



EXPLORING DISTANCE IN SECURITY FORCE ASSISTANCE: THE CASE OF NATO MISSION IRAQ

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Maria-Louise Clausen and Peter Albrecht

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ABSTRACT

The West's diminished belief in its own transformative capabilities has led to a preference for stabilisation over statebuilding interventions. This working paper explores how this has led to an increased Western focus on applying distance between the intervening state and the subject of intervention, focusing specifically on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), as the foremost Western security organisation. The working paper argues that current security force assistance applies a dual strategy that combines local partner support – the advising, training, and equipping of local partners to plan and execute ground operations – with targeted strikes and surveillance using drones. This distance, we suggest, actually lessens the effectiveness of SFA, as these relationships suffer from many of the weaknesses associated with patron-client relations as described in the proxy war literature. In the second part of the paper, we trace how SFA is done by the NATO Mission Iraq (NMI). This is an important test case for demonstrating the influential idea that the security of NATO member states can be ensured by stabilising the alliance's periphery.

INTRODUCTION

Protracted, costly but also largely unsuccessful interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan have reduced the appetite in the West for large-scale military interventions. These interventions were shaped by an unfettered belief in the superiority of liberal democracies and sought to strengthen accountability and effectiveness of – and respect for – human rights and the rule of law *within* the security sector. But due to the West's diminished belief in its own transformative abilities and a growing preference for stabilisation over statebuilding, today's forms of military interventions leave little room for such an approach. Instead, Western states increasingly seek to influence conflicts abroad while minimising their physical presence on the ground.¹ This has resulted in a comeback for the phenomenon of proxy-warfare in contemporary conflict.² But the linkage of the proxy war concept to the Cold War, leading some to refer to it as a mere 'moniker' of superpower interventionism,³ has led to an over-prevalence of state-centric frames and limited conceptualisations of the complexity of interactions between patrons and clients.⁴ Consequently, an overlapping yet separate literature seeks to

¹ Maria-Louise Clausen and Peter Albrecht, "Interventions Since the Cold War: From Statebuilding to Stabilisation," *International Affairs* 97:4 (2021), 1203-1220.

² Andrew Mumford, "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict," *The RUSI Journal* 158:2 (2013), 40-46. Tyrone L. Groh, *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

³ Vladimir Rauta, "Proxy War: A Reconceptualisation," *Civil Wars* 23:1 (2021), 1-24.

⁴ Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss, "The Political Power of Proxies: Why Nonstate Actors Use Local Surrogates," *International Security* 44:4 (2020); Maria-Louise Clausen, "Exploring the Agency of the

explore distance as a defining characteristic of contemporary warfare, spurring an expanding range of conceptual alternatives for indirect warfare such as 'surrogate', 'remote' and 'vicarious'.⁵

In this working paper we explore how Western approaches to security sector reform (SSR) have become increasingly focused on applying distance between the intervening state and the context of the intervention. SSR dates back to the 1990s, when it was deliberately and explicitly defined as separate from the more narrow and technically orientated train-and-equip security assistance.⁶ However, we argue that the West's desire to introduce distance between itself and its interventions has led to a search for alternative avenues for attaining strategic advantage and influence in the world's hotspots. Our focus is on Security Force Assistance (SFA) to utilise local partners and technology to achieve strategic goals from a distance.⁷ We argue that SFA can be understood as a principal-agent relationship as one actor, the West, provides resources and, in return, expects to be able to influence events on the ground. The literature on principal-agent relationships has explored factors that both enable and challenge the exchange of resources from a principal to influence through an agent. We suggest that approaching SFA as a principal-agent relationship can help us understand some of the challenges that SFA faces in weak and unstable states.

This paper will focus on two key developments in contemporary military interventions.⁸ First, military intervention is outsourced to Southern partners in what is considered from the perspective of the West to be a safer, cheaper and more effective intervention strategy. Instead of all-encompassing SSR programmes, Western military support becomes an instrument to equip partners to act as proxies for the security agendas of Western states – inching towards latter-day train-and-equip programmes – while ignoring or paying lip service to more comprehensive processes of state-building. Second, an attempt to reduce the need for SSR altogether by relying on ever more sophisticated war-fighting

Affiliates of Transnational Jihadist Organizations: The Case of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2022).

⁵ See Andreas Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *International Affairs* 92:1 (2016), 97–113; Rubrick Biegón, Vladimir Rauta and Tom F. A. Watts, "Remote Warfare – Buzzword or Buzzkill?," *Defence Studies*, 21:4 (2021), 427–446; and Thomas Waldman, "Vicarious Warfare: The Counterproductive Consequences of Modern American Military Practice," *Contemporary Security Policy* 39:2 (2018), 181–205.

⁶ Paul Jackson, "Security Sector Reform and State Building," *Third World Quarterly* 32:10 (2011), 1803–22.

⁷ Malte Riemann and Norma Rossi, "Remote Warfare as 'Security of Being': Reading Security Force Assistance as an Ontological Security Routine," *Defence Studies* 21:4 (2021). We are aware of how non-Western states and actors use similar or variations of similar tactics. In fact, as the West is losing appetite for intervention, particularly involving ground troops, countries like Russia, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia are increasingly intervening in their neighbours' affairs. See Mark Leonard, "The New Interventionists," European Council on Foreign Relations, 15 March 2016, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_new_interventionists_6025. A timely example is the description of hybrid warfare by General Valery Gerasimov focusing on Russian tactics in Crimea. See Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations," *Military Review* (Jan-Feb 2016). Moreover, private military companies play an increasing role in the outsourcing of warfare, but we have here chosen to take a state-centric focus.

⁸ We identified these two key developments in a previous paper. See Clausen and Albrecht, "Interventions Since the Cold War."

technologies. Technological advances allow interveners to maintain physical distance to the battlefield, while monitoring and responding to events in the field.⁹ This has diminished the need for SSR as Western states are less dependent on local partners for carrying out sensitive military operations.

These types of interventions indicate a shift where security has moved from being part of a broader development agenda to being narrowly focused on Western security. This process is manifested in the foremost Western security organisation, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), where SFA as a foreign policy tool has grown in importance with, for example, the creation of the NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence in 2017.¹⁰ A key aspect of the SFA agenda is the idea that the security of NATO member states can be ensured by stabilising the alliance's periphery. The NATO Mission Iraq (NMI), which was established formally in 2018, is an important test case for this agenda and as such a key case for current SFA efforts by NATO.¹¹

This working paper first provides a brief elaboration of how SSR emerged after the Cold War, and how it transformed in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the US on 11 September 2001. We explore the introduction of distance in contemporary military interventions by the West with a specific emphasis on NATO. The paper argues that the limited success of the resource demanding wars in Iraq and Afghanistan diminished the belief in large-scale interventions, leading to interventions defined by the desire to introduce distance between the intervener and the place of intervention by relying on local partners and technology. In the second half of the paper, we explore Iraq as a paradigmatic case of Western security interventions over several decades following the Cold War. We explore NATO's support of the Iraqi security sector through the NMI and show how distance in the form of delegation to a local partner and technology shape current security force assistance by the West.

