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Practices of intervention: Assembling Security Force Assistance in Lebanon

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Abstract

This article examines the material-discursive assemblages at work in Security Force Assistance (SFA) programs. Departing from the idea that SFA follows a patron-client type relationship, or that it is normatively bounded, it argues that SFA is emergent and negotiated via epistemic practices. It identifies three sets of practices at work – i) identifying the epistemic object; 2) establishing boundaries of action; and 3) rendering visible the material nexus. The article draws on the case of SFA to Lebanon since 2006 to demonstrate how heterogeneous material elements, global discourses, and actors' interests and agendas are translated and stabilised in SFA programs.

Keywords: Knowledge production – materiality – discourse – security governance – Middle East

Introduction: The Fluid Ontology of Security Force Assistance

Security Force Assistance (SFA) entails “foreign donors training and equipping security forces in a recipient country” (Rolandsen, Dwyer and Reno 2021, XY). While far from a new practice

per se, the widespread reliance on ‘partner forces’, and externalisation of global security work through military aid, capacity building and train & assist programs, marks a shift from liberal interventionism of the 1990s and early 2000s. Across the Middle East and Africa in particular, we observe that Western actors seek to minimise risk while optimising influence and the capacity to shape outcomes. In equal measure, non-Western interventions in many of the same spaces also take the form of external support to local security actors. A global practice of SFA is emerging and requires scrutiny.

This article puts forward the argument that many of today’s SFA programs are ‘made up in the making’ and do not come with ready solutions and clear normative boundaries. The changing nature of wars and the particular characteristic of working with local partners has been captured by war studies concerned with “shadow wars” (Niva 2013), “remote warfare” (Knowles and Watson 2018), “surrogate warfare” (Krieg and Rickli 2018), or “liquid war” (Demmers and Gould 2018). The article builds on this emerging body of literature by focusing on the micro processes of assembling specific SFA programs, and proposes a framework based on epistemic practices that joins up aspects of knowledge production, the role of materiality, and stabilisation of networks to uncover the emergent nature and political implications of SFA interventions. These ‘assemblages’ are indeed emergent and unstable, in contrast perhaps to the more robust ‘apparatus’ of peacekeeping or other forms of established and enduring forms of interventions (Doucet 2016, 119).

The article analyses SFA to Lebanon in order to illustrate how assemblage approaches can shed light on the processes of negotiating SFA contents. Lebanon is a major recipient of partly colluding, partly competing US, British, French, and European Union SFA – as well as the target of Iranian, Saudi and Russian military aid. Contrary to what is often assumed in this ‘geopolitical hotspot’, the article argues that external donors prefer a ‘non-political’ approach that focuses SFA directly and bilaterally to security agencies, with just tacit approval by

political elites, who are seen as corrupt, inefficient and embroiled in endless power-sharing negotiations. Instead, security professionals are preferred as direct interlocutors and receivers of SFA. The effects of this peer-to-peer approach to SFA have come to the fore after recent turbulent events. In October 2019, a popular uprising erupted that demanded an end to the sectarian-based political system, increasingly guilty of dysfunctional politics and clientelism. On 4th August 2020, a devastating blast hit Beirut Port, which further exposed a severe economic crisis and deepened the public and international awareness of Lebanese political elites' incapacity to govern the country and eclipse the sectarian-based power sharing model. What is left of the rump state is the capacity of Lebanese security agencies to deliver security – yet of a kind that seeks to protect status quo, and hence prevent deeper reform of the state.

This article exposes how the delivery of SFA to Lebanon has served as a vehicle for an increasingly coercive expression of sovereign power, rather than contributing to meaningful reform of core governance functions. Vast amounts of SFA have strengthened Lebanese security agencies under a veneer of international coordination and central political control. This in turn has produced a coercive variant of sovereignty that protects the performativity of the state, while other governance functions are relegated to private networks. While Lebanon is unique in many respects, the article provides insights into how SFA is assembled and delivered in a competitive and fragmented environment, which undeniably characterises many current SFA contexts.

