armed forces being deployed to almost 80% of its effectiveness. Indeed, the security situation in Niger has deteriorated drastically during the past three years. Direct attacks on civilians in Niger rose for example by 500% between November 2018 and March 2019, compared to the same period the year before¹⁷. As a result of this, there is no pool of specialised instructors in the armed forces to give training. This has been a problem in military schools and training centres, as anyone with recognized competences will be deployed, enabling the Combat Companies in theatre rather than training new recruits. The implications of this is a lack of sustainability and institutional memory, and ultimately, an increased dependency on foreign trainers to ensure continuity.

In order to maintain sustainability of the courses and trainings given, a standardised program of instruction (POI) was developed between the Nigerian Special Forces Command and the Belgian Special Forces Group, with support from other WPNs, for the Nigerien Special Operations Forces. The program, which consists of over 18 courses and various techniques, tactics, and procedures will both act as a program of instruction (what will be seen), and as a course manual (how it will be seen), for future trainers. The POI contains several videos, a number of images, adapted to local context, and simple but elaborated explanations of both content and method to facilitate transmission of the content.

Local ownership has been an important guiding principle for the development of the courses. All of the courses have therefore been “Nigerienized”, in the sense that they have been developed from already existing Nigerien techniques, tactics and procedures. Videos have

¹⁷ ACLED. 2019. “Explosive Developments: The Growing Threat of IEDS in Western Niger”, 19 June. Available at: <https://www.acleddata.com/2019/06/19/explosive-developments-the-growing-threat-of-ieds-in-western-niger/>, accessed 21 August 2019.

been made with local soldiers using both French and local languages, while the POIs have been ‘tested’ on different Nigerien audiences, to get relevant feedback. Over a two-year period, officers at the military school in Niamey have been given a “Nigerienized” *close quarter combat* POI with standardized lessons sheets in order to provide theoretical and practical lessons to their fellow colleagues. In this case, the Belgian SF instructor(s) simply observe the clarity and quality of the lessons to enhance the POI and course manual. Clear and detailed course manuals are essential so that there is little dependence on the speciality and experience of the instructor. As mentioned above, the high operational tempo in Niger makes it very difficult to have specialised instructors within the battalions, which justifies the importance of detailed and well-illustrated POI. All adaptations to the curriculum are continuously being approved by the Nigerien military authorities, responsible for doctrine and training.

c) Adapting equipment to local contexts

It is not just formations and courses that need to be sustainable and adapted to local contexts, this is also true for equipment. The Individual First Aid Kits that were provided to Nigerien soldiers by partner nations were often different, depending on which WPN provided them. Yet, all were relatively expensive items, which often were seen as a status symbol, and therefore used sparingly¹⁸. The highly technical and very expensive kit was in addition not sustainable, as Nigerien authorities would be unable to replace parts, or even to procure kits for new recruits and existing battalions, should providers withdraw support in the future.

In response to this problem of a sustainable supply of equipment, two Belgian SOF medics and a French military medic, started exchanging ideas on how to create a new, and locally made, first aid kit. The discussion was rapidly expanded to include various Nigerien military personnel, to make sure that it corresponded to local realities. Important in this respect was the fact that Niger already focuses on the paramedical aspect within a large French-led military assistance program: Écoles Nationales à Vocations Régionales (ENVR), where the Nigerien ENVR educates paramedical personnel at EPPAN (École du Personnel Paramédical des Armées à Niamey)¹⁹. As such, the development of the new kit fit into existing structures of local capacity.

¹⁸ Pierre Dehaene, “The Localization Strategy: Strategic Sense for Special Operations Forces in Niger”, CTX, vol.9, n°1, 2019, pp. 29-28.

¹⁹ Tom Van Der Spiegel, “Belgian SF Gp Localization Strategy and the Human Domain (HD).

Special Warfare and applied Strategic Tactics – Niger”, Internal Document, 2018, Belgian Defense.

The new POI on combat first aid, together with the new, locally made Individual First Aid Kit were approved by the Nigerien Director of the EPPAN in October 2018²⁰. The 16-hour course includes instructional and awareness videos with local military personnel, while the new kit is made with local material in the Niamey market by local artisans. While an excellent example of how to involve the local economy in producing military equipment, this has not been a smooth and effortless process. Differences in priorities and resources between WPNs have resulted in continuous discussions about the relevance of producing local equipment.