SECURITY SECTOR REFORM AFTER THE COLD WAR

The advent of security sector reform (SSR) in the late 1990s articulated the idea that making peace, reinforcing stability and promoting democratisation required a fundamental transformation of how security institutions were governed and funded. Historically, SSR grew out of the liberal-democratic world order that dominated after the Soviet Union's collapse, marking a departure from train-and-equip exercises that until this point had focused mainly on making security institutions more effective. Indeed, Cold War security support had been almost

⁹ Olivier Schmitt, "Wartime Paradigms and the Future of Western Military Power," *International Affairs* 96:2 (2020), 401–18; Warren Chin, "Technology, War and the State: Past, Present and Future," *International Affairs* 95:4 (2019), 765–84.

¹⁰ <https://www.nsfacoe.org/>

¹¹ Kevin Koehler, "Projecting Stability in Practice? NATO's New Training Mission in Iraq", NDC Policy Brief 2, NATO Defense College, Oct 2018, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1216>

universally train-and-equip by nature, with the goal of empowering a partner to contain the export of security threats and the spread of an opposing ideological camp.¹² In practice, this meant that assistance was given to build the capacity of recipient regimes to defend against internal and external challengers, while serving as proxies in the providers' wider struggles for influence.¹³ SSR, Caparini noted in the early 2000s, emerged 'within the development community' and was 'based on the assumption that democracy and sustainable socio-economic development [...] cannot be achieved without meeting the basic security needs of individuals and communities'.¹⁴ The abbreviation, SSR, was initially coined and projected by the UK's Department for International Development (DfID), signalling its political fight domestically to carve out and consolidate a role vis-à-vis the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence. This took place in a geopolitical reality where the Soviet threat had waned, and the financial power of a development agency like DfID rose exponentially. In this context, DfID was demanding a role in defining what interventions should look like in a situation that from a Western perspective was seen as marked by an increased number of intrastate conflicts.¹⁵ Indeed, Clare Short, head of DfID at this time, who played a key role in the integration of security and development and initial formulations of SSR in the 1990s framed it as: 'You couldn't be intelligently interested in development in Africa and not be very focused on how you bring all these conflicts to an end'.¹⁶ In a speech from 1999, often referred to as the birth of SSR, Short noted that 'we want increasingly to integrate a security sector reform perspective into our country programmes and into the thinking of other donors and multilateral development institutions'.¹⁷

This linkage, or even subjugation, of security to development was a result of the shared rationale that furthering democratisation – including of the security sector or more narrowly the defence sector – would have a stabilising effect regionally and globally because it was believed that democracies were unlikely to fight each other. This was part of a wider trend that took hold in even the preeminent Western security institution emerging out of the Cold War, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Formed in 1949, NATO arose from the desire to counteract the perceived threat of Soviet expansion and infiltration in Europe after the conclusion of the Second World War.¹⁸ It was initially formulated as a pact to establish the firm commitment of the US to aid militarily in the event of any aggression in Europe. But despite its pre-occupation with military affairs, as one

¹² Mark Sedra, "Finding Innovation in State-building: Moving Beyond the Orthodox Liberal Model," *PRISM* 3:3 (2012), 47-62 (p. 53).

¹³ Øystein H. Rolandsen, Maggie Dwyer & William Reno, "Security Force Assistance to Fragile States: A Framework of Analysis," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15:5 (2021), 563-579.

¹⁴ Marina Caparini, "Security Sector Reform and NATO and EU Enlargement," *SIPRI Yearbook* (2003), 237-260.

¹⁵ Mark R. Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars* (London: Zed Books, 2009).

¹⁶ Author interview with Clare Short, London, June 2008.

¹⁷ Clare Short, "Security Sector Reform and the Elimination of Poverty," speech delivered at Centre for Defence Studies, King's College London, 9 March 1999, <https://www.clareshort.org/speeches/security-sector-reform>.

¹⁸ Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of Nato and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 11.

expert on NATO frames it, the main purpose of NATO was to stiffen the self-confidence of the smaller European states in the face of Soviet political pressure.¹⁹

In the 1990s, NATO began its transformation from a threat-based alliance to a security management institution in line with Europe's (and the US's) self-perception as a projector of stability into their immediate neighbourhoods, with NATO as the 'agent of change'.²⁰ Initially, this governance-orientated approach focused on transforming former Warsaw Pact Countries in Central and Eastern Europe to promote political and military cooperation across the European continent as outlined in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme.²¹ The PfP focused on formulating individual partnership programmes with subscribing states, primarily newly democratic Central and East European states, with objectives focusing on transparency in national defence planning, ensuring democratic control of defence forces and the development of closer ties to NATO for the purpose of joint peacekeeping or humanitarian missions and later full NATO membership.²² Hence, the framework document for the PfP encapsulates the liberal-democratic principles of governance that dominated the West's approach to SSR in the 1990s.

Up until the early 2000s, a belief in the West's ability to project stability and democracy was at its height, but this changed after the terrorist attacks on the US on 11 September 2001. In a double-pull, 9/11 rebalanced the relationship between development and security, establishing a hierarchy that put the latter definitively on top. The US led the way with a sweeping expansion of executive authority, and a broad erosion of civil liberties, which militarised US foreign assistance in areas of strategic interest, notably Iraq and Afghanistan.²³ This shift brought SSR to the forefront of Western interventions and transformed it from being the responsibility of development organisations to ultimately becoming a military endeavour. This paved the way for a larger role for NATO. After 9/11, NATO was under pressure to demonstrate its ability to respond to asymmetric threats.²⁴ On 12 September 2001, it made the unprecedented decision to invoke Article V of the NATO charter, which states that an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all NATO members.²⁵ In the end, however, the US preferred to move ahead with the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, that began in October 2001, without direct participation of NATO. While NATO was quickly side-lined by the US administration in the military campaign in Afghanistan, the 9/11 attacks mark a

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 16

²⁰ David S. Yost, *NATO Transformed: The Alliance's New Roles in International Security* (Washington, DC: United States Inst of Peace Press, 1998).

²¹ NATO, "Partnership for Peace: Framework Document," 10-11 Jan 1994, <http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c940110b.htm>.

²² Chris Morffew, "Partnership for Peace and Security Sector Reform," in *Security Sector Reform in South East Europe, From a Necessary Remedy to a Global Concept: 13th Workshop of the Study Group "Regional Stability in South East Europe,"* ed. A. H. Ebnöther et al (Vienna: DCAF Publishing, 2007), pp. 11-19.

²³ Christopher J. Coyne, "The Political Economy of the Creeping Militarization of US Foreign Policy," *Public Policy* 17:1 (2011), 1-25.