The case study is supported by *in situ* interviews with staff working on an EU-funded border management program (EU IBM) and their liaison officers in the Lebanese Army, Police, General Security and Customs between in 2015 to 2019. The interviews were designed to reveal how these key participants negotiated and agreed on the contents of the specific SFA assemblage. In particular, it emerges that the Army has assumed a role of custodian of the common good, in contrast to political elites who are seen as primarily serving their own

alliances and politico-economic interest. Contempt for politicians runs across identity markers in these interviews, further reinforcing the understanding of SFA as a technical and expert-driven undertaking. The interviews were key to discern the nexus where international concepts meet varieties of local knowledge and jointly form the network at the core of the SFA program. The case study also maps how artefacts, materiality and relationality come together and is inscribed onto the Lebanese society, and to that end extend the work of long-term observers of Lebanese security, notably the International Crisis Group, International Alert and Human Rights Watch, in addition to individual analysts living in and working on the contested space of Beirut. In mapping the SFA assemblage in Lebanon, the article also analyses documents, including EU project reports and newspaper articles, with the aim to provide examples of how the SFA assemblage has been ‘made up in the making’. It shows how discourse-material practices produce and stabilise SFA as a form of technical support to the “sovereignty of Lebanon”, while silencing the deeply political implications of bilaterally empowering Lebanese security agencies in the absence of deeper reform processes. It thereby demonstrates how assemblage approaches can shed light on the way in which heterogeneous actors, discourses, practices and materiality co-function to mount a temporarily fixed understanding of the problem – ‘state weakness and fragmentation’ – and the associated solution – apolitical and peer-to-peer Security Force Assistance.

The article first reviews the geostrategic and the peace-normative literature on SFA, before it presents an assemblage framework of analysis. Proceeding, the article presents the case of SFA to Lebanon through a focus on stabilising, translating and materialising SFA.

Genealogy of a practice: SFA between proxy war and SSR

SFA resides in the crossroads between two main bodies of literature and indeed practice: on the one hand, SFA as strategic use of allies, partners, ‘proxies’ or sub-national friendlies to achieve specific geostrategic objectives (*geopolitical-strategic*); and on the other hand, training and equipping security forces as part of interventions in conflict-affected contexts with the purpose of generating stability, peace and good governance (*peace-normative*).

First, a cluster of *geopolitical-strategic* literature on SFA analyses the relationship between the delivery of security assistance and the attainment of specific foreign policy goals. Some of these analyses offer strong prescriptive narratives – SFA, and specifically US SFA, should be more, better, or otherwise enhanced based on long-term strategic commitments, more resources and best practice (e.g. Paul et al. 2013; Matisek 2018; Karlin 2018). Political science approaches to states’ support of foreign armies or rebel groups seek to “bring politics back in”. Here, there is a recognition of the politics at play when states use SFA as a foreign policy instrument (Biddle et al. 2017). Drawing on principal-agent (PA) problems, these approaches seek to capture how states’ support to other states or non-state groups may forego some of the costs of large-scale troop deployments, but also that the relegation implies the loss of a degree of foreign policy autonomy (Salehyan 2010). Biddle et al. (2017) apply the PA approach in their analysis of how effective SFA is in increasing military effectiveness, finding that on a whole “SFA is much harder in practice than often assumed” (p. 94), and that “small footprints means small payoffs” (p. 95). This loss of autonomy dilemma is also reflected in recent theories of proxy warfare, which seek to draw lineages from the Cold War concept to the practice of using surrogate forces today (Mumford, 2013). In such strategic studies literature, there is a tendency to provide models that captures the various strategic challenges involved, such as time, power and PA problems (Fox 2019). Recent contributions apply modifications to the principal-agent framework so to accommodate for the construction of ‘identities’ in determining US’ approach to enlisting local allies (Rittinger 2017), and to explain SFA

providers' response to recipients of military aid in the face of violations of human rights norms (Buchard and Burgess 2019). While important studies to bring attention to the global practice of SFA, PA theory of SFA, even with a constructivist touch-up, rests on assumptions that, this article argues, are inadequate for the study of SFA as it is practiced today.