Similarly, producing standardised equipment by local artisans has proven to be challenging, with delays and inconsistent product results. Sudden increases in fabric prices or depleted supplies cause delays and it is difficult to assure constant quality when dozens of artisans are handcrafting the products. Work is done to overcome these challenges by (locally) industrializing the fabrication and logistics processes with the possible support of international development agencies. In the spring of 2020, the kit was still being adapted and tested on training audiences. After six versions, based on ground level testing with the Nigeriens, the kit has now been produced over 8.000 times and distributed to about 4.000 NER security forces. There are discussions of exporting the kit to other militaries in the region which would further facilitate interoperability in the region²¹.

III. Conclusion

This brief has analysed challenges related to SFA on a macro and micro level, showcasing the importance of understanding the local context and the political implications of strengthening security forces in fragile states.

By analysing three concrete examples from the case study, the importance of understanding the local context, energy and logic - enshrined in procedures, values and priorities - has been underlined. Through these examples, the larger political ramifications of SFA have also been highlighted, making it clear that while some changes initiated by WPNs into local security structures can have long-lasting implications, others may never stick, as they are not adapted to local realities. It is therefore crucial that WPNs reflect on long-term impact and sustainability of their assistance, keeping in mind the local context and feeding into local capacities rather than replacing them.

This type of work to ensure local ownership and sustainability requires a large amount of patience of all parties involved as it usually takes longer time to work *with* someone than *for*

²⁰ Belgium Special Operations Forces Liaison Element, Life Saving Kit– Internal Document, 2018, Belgian Defence.

²¹ For example, some Burkinabe forces – who are part of the G5 Sahel Joint Force - have already received these kits in 2019.

someone.²² Decision-makers therefore need to recognize that time is needed for deeper and more sustainable impact. Working with local processes has undeniable advantages but also requires the providers of SFA to review how training and equipping is done, introducing more adaptive and flexible solutions. Often, this slower process is contrasted with decision makers who need (immediate) results to validate operations and spending. Both of these realities must be taken into consideration, meaning that there is a need for the staff in the field to work on two lines of effort simultaneously: the long term for the *recipients*, and the short term for *providers*. This is possible, but it requires an understanding and supportive hierarchy.

The benefits of standardising training and equipment are evident and have been stressed in this brief, yet more research needs to be undertaken with regard to collaboration and coordination structures between WPNs. Working together with other WPNs, attempting to standardize processes and align objectives, can be difficult as motivation, patience and resources can diverge enormously. Relationships, which can be fragile, become the linchpin of successful coordination and synchronization. Horizontal collaboration structures between different WPNs bring advantages in the sense that every nation has the autonomy to think, act, and engage with the recipient nation. Yet, this requires buy-in from all participants and innovative and creative minds which are willing and able to build on the unique characteristics of the given host nation. WPNs therefore need to not only get a holistic perspective of the institution they are assisting, but also a broader understanding of other SFA initiatives in order to streamline training and avoid duplication. From this perspective, coordination and communication should complement command and control as guiding principles for SFA collaborations. Options to be explored in order to improve SFA could also entail a development of synergies between cooperation programs related to SFA and specific needs linked to peacekeeping, for example by developing the UN Light Coordination Mechanism.

²² See for example Nina Wilén, "Capacity-building or Capacity-Taking? Legitimizing Concepts in Peace and Development Operations", *International Peacekeeping*, vol.16, n°3, 2009, pp.337-351.

The authors

Nina Wilén is Assistant Professor in Political Science at Lund University and Director for the Africa Program at Egmont Institute of International Relations. Her research interests include peacekeeping, peace operations, and military assistance, with a particular focus on gender and the military. She has published extensively on these topics in reviews such as *Third World Quarterly*, *Gender, Work and Organisation* and *Journal of Eastern African Studies*. She is a Global Fellow at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO), and part of the Research Project on Security Force Assistance. Since January 2020 she is the Editor in Chief of *International Peacekeeping*.



Pierre Dehaene is a PhD candidate at King's College London studying the relationship between strategy, complexity and minimalism. He also serves in the Belgian armed forces as a practitioner, actively bridging the gap between theory and practice.



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