²⁴ Caparini, "Security Sector Reform," p. 248.

²⁵ Andrew R. Hoehn and Sarah Harting, *Risking NATO: Testing the Limits of the Alliance in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010).

shift in NATO security discourse towards increased emphasis on terrorism.²⁶ This gave NATO a new focus – the stabilisation of its periphery. This was initially geographically focused on Afghanistan where NATO became heavily involved through support to the international security force, called International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), with planning and logistics as well as communication and intelligence. NATO took on command of ISAF in 2003 and continued its role in Afghanistan in the following years, although the US remained decisive for the intervention.

In Iraq, the US state department had outlined a comprehensive nation-building programme in 2002, but it was never put to the test as the Pentagon and the military establishment discarded the plan and set up the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (renamed the Coalition Provisional Authority [CPA] in May 2003).²⁷ The US-led coalition was utterly unprepared for the increase in the number and sophistication of attacks on coalition forces as Iraq collapsed into a downward spiral of political violence, crime and civil war after 2003.²⁸ While the US took the lead in Iraq, early on there were calls for NATO to take on a larger role as a multinational force.²⁹ However, as key NATO countries such as France and Germany were wary about the war, NATO could not act as one in Iraq.

The limited success of the resource-demanding wars in Iraq and Afghanistan diminished the belief in the ability of large-scale military interventions to transform states into recognisable liberal democratic polities. In 2017, Mark Sedra bluntly stated that SSR had produced notably few identifiable successes and that ‘the impact of failed US security assistance programmes has been striking’ – not only in Iraq, but also in Afghanistan, Yemen and multiple African countries.³⁰

EXPANDING DISTANCE IN MILITARY INTERVENTIONS

Current interventions are increasingly defined by the desire to introduce physical and political distance between the intervener and the space and place of intervention.³¹ This has become a comprehensive strategy by which Western states, with the help of partners on the ground and technological innovation, seek

²⁶ Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, chapter 10.

²⁷ Marina Ottaway, “Nation-Building in Iraq: Iran 1, the United States 0,” *Insight Turkey* 17:2 (2015).

²⁸ Andrew Rathmell, *Developing Iraq’s Security Sector: The Coalition Provisional Authority’s Experience* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2005).

²⁹ International Crisis Group (ICG), “Iraq: Building a New Security Structure,” *Middle East Report* 20, 23 Dec 2003, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/iraq-building-new-security-structure>.

³⁰ Mark Sedra, *Security Sector Reform in Conflict-Affected Countries: The Evolution of a Model* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 79.

³¹ Rubrick Biegón and Tom F. A. Watts, “Remote Warfare and the Retooling of American Primacy,” *Geopolitics* 27:3 (2022), 948-971.

to achieve security objectives without deploying large military forces.³² Security is prioritised over governance, and political settlements over democratic or human rights standards – something that has become pertinent as the global effort against transnational jihadism has meant closer ties with authoritarian regimes under the rubric of fighting Islamist insurgents.

The standard operational framework for Western interventions in conflict-affected contexts, including those spearheaded by NATO, has become stabilisation rather than statebuilding.³³ Instead of emphasising the state's ability to preserve itself via functioning and democratically accountable security forces, the West has come to focus more narrowly on building security forces able to prevent instability and chaos. For example, in Iraq during Operation Inherent Resolve to defeat ISIL, then-President Obama only authorised the deployment of a limited number of Special Operations Forces to assist the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in their anti-IS operations. Instead, the local security forces were tasked with fighting on the ground while the US and other Western states assisted with weapons, logistics and intelligence. Complementing the delegation of security to local partners has been a quest to utilise technology to make warfare more humane and eliminate the need for large military campaigns. While it is not new to seek military superiority through technology, the political constraints on large-scale military actions that risk the lives of Western soldiers, combined with the growing focus on taking measures to avoid civilian casualties, has accelerated the development of weapons systems that utilise precision, remote control, target identification and acquisition and significantly improved command and control operating systems.³⁴ This outsourcing of warfare to technology, including what has been referred to as the 'dronification of state power', also gained traction during Obama's tenure.³⁵

Delegating to partners in the global South

Since 9/11, the West, and the US in particular, has sought to lower the political and financial cost of intervention through a strategy of multilateral retrenchment and strategic partnerships with local partners.³⁶ This has brought Security Force Assistance (SFA) to the fore as a mechanism by which one actor attempts to outsource responsibility for the provision of security to another.³⁷ SFA is a practice aimed at building partner capacity and is offered by Western democracies to local military forces to increase the strategic reach of Western militaries. It offers

³² Riemann and Rossi, "Remote Warfare" as 'Security of Being.'"

³³ Roberto Belloni and Irene Costantini, "From Liberal Statebuilding to Counterinsurgency and Stabilization: The International Intervention in Iraq," *Ethnopolitics* 18:5 (2019), 509–25 (p. 510); Koehler, "Projecting Stability in Practice?"

³⁴ Anzar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³⁵ Ian G. R. Shaw, *Predator Empire: Drone Warfare and Full Spectrum Dominance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Seyom Brown, "Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27:2 (2016).

³⁶ Daniel W. Drezner, "Does Obama have a Grand Strategy? Why We Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times," *Foreign Affairs* 90:4 (2011).

³⁷ Koehler, "Projecting Stability in Practice?"

trainings, advising and enable operations with partners so that they can deal with threats and challenges that the West deem critical to its national security. This has led Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss to refer to SFA programmes as akin to defensive sponsor-proxy relationships, reflecting a general shift in how partnerships are understood.³⁸ Partnerships increasingly refer to relationships where the strategic, operational and tactical burden of warfare is delegated from the West to an actor in the global South.³⁹ These local actors are described as partners, but it is a relationship where the Western patron provides resources – money, weapons, training, or reputational support – and in return expects influence on the ground without having to send a large ground force.⁴⁰ The specific type of support and level of influence needed for a relationship to be characterised as a proxy relationship varies and is subject to normative evaluation.⁴¹ The patron usually does not join the fighting on the ground but might provide a protected area for resupply and training for the client.⁴² Operationally, partners have local knowledge and easier access to remote areas.⁴³ But whereas delegation of warfare appear less costly for the patron, experience shows how the West, and the US in particular, frequently face problems. Local groups accept patronage as it can help them in their cause through access to superior weapons, higher salaries, or linkage to a strong brand, but proxies will almost invariably act according to their own interests and impulses. Monitoring is difficult and costly for the patron.⁴⁴ Moreover, the patron risks becoming involved in unwanted conflict on behalf of its proxy as it can be difficult to disengage from proxies if their fight has been internalised as a just cause, or to acknowledge transgressions as these reflect poorly on the patron.⁴⁵ Although support to proxies can help limit escalation as it allows some deniability, it can also lead to an overall worsening of conflict as more actors become involved, each supporting their own groups. These factors help us understand how it is not without risk to engage in SFA to boost the military capabilities of security institutions in weak and conflict-affected states.