First, because the outlook continues to be policy-driven: it is concerned with the conditions under which SFA is most efficient and argues that footprint size isn't the most important factor, but rather political interest alignment between the principal and the agent and that SFA must be invasive and changing the fundamental structure of the recipient security forces (Karlin 2018).

Second, casting analyses of SFA as set in a principal-agent framework – even with a constructivist approach to the properties of those identities which produce specific policy options and choices – obfuscates the *experimental* nature of SFA. SFA providers work in composite spaces, where multiple other actors compete and collude, which in turn influence the contents and direction of SFA programs. All of these context specific factors impact on the way we conceive of the actors involved, to the point where identifying principals and agents become a highly blurred exercise. This is evident for example in Fox's "In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy Warfare" (2019), where, despite personal field experience as a US soldier in Iraq in 2017, he is hardly able to determine who was the principal and who was the agent as the Iraqi Security Forces supported by the US-led coalition attacked Islamic State positions (fn, p. 8).

Finally, the transactional premise of principal-agent theory, as per its origins in economic theory, is hard to reconcile with the complexities and fluidity of SFA. While weapons, equipment and training pass from one actor to another as part of SFA practices, there is very little of the contractual and agreed-upon to guide expectations of such 'transactions'.

Rarely does the provider have assurances from the recipient that certain objectives will be met, nor legal instruments to enforce breach of contract. The recipient, meanwhile, is likely to have a very different view of the ‘contract’, and officials on both sides will know that the terms will constantly change, and the story appears more as a multidimensional, ontologically fluid, and decentred relationship rather than a situation resembling any familiar model of transaction. As such, SFA engagements are more akin to an open relationship than an arranged marriage, and the patron-client framework is not only inadequate at explaining outcomes but fails to capture what is actually going on in the world of global security.

The second set of literature, the *peace-normative*, stems from the vast library on peacebuilding, statebuilding, failed states, and associated interventions. In particular, the work on Security Sector Reform (SSR) is of relevance as foreign donors training and equipping security forces is at the heart of SSR. Central to the expanded peacebuilding cum statebuilding agenda was the creation of functioning and legitimate security structures, in which first, the role of external militaries, and their crucial role in leading the reform process in partnership with local security forces; second, the assumed *post*-conflict environment, locating SSR in the settlement that had provided the terms for reconstruction; and third, the strong embeddedness in good governance and democratic norms (see Schnabel and Ehrhardt 2005). Arguably, all of these conditions have been modified in later iterations, leaving the similarities with contemporary SFA to come to the fore (see the special issue on Second Generation SSR introduced by Jackson 2018).

First, the interface between external militaries and local forces are key in both SSR and SFA literature and is comparable, in particular when considering the light footprint and capacity building approach favoured by Western providers. As the ‘local turn’ took hold in peacebuilding studies, seeking to capture the significance of domestic agency (MacGinty 2010), scholars sought to overcome the analytical challenges of thinking in terms of global and

local distinctions, and to understand the outcomes of international interventions as creating conditions for ‘hybrid peace’ (Jarstad and Belloni 2012; Richmond 2015). Such hybrid systems are favourable compared to the external intervener-passive local actor dichotomy, but it is still working on similar assumptions to the principal-agent model, whereby hierarchy is assumed to embed global-local relations.

Second, we increasingly find SSR type programs not necessarily taking place *after* the cessation of hostilities and in contexts of post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation, but rather in the midst of ongoing instability and conflict. This raises issues around governance and legitimacy, and in particular the extent to which direct support to security forces in the absence of political and governance reform produce effectiveness and legitimacy in ‘areas of limited statehood’ (see Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018). This treating of crises as contingencies or emergencies produces a lower threshold of normative standards both for the ‘recipients’ and the ‘providers’, for example in the way that the ‘principled pragmatism’ of the EU in its ‘neighbourhood’ has further entrenched criminalisation and authoritarianism in those countries (Strazzari and Rainieri 2019).

