



**Karlin, Mara E. *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.**

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Mara Karlin offers a no-nonsense assessment of American security assistance policy, and finds it wanting. She argues that policymakers' penchant for focusing on training and equipping foreign militaries, at the expense of getting involved in more sensitive military affairs, does not help the militaries of fragile states to extend sovereignty over their territory. Scholars of state development and counterinsurgency,

as well as government officials and military officers dealing with security assistance, would be well served by giving Karlin's book a close read.

Karlin calls for new thinking in US security assistance policy. Instead of defaulting to offering hardware and training courses to militaries in need of assistance, the effect of which is often merely symbolic, policymakers should look to two factors to determine whether such missions will be likely to help fragile states' militaries actually control territory: the nature of US involvement and the external threat environment. In particular, US involvement should not shy away from delving into sensitive military matters like personnel and organization, and the US should refuse opportunities to become a co-combatant in the partner state's struggle against insurgents. To the extent possible, the US should also limit the efforts of external players to provide support and sanctuary to insurgents.

Karlin draws on evidence from four cases of US security assistance: Greece (1947-49), Vietnam (1955-60), Lebanon (1982-84), and Lebanon (2005-09). The evidence clearly supports the book's two main contentions about the nature of US involvement and the role of antagonistic external actors. In Greece, US involvement was critical in helping the fledgling Greek government fend off a dire insurgent challenge to sovereignty. The US focused the security assistance mission on foreign internal defense, did not become a combatant, and became directly involved in sensitive Greek military affairs like the organization of the force and personnel appointment, promotion, and retirement. In the other three cases, the nature of US involvement was off kilter. In Vietnam, security assistance aimed at deterring a North Vietnamese invasion instead of bolstering South Vietnamese sovereignty, and in Vietnam and both Lebanon cases US officials were reluctant to involve themselves in the sorts of sensitive military decisions that had been so critical in Greece.

The four cases also demonstrate the importance of external actors' roles. In the Greek case, Yugoslav support and sanctuary for communist insurgents decreased dramatically over time, with a comparable decrease in support and sanctuary from Albania and Bulgaria. This created operational space for the Greek government, with American assistance, to orchestrate an enforceable, sustainable monopoly over violence. In Vietnam, by contrast, external actors did not play, initially, an antagonistic role in undermining South Vietnamese sovereignty, although American military advisors

acted as if they did. In the late 1950s, as the South Vietnamese regime began to buckle under the weight of its own incompetence, North Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union started to exploit the situation for their own benefit, making the success of the American security assistance mission less likely. In the first Lebanon case, Israel, Syria, and Iran played increasingly detrimental roles in Lebanese sovereignty. Although Israel and Syria were less detrimental to Lebanese sovereignty in the 2005-2009 episode, Iran's support for Hizbullah nonetheless had a deleterious effect, an effect heightened by the failure of US advisors to involve themselves in sensitive Lebanese military affairs. It is telling, then, that Greece, where the nature of American involvement was positive and the role of antagonistic external actors was diminishing, is the only case of unambiguous success in US security assistance to a fragile state's military.

While these cases hold important lessons and insights for policymakers and scholars alike, *Building Militaries in Fragile States* leaves two important conceptual points unclear. First, what exactly constitutes "positive" US involvement in a partner state? Karlin argues that the United States should be "deeply involved in the partner state's sensitive military affairs," which includes "seeking to influence appointments in the partner state military" and "avoiding becoming a co-combatant" (15).

At first blush this seems to be a contradiction, since being "deeply involved" in military affairs would suggest becoming a co-combatant, as the French became in Indochina. In fact, French involvement was so deep that French officers created little space for indigenous leadership development. But Karlin is not actually using a scale of involvement sliding between "deeper" and "shallower." Rather, there is a sweet spot in security assistance, where the assisting state's involvement is deep enough to accomplish the mission (by involving itself in sensitive decisions), but not so deep that the involvement creates dependence (by fighting in place of the partner state). Instead of thinking of involvement as deeper or shallower, we might characterize involvement as empowering or disempowering, a continuum that recognizes the challenge of hitting this sweet spot.

The second unclear point is which factor has a greater effect on the success of security assistance missions, the nature of US involvement or the role of antagonistic external actors? If the role of antagonistic actors is more important than the nature of involvement, then the US should avoid providing security assistance to states where

external actors play a substantially negative role. But if the nature of involvement is more important than the role of external antagonists, then the span of policy influence and control is much greater: American security assistance policies could tip the scale in favor of success, even if antagonists are present and active, which they increasingly seem to be.

These two conceptual issues may fall outside the scope of Karlin's book, though, given that she sets out to provide a policy-relevant approach to the problem. The powerful sweep of her overall empirical point dominates: training and equipment support are not enough to build militaries in fragile states. Given the history of American failure in endeavors of this sort, there is a great deal in this book worth reflecting upon. Scholars and policymakers alike should consider what the next step for research and analysis should be, from why Iran has proven so much more effective at building military forces abroad than the US, to what bureaucratic or cultural pathologies beset American efforts after success in Greece. In particular, how did many of the same principals, including Truman and Eisenhower, manage success in Greece in the late 1940s, but then usher in abject failure in Vietnam in the mid-1950s? To be sure, *Building Militaries in Fragile States* is a must-read for anyone making or studying security assistance policy, and it should influence thinking on the subject for some time to come.

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