³⁸ Assaf Moghadam and Michel Wyss, "Five Myths About Sponsor-Proxy Relationships," *Lawfare* (Dec 2018).

³⁹ Andreas Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War"; Brown, "Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy."

⁴⁰ Tyrone Groh, "The Utility of Proxy War," *Lawfare* (April 2019).

⁴¹ Rauta, "Proxy War"; Maria-Louise Clausen, "Saudi Arabia's Rhetorical Construction of the Houthis as an Iranian Proxy," in *Sectarianism, De-Sectarianization and Regional Politics in The Middle East: Protest and Proxies Across States and Borders*, ed. Eyad Alrefai et al (London: IB Tauris: forthcoming).

⁴² Ryan Grauer and Dominic Tierney, "The Arsenal of Insurrection: Explaining Rising Support for Rebels," *Security Studies* 27:2 (2018); Daniel L. Byman, "Why Engage in Proxy War? A State's Perspective," The Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 21 May 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/21/why-engage-in-proxy-war-a-states-perspective/>

⁴³ Daniel L. Byman, "Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism," *International Security* 31:2 (2006), 79–115.

⁴⁴ Daniel L. Byman "Why Be a Pawn to a State? Proxy Wars from a Proxy's Perspective," The Brookings Institute, Washington DC, 22 May 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/22/why-be-a-pawn-to-a-state-proxy-wars-from-a-proxys-perspective/>; Byman, "Why Engage in Proxy War?".

⁴⁵ Brown, "Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy," p. 247.

Using technology to intervene from a distance

Technology has been put forward as way to not only to make war less violent and costly, but as a shortcut that allows interveners to remain engaged in distant conflict zones without dispatching large numbers of troops. While we recognise that the range of potential technologies relevant for a study of increased distance in SFA is broad, we focus on the use of drones or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) as these allow the West to participate in warfare from a safe distance.⁴⁶

Many commentators have argued that the use of armed drones, particularly in the US-led 'war on terror', is a defining trait of remote warfare.⁴⁷ The use of the drone redefines what it means to be a combatant, reshapes the sensory experience of war, and leverages changes in operational tactics and military ethics. Most notably, this include a transference of risk from the Western soldier to the local partner and non-combatants living in the places where air strikes occur.⁴⁸ In relation to SFA, drones can be used to circumvent the role played by local partners. The ability of drone operators to be located far from the strike site, as they observe the unsuspecting targets from the safety of a command centre, has spurred the comparison of drones to having an almost 'godlike power over life and death'.⁴⁹ Hence, the danger is that this type of technology – which makes the enemy more vulnerable while the intervener is removed from danger – conceals the real cost of military intervention.⁵⁰

From a military standpoint, the main weakness of the deployment of technology is that it relies on intelligence collected by humans. The solution has been to introduce remotely operated aerial platforms that can collect and process huge amounts of data. Drones have become essential to obtain information in places that are often presented as impenetrable and as defying empirical investigation from the perspective of the external observer and intervenor.⁵¹ This reflects a perception that aerial surveillance is more precise than human intelligence as it comes with a sense of omniscience. As such, it represents a dream of obtaining perfect information through full-spectrum dominance, using land, air, maritime and space assets.⁵² Military technology does not just remake war or introduce distance, but recalibrates the interaction between the intervener and those being targeted for intervention.

⁴⁶ Biegon et al, "Remote Warfare"; Waldman, "Vicarious Warfare."

⁴⁷ Biegon et al, "Remote Warfare."

⁴⁸ Christian Enemark, "Drones, Risk, and Perpetual Force," *Ethics & International Affairs* 28:3 (2014).

⁴⁹ Hugh Gusterson, *Drone: Remote Control Warfare* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), pp. 3-4.

⁵⁰ Michael Walzer, "Targeted Killing and Remote Warfare," *Dissent*, 11 January 2013, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/targeted-killing-and-drone-warfare

⁵¹ Priya Satia, "Drones: A History from the British Middle East," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 5:1 (2014), 1-31.

⁵² Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 240.

DISTANCE EXEMPLIFIED – NATO IN IRAQ

The 2003 war in Iraq was a turning point for the US military and the public that played a key role in moving towards high tech and light footprint forms of military intervention.⁵³ The shortcomings of conventional forces in Iraq post-invasion unleashed debate on how to adapt to the battlefield challenges of terrorism and insurgency. In this part of the paper, we explore Iraq as a paradigmatic case of Western security interventions. We explore NATO's involvement in security assistance in Iraq to show how distance has become a defining feature of Western interventions.⁵⁴ Iraq is a prime example of how Western security concerns trump local security concerns – and political and economic development.⁵⁵

The current SFA should be understood as a corrective to the failed state-building process that followed the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq. While Iraq had been vigorously militarised during the Ba'ath regime, the regular armed forces had been deliberately side-lined by Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath party.⁵⁶ But the military was a key social and economic institution. While being a tool of repression, the army was also a cause of pride and patriotic sentiment. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)'s decision to dismantle the Iraqi army in May 2003⁵⁷ not only resulted in the unemployment of approximately 400,000 officers but was also considered humiliating to many Iraqis.⁵⁸ The subsequent creation of a New Iraqi Army (NIA) by the CPA prioritised expediency and therefore used Iraqi intermediaries such as political parties, tribal chiefs, and notables to recommend candidates and military appointments were increasingly based on loyalty rather than merit.⁵⁹ This institutionalised factionalism and the dependence of the NIA on the US left Iraq dependent on the US military to uphold security and train new security forces, thereby undermining the notion that a legitimate Iraqi institution was being established.⁶⁰ Furthermore, training and instructions was delegated to American private contractors, whose efforts were hampered by poor organisation, which led to language problems and overall humiliating treatment.⁶¹ In sum, the policy of 'Iraqification' in both political and military spheres was justified as an effort to turn power over to the Iraqi people. It led, however, to a hurried and incomplete 'indigenisation' of the

⁵³ Adam J. Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁵⁴ Julie Garey, *The US Role in NATO's Survival after the Cold War* (Cham: Springer, 2019), p. 36.

⁵⁵ Belloni and Costantini "From Liberal Statebuilding to Counterinsurgency and Stabilization."

⁵⁶ ICG, "Iraq", p. 3; Dina Rizk Khouri, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁵⁷ CPA/ORD/23 May 2003/02, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB418/docs/9b%20-%20Coalition%20Provisional%20Authority%20Order%20No%202%20-%202008-23-03.pdf>

⁵⁸ ICG, "Iraq," p. 13.

⁵⁹ Ottaway, "Nation-Building in Iraq," p. 13; https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/cpa-iraq/regulations/20030818_CPAORD_22_Creation_of_a_New_Iraqi_Army.pdf

⁶⁰ Paul Bremer and Malcolm McConnell, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Anthony Cordesman, "Iraq and Conflict Termination: The Road to Guerilla War?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 28 July 2003, https://universityofleeds.github.io/philtaylorpapers/pmt/exhibits/666/Iraq_ConflictTerm.pdf.

