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The post-Libya fiasco confirms the author's argument that the United States needs to be thoughtful in its determination of when and where to intervene, and that we need to act as a catalyst—where we go, others will follow, and when we are not present, things do not go (as) well. Ambassador Barton provides noble and practical examples of

how to intervene on the margins of conflict but—no matter how compelling the humanitarian grounds for getting involved to stop the killing of innocents—our efforts are feel-good Band-Aids that prolong the suffering and may actually worsen matters absent an all-in, whole-of-government commitment with a clear strategy. **PRISM**

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### **Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States**

By Mara Karlin

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Reviewed By Joseph Collins

**A**fter more than a decade of supporting large expeditionary forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. battle cry today is “by, with, and through” (BWT). According to General Joseph Votel, Commander U.S. Central Command, BWT means “that operations are led by our partners, state or non-state, *with* enabling support from the United States or U.S.-led coalitions, and *through* U.S. authorities and partner agreements.”<sup>1</sup> When U.S. soldiers discuss this concept, they usually dwell upon train, advise, and assist actions in the field. At the top end of the BWT food chain, however, are those instances where, as it did in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States believes that it must rebuild the militaries of its partners, often when they are in perilous circumstances.

There are few books on this critically important subject.<sup>2</sup> One newcomer to the collection is Dr.

Mara Karlin's aptly titled, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*. Karlin finished the book after a tour as the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development; she now teaches in the strategy program at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Karlin knows this subject from the training ground through the archives to the Ivory Tower. Her work is careful, judicious, well-written, and peppered with archival and interview material. *Building Militaries in Fragile States* will be a benchmark for the next generation of scholars. It is a book about past policies, but it is full of wisdom for the future.

Karlin starts with a blinding flash of the obvious from Winston Churchill: “However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.” Sir Winston's marvelous quote is the guiding light of this book on U.S. attempts to help its fragile allies build militaries. Her conclusion is that the U.S. record is “uneven at best,” a conclusion which has been borne out by recent studies of our efforts to rebuild military sectors in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

*Building Militaries in Fragile States* looks deeply into four cases: Greece in the late 1940s, South Vietnam in the 1950s, Lebanon in 1982–84 and again in 2005–09. Only one of these cases, Greece, after fits and starts, was a success. Vietnam was a failure, and in both Lebanon cases, a partial failure. The differences in these cases, Karlin tells us, is not

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“more” but “how.” The U.S. default setting seems to be provide equipment, training, and military-only advice, but that is not the way to succeed in the business of building militaries in dire straits. Karlin’s summary of the case of Greece is telling

*The U.S. program to strengthen the Greek military succeeded as Greece established a more enforced and sustainable monopoly on violence. The program was marked by deep U.S. involvement in sensitive Greek military affairs, including the military’s structure and personnel, while limiting the U.S. military from becoming a co-combatant. Its coupling with the decrease in external support to the guerrillas, including equipment and sanctuary, enabled the Greek state to effectively confront the guerrillas and increasingly control its territory.*

At the strategic level, Karlin’s two key variables that favor success are 1) deep involvement by the United States in sensitive, partner military decisions, to include personnel, and 2) a diminishing (or diminished) role played by the external, antagonistic actors. The first of these variables will always be a problem. The United States respects sovereignty and does not want to get into its partners domestic politics. The State Department is especially sensitive about sovereignty and letting states run their own political-military affairs. Karlin notes the failure of those good intentions in the chapters on Vietnam and Lebanon. If you want to succeed, you have to be intrusive in areas where your partners are not eager to hear your input. Training and equipment are key inputs but not decisive ones. Refraining from being a co-combatant generally seems to be a good idea, as well, but was not directly assessed in any of the cases.

To succeed in the future, Karlin provides a useful set of questions for policymakers that range from an operation’s purpose to U.S. domestic politics. She warns us, that we have to see training and

equipping only as “light security sector reform.” Real transformation of a partner’s military sector, if that is the goal, requires U.S. intrusion into sensitive politico-military decisions of our partners, including leadership decisions, and working to limit external actors who meddle or spoil. The goal is for partners to be able “to maintain internal defense” and to achieve the Weberian monopoly of legitimate violence within their territory.

In the end, Karlin the practitioner cannot help but reflect critically on our efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, which reflect our “thin record of success.” She makes an important point

*The United States must rethink its traditional orientation when it seeks to strengthen partner militaries. At a minimum, simply training and equipping partner militaries is not a panacea for the United States to secure fragile states facing insurgencies. Over the last seventy years, the United States has not had overwhelming success in pursuing this policy.... Put simply, training and equipping a military is not transforming it.*

Karlin concludes that the key, expensive as it may be, is for the United States “to make a concerted effort to influence the partner’s military agenda by advising it at all levels on all affairs.” This is a complicated business and not one for amateurs or those seeking quick results, a group that often includes Americans.

Dr. Mara Karlin’s book is a superb addition to the literature on security assistance and state transformation. Its value lies in its expert, practitioner-scholar viewpoint, and its focus on results and the critical variables that produce them. It is commonplace for both scholars and policy wonks to bemoan the gap between policy and scholarship. Karlin has done yeoman’s work to reduce that gap on this important subject. **PRISM**

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> GEN Joseph Votel, USA, and COL Eero Keravouri, USA, “The By-With-Through Operational Approach,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, JFQ 89, 2nd quarter 2018, 40.

<sup>2</sup> A major new text on building national-level defense institutions from both regional and functional perspectives is Alexandra Kerr and Michael Miklaucic, eds., *Effective, Legitimate, Secure: Insights for Defense Institution Building* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Center for Complex Operations, 2017), available at <<http://cco.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/>>. This edited volume was produced with the help of a grant from the Office of Secretary of Defense-Policy, supervised by the first Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Security Cooperation, Tommy Ross, who served under the Obama Administration.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of our efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan that bears out Karlin’s overall assessment, see T.X. Hammes, “Raising and Mentoring Security Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq,” in Richard Hooker and Joseph Collins, eds., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2015), 277–334.