Third, while the OECD DAC Guidelines for SSR are still a point of reference, we can observe a lack of comprehensive SSR, and rather more specific projects working with local partners through limited, shorter term training and ‘capacity building’ programs. As there is considerable competition and contest between donors to access and influence local security forces, the reform-oriented language and models are left to the backburner. Consequently, we increasingly observe the landscape of actors claiming to ‘do’ SSR as essentially a string of bilateral approaches (cf. Jackson 2018, 4).

Both *geopolitical-strategic* and *normative-peace* literature suffers from a lack of focus on the core of the practice that we refer to as “foreign donors training and equipping security

forces in a recipient country”, namely the joint constituted space between global security discourses, a network of “securocratic elites” (Moe and Mueller 2017), and material agency. The next section outlines a framework based on assemblage thinking for rethinking SFA practice.

Assembling Knowledge, Networks and Materiality

Assemblage thinking reorients analyses towards the ‘arrangements’ between heterogenous components, including material objects, and “the *nature of interactions* between components and the capacities such components exhibit when arranged in different ways” (Savage 2020, 322, emphasis in the original). It thus centres on relationality (Acuto and Curtis 2014, 2), and directs the analysis at the making and unmaking of complex phenomena, in particular related to complex forms of global interactions, e.g. globalisation (Sassen 2008; Ong and Collier 2004). ‘Global security assemblages’ points us to the constantly shifting assembling and reassembling of knowledges and practices that define contemporary security governance (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009, 3). The emergent, but unstable formation of interventions, which “pulls together knowledges and actors in the fields of development, humanitarianism, human rights, security, and policing” is also different from more enduring practices, such as Peacekeeping for instance (Doucet 2016, 119). SFA, composed of a variety of actors, technologies and normativities, can purposefully be analysed through the assembling of its dispersed parts and fragmented components, not least because of its fluid ontological core. Readapting Li’s set of practices that draw together heterogeneous elements that work to form an unstable but temporally coherent assemblage, (2007), I identify three practices of particular relevance for studying the emergence of a typical security assistance program. They do not

follow a temporal linearity, but are polycentric practices that pull the assemblage together, while at times also apart:

First, establishing the epistemic object: producing knowledge about the problem to be solved and the goal of SFA programs consists of negotiating the exact mix of expectations, on the one hand, and practical know-how on the other: “what needs to be done” and “what can be done”. Given the fragmented and fluid nature of SFA, it appears to be made up primarily of practical know-how of *how things actually work* in specific domestic contexts, rather than a claim to any pool of SFA expertise or ‘global knowledge’. In other words, SFA, and similar to the adjacent term Capacity Building, is assembled by improvised relations between capacity builders and receivers which is situated in time and space (Bueger and Tholens 2021, 23). Complex social contests over “how and where” security technologies such as borders should be enforced (Sandor 2016, 491), and not least “who” should enforce them, are typical of contemporary SFA contexts, where specific programs enter into and is being shaped by the extant environment, and which are themselves sites of contests between the multiplicity of actors involved – both formally on the payroll and informally among adjacent ‘stakeholders’. The contest is essentially a competition over which and whose knowledge will prevail and stabilise, so that fragments of knowledge and expertise are made authoritative, what some have called ‘black-boxed’, i.e. the process whereby it is made invisible by its own success (Latour 1999, 304, cited in Villumsen-Berling 2019). Or, as Li (2007, 265) states, “particular programmes come complete with elaborate rationalizations but the elements from which they are drawn have no singular rationality and no essence”. Scholars are split in their view on whether *expertise* is the main sources of knowledge claims (Sending 2017), or practical know-how, which Bueger (2015) and Bueger and Villumsen (2016) call the ‘third generation’ of expertise research in IR, or ‘epistemic practices’. In SFA contexts, it appears that there is less relative stability and reproduction in the form of a Bourdieusian *field* such as a ‘peaceland’