⁶¹ ICG, "Iraq," p. 15; Wilcke, "A Hard Place," p. 129.

Iraqi security forces that left them underfunded and with limited skill and internal trust.⁶² As such, the CPA's focus on producing uniformed officers instead of institutional reform proved to be a short-sighted approach.⁶³

The result of this was seen in 2014, as parts of the army dissipated when faced with the onslaught of the Islamic State. The focus on quickly creating officers in uniform had led to a neglect of institution building, making the Iraqi army a 'Fabergé Egg military – expensive, shiny, and easy to Break'.⁶⁴ It was numerically superior but political decisions that led to lack of or broken equipment, and the promotion of incompetent and corrupt leaders to command positions, left the army impotent when faced with a threat.⁶⁵ This lesson has led to a focus in current SFA on the military institutional framework such as budgeting, personal management, inter-institutional links and capacity for ministerial oversight – especially as the Iraqi security forces, particularly key forces such as the Counter-Terrorism Service, subsequently has proven themselves as competent soldiers in the fight against ISIL.⁶⁶

The NATO Mission Iraq

The collapse of the Iraqi army in 2014 has been cast as a testimony to the failure of the US-led security sector reform following the invasion in 2003.⁶⁷ NATO played a limited role in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, instead seeing individual NATO member states, including Denmark, participate bilaterally in the US-led coalition. This has been cited as evidence of a fractured US-NATO relationship as President George W. Bush repeatedly and publicly asked for NATO support.⁶⁸ However, following debate and pressure from the US, NATO did establish a training mission in Iraq (NTM-I), reaching close to 400 stationed personnel during its time of operation

⁶² Toby Dodge, "Iraq: The Contradictions of Exogenous Statebuilding in Historical Perspective," *Third World Quarterly* 27:1 (2006), 187–200.

⁶³ Christoph Wilcke, "A Hard Place: The United States and the Creation of a New Security Apparatus in Iraq," *Civil Wars* 8:2 (2006).

⁶⁴ Wilcke, "A Hard Place," p. 125; Jahara Matissek, "The Crisis of American Military Assistance: Strategic Dithering and Fabergé Egg Armies," *Defense & Security Analysis* 34:3 (2018), 267–290.

⁶⁵ Jonathan Marcus, "Factors Behind the Precipitate Collapse of Iraq's Army," *BBC News*, 13 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838435>; John Beck, "Iraqi Soldiers Fleeing ISIS Claim They Were 'Abandoned' by Senior Officers," *Vice News*, 15 June 2014, <https://news.vice.com/article/iraqi-soldiers-fleeing-isis-claimthey-were-abandoned-by-senior-officers>; Eric Schmitt and Michael R. Gordon, "The Iraqi Army was Crumbling Long Before Its Collapse, U.S. Officials Say," *The New York Times*, 12 June 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/13/world/middleeast/american-intelligence-officials-said-iraqi-military-had-beenin-decline.html>

⁶⁶ Michael Knights and Alex Mello, "The Best Thing America Built in Iraq: Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service and the Long War Against Militancy," *War on the Rocks*, 9 July 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/the-best-thing-america-built-in-iraq-iraqs-counter-terrorism-service-and-the-long-war-against-militancy/>

⁶⁷ Andreas Krieg, "ISIS' Success in Iraq: A Testimony to Failed Security Sector Reform," *CSG Insights*, 22 July 2014.

⁶⁸ Mike Allen and Robin Wright, "Bush Seeks NATO Help on Iraq," *The Washington Post*, 25 June 2004, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/06/25/bush-seeks-nato-help-on-iraq/ba0442ea-ab99-49d4-be54-be3a3c212972/>; Garey, *The US Role in NATO's Survival after the Cold War*, p. 127.

from 2004-2011.⁶⁹ The mission focused on training, mentoring and equipment donation. It explicitly referred to itself as not having a direct role in the US-led combat mission that followed the invasion in 2003, but the NTM-I commander was also the United States Forces Iraq (USF-I) Deputy Commanding General for Advising and Training, and the need for coordination with the coalition was emphasised.⁷⁰ The training mission closed down at the end of 2011, but the relationship between NATO and Iraq was maintained by making Iraq a NATO strategic partner country in 2012. Hence, whereas the rise of Islamic State in the Levant has been cast as a failure of US-led SSR, the more reticent approach taken by NATO from 2003 onwards means that NATO has a less troubled reputation in Iraq. Consequently, as ISIL was announced militarily defeated in December 2017 by then Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, the focus again turned towards ensuring that ISIL could never re-emerge by reforming the Iraqi security forces.⁷¹ Subsequently, in July 2018, NATO scaled up its training and advisory efforts in Iraq as it launched the NATO Mission Iraq (NMI).⁷²

NMI is a non-combat training and advisory mission that aims to prevent the return of ISIL by building more transparent, inclusive and effective security institutions.⁷³ This involves tactical-level training at Iraqi military education institutions and support for institutional development of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense (MoD) to encourage self-sustaining and long-term organisational change in the ISF.⁷⁴ The mission is focused on preventing the emergence of Islamic State as this is what the West considers the main security threat related to Iraq. However, Iraqis do not necessarily see Islamic State as the main security threat.⁷⁵ The most influential armed non-state actors are the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella term for more than fifty subgroups that mobilised after Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a *fatwa* in June 2014 urging Iraqis to join the security forces to fight IS.⁷⁶ The PMF vary greatly in size, organisational capacity and political loyalties, but the strongest have traditionally been those enjoying Iranian support.⁷⁷ The PMF have formally been integrated into the Iraqi security

⁶⁹ It was considered a precondition for NATO involvement that there was international support through a UN resolution (which came with UNSCR 1546 in June 2004), a request from the Iraqi government and support among NATO states. See Lynch and Janzen, "NATO Training Mission".

⁷⁰ NATO, "NATO's Assistance to Iraq (2004-2011)," 1 Sept 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_51978.htm

⁷¹ Maria-Louise Clausen, *Breaking the Cycle: Iraq Following the Military Defeat of Islamic State*, DIIS Report 2, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen, 2019.

⁷² NATO, "Relations with Iraq," 1 June 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_88247.htm

⁷³ NATO, "NATO Mission Iraq," 27 May 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_166936.htm

⁷⁴ Peter Dhal Thruelsen, "Misaligned in Mesopotamia: Conflicting Ambitions in NATO Mission Iraq," *War on the Rocks*, 16 Sept 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/misaligned-in-mesopotamia-conflicting-ambitions-in-nato-mission-iraq/>; Clausen, Maria-Louise and Malmvig, Helle, "Mission Impossible? The NATO mission in Iraq is facing a number of challenges", DIIS policy Brief, October 2022.

⁷⁵ In a nationally representative survey done by one of the authors, most saw the rivalry between Iran and the USA as having the most negative impact on their personal security. In second place, 27.8 percent pointed to Islamic State as their major security concern.

⁷⁶ Clausen, *Breaking the Cycle*.

⁷⁷ Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," Report, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, 28 April 2017.

forces but continue to operate outside state control and as such pose a threat to the legitimacy of the security sector.⁷⁸

NMI is aware that the PMF pose a challenge to reforming the security sector, and therefore seeks to isolate its activities from the political – and historical – context in which they take place. It presents some themes like ‘Building Integrity’, i.e. battling corruption, as a priority, but there is limited desire to deal directly with the well-documented and long-term problem that the MoD is institutionally weak, corrupt and bloated.⁷⁹ Instead, the training efforts are presented as a long-term strategy to reform the system by gradually influencing it from within.

Understanding SFA as delegation to a client

The Iraq War has been described as a turning-point for the willingness of the US and its European partners to commit troops to overseas engagements.⁸⁰ This has led to increased reliance on partnered security forces which, through SFA, are meant to take care of their own security in a way that match the interests of the West.⁸¹ At the same time, the use of local partners as proxies conceals the real cost of war from home populations critical of military adventurism.⁸² However, effective SFA has been found to be much harder in practice than often assumed.⁸³

In this section, we explore the NATO supported SFA in Iraq by looking to the proxy literature whose core purpose is to understand the relationship between patrons and clients. NATO is in Iraq to assist the Iraqi security forces so that the ISF can ‘stabilise their country, fight terrorism and prevent the return of Daesh’.⁸⁴ The focus is on strengthening the ISF to be able to uphold security in Iraq as it is in NATO’s interests to secure its ‘southern neighbourhood’ – as the Middle East is referred to.⁸⁵ NATO’s focus has shifted towards the management of what is considered ‘an increasingly problematic Periphery’ that needs to be contained for the West to remain peaceful.⁸⁶ The Iraqi ability to ward off potential external enemies takes a backseat. At the same time, Iraqi elite actors might see the creation of a professional, politically independent, and non-corrupt military as a threat to the internal balance of power. Hence, NATO has to balance both diverging strategic interests among its member states, and among its Iraqi counterparts.

⁷⁸ Michael Knights et al, “Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 163, Washington DC, 23 March 2020; Clausen, *Breaking the Cycle*.

⁷⁹ Rathmell, *Developing Iraq’s Security Sector*, p. 78

⁸⁰ Biegon and Watts, “Remote Warfare and the Retooling of American Primacy,” p. 5.

⁸¹ Stephen Biddle et al, “Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41:1-2 (2018), 89–142.

⁸² Douglas Porch, “Expendable Soldiers,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25:3 (2014), 696-716 (p. 700).

⁸³ Biddle et al, “Small Footprint, Small Payoff.”

⁸⁴ NATO, “NATO Mission Iraq,” 27 May 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_166936.htm

⁸⁵ NATO, “NATO 2022 Strategic Concept,” 29 June 2022, <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept>

⁸⁶ Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*. Pp. 162

NMI provides various types of support to the ISF, but the focus is on training, organisational assistance and reputational support. Training and organisational support aims to build the institutional capacity of the ISF to avoid the mistakes of SSR following 2003 as described above. Reputational support is a bit more ambiguous for several reasons. First, the Iraqi army is an important symbol of sovereignty and national unity. This increases public scrutiny of the relationship between NATO and the ISF, which is exacerbated by the general Iraqi population's limited understanding of what NATO is and how it relates to the US.⁸⁷ Resistance against the US presence in Iraq has become more vocal in recent years.⁸⁸ NATO's efforts in Iraq are explicitly framed as complementing those of the US and while the US is part of NATO, a larger NATO engagement emphasises Europe's role. However, there are those who fear that the US will dominate the mission.⁸⁹

NATO is more vulnerable to criticism of its effort in Iraq as it depends on the support of more than 20 different states with separate interests. This impacts the type and degree of support that NATO is able to offer the ISF and makes NATO dependent on the overt support of the Iraqi government. Consequently, NATO continually emphasises that NMI is demand-driven and based on Iraqi ownership.⁹⁰ Decades of intervention, including the most recent Operation Inherent Resolve, has established an expectation among the Iraqi of a level of quickly delivered material support which NMI cannot provide.⁹¹ Indeed, NMI does not provide military equipment or other substantial material support to its Iraqi counterparts although it is in demand. Instead, NMI frames itself as supporting the 'basic modernisation of the Iraqi defence'.⁹² This include themes which are considered important for key NATO states but are less of a priority for the Iraqi security forces such as Women, Peace and Security (WPS).⁹³

⁸⁷ In a recent survey by one of the authors, almost 32% replied that the presence of NATO in Iraq violated Iraqi sovereignty and a majority saw the presence of NATO in Iraq as a way for the US to keep its influence (only 24.5% either disagreed or somewhat disagreed). See Maria-Louise Clausen, "Providing Security in Iraq: What Do Iraqis Think?" DIIS policy brief, Danish Institute of International Studies, Copenhagen, 27 April 2021, <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/providing-security-in-iraq-what-do-iraqis-think>

⁸⁸ Harith Hasan, "Iraq's Prime Minister Visited Biden: What Happens Next?" Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, 26 July 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/07/26/iraq-s-prime-minister-visited-biden.-what-happens-next-pub-85040>

⁸⁹ Interviews, NMI, January 2022. NMI also relies on American provided intelligence, infrastructure, basing and logistics. Paolo Napolitano, "What to Expect When You're Expecting NATO in Iraq," *War on the Rocks*, 29 March 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/what-to-expect-when-youre-expecting-nato-in-iraq/>

⁹⁰ Danish Defence, "We Have Helped the Iraqis Take Ownership," 11 May 2022, <https://www.forsvaret.dk/en/news/2022/vi-har-hjulpet-irakerne-til-at-tage-ejerskab/>

⁹¹ Interviews, Iraq, 2017-2022.

⁹² Danish Defence, "We Have Helped the Iraqis Take Ownership."

⁹³ Maria-Louise Clausen and Ekatherina Zhukova, "Making Women Count, Not Just Counting Women," DIIS Policy Brief, Danish Institute of International Studies, Copenhagen, 31 May 2021, <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/making-women-count-not-just-counting-women>

At the same time, NMI has ‘no real carrot or stick’⁹⁴ which means that priorities must be negotiated, and compromises found, with the Iraqi counterparts.⁹⁵ Persuasion and rapport building is not just a doctrinal preference. NATO does not operate in a vacuum, as actors such as Iran and Russia pose a challenge to liberal interventionism because they operate with limited conditionalities and are prepared to hand out material support.⁹⁶ The proxy literature, rather unsurprisingly, shows that the strongest relationships with clients exist if the patron is the sole or leading patron.⁹⁷ This is not the case for NATO. The client, the Iraqi security forces, is not coherent and lacks the capacity to act unified in the overall interest of Iraqi citizens, while alternative patrons proliferate, in some cases supporting the same actors as NATO, and in others, supporting security actors in direct defiance of Iraq government authority.⁹⁸ Hence, the relationship between NATO and the Iraqis suffer from well-established principal-agent challenges. NMI has limited ability to monitor ISF behaviour or desire to impose strict conditionality with clear consequences for shirking. NATO instead accepts limited enforcement capabilities, suggesting that the mere presence of NATO is enough in that it acts as a counterbalance and alternative to the Iranian or Russian influence in Iraq.⁹⁹ This is only accentuated by the current political instability that may lead to a situation where political power is centred around forces controlled by Iran or at least strongly opposed to a US-led role in Iraq such as Muqtadr al-Sadr.¹⁰⁰

Technology as a tactical advantage

The Iraqi 2003 invasion became a massive state-building exercise with the US spending over \$25 billion (unadjusted) on the ISF, devoting tens of thousands of US personnel to training and advising, and the deployment of over 100,000 other US troops to provide security until the ISF could take over.¹⁰¹ However, the initial belief was that a small troop footprint combined with strategic air power could remove Saddam Hussein and the Ba’ath Party regime from power, leading to a

⁹⁴ Peter Dahl Thruelsen, “Misaligned in Mesopotamia: Conflicting Ambitions in NATO Mission Iraq,” *War on the Rocks*, 16 Sept 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/misaligned-in-mesopotamia-conflicting-ambitions-in-nato-mission-iraq/>

⁹⁵ Interviews, NMI, January 2022.

⁹⁶ Belloni and Costantini, “From Liberal Statebuilding to Counterinsurgency and Stabilization,” p. 512; Biddle et al, “Small Footprint, Small Payoff,” p. 91. The role of Turkey – or Türkiye – in Iraq and consequently NMI is also ambiguous at best.

⁹⁷ Afshon Ostovar, “Iran, Its Clients, and the Future of the Middle East: The Limits of Religion,” *International Affairs* 94:6 (2018), 1237–1255.

⁹⁸ Buddhika B. Jayamaha, Kevin Petit and Will Reno, “Iraq’s Path to State Failure,” *Small Wars Journal* (April 2017), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/iraq%e2%80%99s-path-to-state-failure>

⁹⁹ Interviews, NMI, January 2022. Iran and Russia have been described as the new “power couple” in the Middle East, due to a shared aversion to Western-led reform. See Belloni and Costantini “From Liberal Statebuilding to Counterinsurgency and Stabilization,” p. 512.

¹⁰⁰ Byman, “Friends like These”; Michael Young, “Big Bang in Baghdad?” Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, 3 August 2022, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/87621>

¹⁰¹ Biddle, “Small Footprint, Small Payoff.”

free and democratic Iraq.¹⁰² The idea of Iraq being a place especially suited for aerial surveillance and dominance goes back even further.¹⁰³ In this part of the paper, we focus on the impact of technology as the other leg of the Western strategy to defeat ISIL and stabilise Iraq, especially focusing on drones or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs).

Following 9/11, security cooperation programming increasingly focused on building the capacity of partnered states while leveraging remote weapons technologies such as guided munitions, drones and stealth aircraft to increase the accuracy and distance at which Western forces could strike their adversaries in Iraq.¹⁰⁴ But perhaps more importantly, 9/11 ushered in a dramatic change where the US government more or less overnight went from being against targeted assassinations to sanctioning the killings of al-Qaeda operatives and their allies.¹⁰⁵ In 2020, for example, the Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, a high-ranking official of a recognised state, was assassinated by a targeted American drone strike in Iraq, a sovereign state, without warning.¹⁰⁶ The attack spurred vocal resistance to the presence of the US in Iraq and by implication complicated the position of NMI in Iraq.¹⁰⁷

Drones were used in Iraq in 2003 and against the subsequent insurgency where the use of drones expanded as ambushes and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) emerged as a key threat to the US-led Coalition forces.¹⁰⁸ This way, the drone compensated for a lack of information and understanding about Iraq's complex human terrain by increasing the surveillance capabilities of Western militaries from a distance.¹⁰⁹ The drone can fly under clouds that can render satellites useless, and it can circle overhead a specific target for hours. Cameras that are able to read 'a license plate from two miles up' while eavesdropping on electronic communications collect enormous amounts of data.¹¹⁰ NATO argues that the fact that ground force operations are increasingly done by non-NATO local forces, such as the ISF, makes air power paramount in its southern missions.¹¹¹ As an example of this, responding to the threat from ISIL, NATO deployed its advanced Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft in 2016 to support the

¹⁰² Jeanne Godfroy and Liam Collins, "Iraq, 2003–2011: Succeeding to Fail," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 30:1 (2019), 140-175.

¹⁰³ Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, p. 240.

¹⁰⁴ Biegon and Watts, "Remote Warfare and the Retooling of American Primacy."

¹⁰⁵ Gusterson, *Drone*.

¹⁰⁶ Maria-Louise Clausen, "The Potential of Nationalism in Iraq: Caught Between Domestic Repression and External Co-optation," *POMEPS Studies 38: Sectarianism and International Relations* (2020), 24-28.

¹⁰⁷ Following the assassination, the Iraqi parliament requested the then Iraqi prime minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, to end foreign military presence in Iraq. Correspondingly, Shiite militias carried out a total of nearly 100 attacks on US diplomatic facilities and bases hosting US-led coalition troops in Iraq. See Faith Oguzhan Ipek, "The US Withdrawal from Iraq: One Boot Inside, the Other Out?" *Politics Today*, 21 Jan 2022, <https://politicstoday.org/the-u-s-withdrawal-from-iraq-one-boot-inside-the-other-out/>

¹⁰⁸ Godfroy and Collins, "Iraq, 2003–2011," p. 162.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, pp. 140-175.

¹¹⁰ Gusterson, *Drone*, p. 20.

¹¹¹ Hans Binnendijk, "The Role of NATO Joint Air Power in Deterrence and Collective Defence," Joint Air Power Competence Centre, Kalkar, Oct 2017, <https://www.japcc.org/chapters/the-role-of-nato-joint-air-power-in-deterrence-and-collective-defence/#dealing-with-nato-southern-missions-the-role-of-air-power53>

US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS with ‘surveillance and situational awareness’.¹¹² Islamic State remains active across Iraq and the Iraqi security forces and their Western allies continue to use drones to detect attempts at infiltration, military movements, or other suspicious activities.¹¹³

From the perspective of Iraq, drones can support its ability to exert a monopoly of (legitimate) violence in the country by facilitating intelligence gathering and targeted strikes. Technology is seen as a ‘short-cut’ as the Iraqi state does not have the capacity or legitimacy to effectively have a presence on the ground.¹¹⁴ Consequently, the Iraqi security forces are seeking to develop their surveillance capacity in part through transfers of sophisticated surveillance technologies and aerial reconnaissance capabilities from the West. However, the Iraqi security forces are currently not able to, without international support, provide persistent surveillance coverage, especially after dark, when insurgent and terrorist activity is typically more pronounced.¹¹⁵ While NATO might assist the Iraqis with surveillance capabilities, the overall goal for NATO is to maintain and perhaps even extend the scientific, technological and military superiority of NATO while making sure partners have sufficient capability for self-defence.¹¹⁶ Moreover, it is a key principle of supplying material – or sharing material – that the partner should not share it onwards, unless they have permission to do so. However, the ability of NATO to control what the ISF does once equipment has been transferred or information shared is limited.

The ability to carry out effective SFA hinges on the patron’s ability to find reliable information on the inner workings of the client’s security system to locate the most dependable partners. This is particularly relevant in the Iraqi security context as it is fragmented and defined by multiple actors with distinctive agendas.¹¹⁷ The question is if technology can assist in this. Proponents of drones believe that they can help the patron overcome the information asymmetry which is inherent in relationships between patrons and clients as it, in principle, allows the patron to bypass the client by collecting its own information from a distance. However, drones cannot search houses, interrogate captives, talk to locals or build relationships with local communities.¹¹⁸ NATO has also pointed to the

¹¹² NATO, “NATO AWACS Surveillance Aircraft Support to the Counter ISIS Coalition,” Factsheet, Dec 2018, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_12/20181210_1812-factsheet-awacs-isil-en.pdf. The AWACS is a modified Boeing 707 equipped with long-range radar and sensors.

¹¹³ Maria-Louise Clausen, “The Impact of Remote Surveillance in Iraq: A Tool of Coercion or Public Security?” DIIS Policy Brief, Danish Institute of International Studies, Dec 2019.

¹¹⁴ Toby Dodge has referred to this as *hakumat al tayra* (government by aircraft). See Dodge “Iraq,” pp. 187-200.

¹¹⁵ Joseph Trevithick, “Only One of Iraq’s Chinese CH-4B Drones is Mission Capable as Other Buyers Give Up on Them,” *The Drive*, 13 Aug 2019, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/29324/only-one-of-iraqs-chinese-ch-4b-drones-is-mission-capable-as-other-buyers-give-up-on-them>

¹¹⁶ Andrea Gilli, “NATO, Technological Superiority, and Emerging and Disruptive Technologies,” in *NATO 2030: New Technologies, New Conflicts, New Partnerships*, ed. Thierry Tardy, NDC Research Paper no. 17, Feb 2021.

¹¹⁷ Koehler, “Projecting Stability in Practice?”

¹¹⁸ Gusterson, *Drone*.

vulnerability of drones in contested airspace.¹¹⁹ It is thus important to be realistic about what drones can – and cannot – do in supporting effective stabilisation interventions. There is a risk that relying on technology risks undermining the relationship between the patron and the client. In Iraq, the American use of surveillance drones to protect the US embassy and consulates, as well as US personnel unsurprisingly sparked criticism in Iraq as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty.¹²⁰

CONCLUSION

Contemporary warfare is increasingly characterised by the technical ability to threaten and, if necessary, actualise violence from a distance.¹²¹ This process of introducing distance into the effects of war is replicated in the West's approach to security force assistance. As such, SFA is a specific aspect of remote warfare that enables the state to achieve strategic goals without intervening directly by utilising partners and technology.¹²² But security cooperation is haunted by many of the same weaknesses that are well-described in the proxy literature. The client goes rogue or has never actually shared the security interests of the patron. Instead, the West risks that assistance is used to strengthen a corrupt and oppressive regime.¹²³ Hence, SFA can be understood as a principal-agent problem where interest asymmetries are the norm and monitoring is difficult and costly.

Intervention has moved from being part of a development agenda to being more overtly focused on Western security. This trend is reflected in the foremost Western security organisation, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO's security reform trajectory has been intertwined with general intervention patterns of the West, driven initially by an agenda of expansion and democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe, which turned into statebuilding in Afghanistan, and subsequently types of SFA that do not require the deployment of large numbers of officers.

Iraq is a paradigmatic example of how the introduction of distance has shaped NATO's involvement in SFA as it has been a key site of Western interventionism for decades. It showcases the inability of the United States, despite its overwhelming military superiority, to defeat a relatively small group of insurgents and create a sustainable local peace. This failure and the costs incurred by the

¹¹⁹ NATO watch, "NATO Report Highlights Drone Limitations in 'Contested Environments,'" 2014, <https://natowatch.org/newsbriefs/2014/nato-report-highlights-drone-limitations-contested-environments>

¹²⁰ Eric Schmitt and Michael S. Schmidt, "US Drones Patrolling Its Skies Provokes Outrage in Iraq," *The New York Times*, 29 Jan 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/30/world/middleeast/iraq-is-angered-by-us-drones-patrolling-its-skies.html>

¹²¹ Abigail Watson and Alasdair McKay. "Remote Warfare: A Critical Introduction," in *Remote Warfare: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Alasdair McKay et al (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2021), pp. 7–33.

¹²² Riemann and Rossi, "Remote Warfare" as 'Security of Being.'"

¹²³ Barbara Salera, "The Case Against Security Operation in Fragile States," *War on the Rocks*, 18 July 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/07/the-case-against-security-cooperation-in-fragile-states/>

United States through the Iraq intervention, has led to an increased avoidance of 'boots on the ground'. The US role in Iraq is fraught with these historical failures, pushing NATO to the forefront of current Western security force assistance. NATO's role in Iraq is important but also politically and operationally complex. Since 2018, NATO has sought to assist the Iraqi security forces through the NATO Mission Iraq that aims to strengthen Iraqi security institutions to fight terrorism and stabilise the country.¹²⁴ The role played by NATO in Iraq reflect an increased focus in NATO since the 2000s from the expansion of its core to the management of 'an increasingly problematic periphery'.¹²⁵

The world became more unpredictable in 2022. NATO underscores how 'the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine has shattered peace and gravely altered our security environment'.¹²⁶ At the same time, terrorism is pointed to as the most direct asymmetric threat, and conflict, fragility and instability in Africa and the Middle East as directly affecting the security of NATO member states and partners. It has been argued that NATO worked in Europe, more because of the intangible sense of security that NATO membership gives than NATO's ability to counter a military attack by Russia on a member state.¹²⁷ Time will tell if this has an impact on how NATO approaches its southern neighbourhood.

¹²⁴ NATO, "NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI)," Factsheet, March 2021, <https://bit.ly/3EBepL6>.

¹²⁵ John Michael Weaver, *NATO in Contemporary Times: Purpose, Relevance, Future* (Cham: Springer, 2021), p. 162.

¹²⁶ "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept."

¹²⁷ Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*.