(Autesserre 2014), and rather a context akin to “ever-shifting constellations of actors, institutions, data and forms of expression that make up the expertise” (Leander and Waever 2019, 2). The SFA assemblage is fragmented and ad hoc, and international practitioners may draw on expertise from other ‘global hotspots’ and ‘local knowledge’ (Moe and Mueller 2017), but are also often engaged to do a specific mission and operation for a specific period, for then to return to their main career path. Producers of authoritative knowledge are therefore primarily those with the practical know-how of how things work both domestically and among the international competitors, and with the practical skills to frame the SFA program as to make it correspond with both domestic and external priorities.

Second, stabilising and maintaining the boundaries of action: a momentarily stable vision of the “where, how and who” is required to establish a functioning SFA program. The unstable ontology inherent in SFA underlines how actors struggle over the shape and content of their relationship, eventually coming to an arrangement – a shared vision – around which all members of the network agree that it is worth building and defending the network (cf. Bueger and Stockbruegger 2018), and from which they develop rationalizations to contain critique (Li, 2007). The network comes into being through *translation*, and the use of artefacts is key to that end. Everyone’s interests and commitment are needed for successful translation to take place, otherwise it is likely to fail or falter. ‘Securocratic elites’ consist of external ‘experts’ coming in to ‘do’ SFA, as well as the host of domestic actors needed to make the SFA program ‘take off’, and their joint role is to translate and make global *and* local scripts compatible with a shared vision for the specific SFA program. Their role is to provide pragmatic, flexible and often technical reinterpretations of mostly non-explicit political expectations. They are also representatives or custodians of context specific knowledge and priorities, and responsible for ensuring that a wider set of interests is maintained through the emergence and reproduction of the assemblage. They practice that which Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado and Henig (2016) call

“everyday diplomacy” – mediating and promoting interpretations that eventually produce new practices and accepted truths. The key element here is how relationships of power are co-produced, and how dominance, resistance and cooperation emerge as tension within the network, but that relationships of power go both ways. Moreover, it is not obvious who is an expert, or whose knowledge claims will be accepted (see Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostić 2017). In SFA assemblages, the network will falter if it is unsuccessful in tending to all interests of the members of the assemblage, both ‘strong’ and ‘weak’. By studying SFA as assembled networks we therefore avoid the hierarchical notion of external imposition and local resistance. Instead, power rests in the capacity to forge agreement, and to produce a mutual commitment and a temporarily stable network that will sustain external pressures and internal divides.

Finally, rendering material: the key role of materiality in SFA programs, with its emphasis on ‘train *and equip*’ approaches and ‘capacity building’ of foreign security forces, is a key component of assemblage approaches. Such materiality is not an external, objective and static force – a hard currency that can be converted into outcomes – but is rather at work in and through social forces. Including it when analysing assemblages does away with the “anthropocentrism that characterizes the vast majority of historical and political writing” (Acuto and Curtis 2014, 2). Materiality – in the form of weapons, infrastructure, surveillance technologies, but also artefacts such as databases, maps, framework agreements, needs assessments – are inherent to the programs themselves: “matter *matters* because it is not an inert backdrop to social life but lively, affectively laden, active in the constitution of subjects, and capable of enabling and constraining security practices and processes” (Walters 2014, 101). Assemblages are made up of “human actors and non-human materials (e.g. technologies; substances; data) at multiple sites” (Amicelle et al. 2015, 318), and in order to understand the forces at play we need to blur the boundary between the technical and the political, and include analyses of the way in which security technologies and politics of SFA are mutually

constitutive. Material factors make the SFA assemblage visible, and are in turn made intelligible through the existence of SFA programs.

Below the article explores these practices through an analysis of a particular SFA assemblage, Security Assistance to Lebanon. This assemblage is made up of heterogeneous elements that have been fitted together and momentarily produce a shared understanding that SFA is an accepted formula for international engagement in Lebanon. The below analysis centres on three interconnected elements of this assemblage: i) the formation of a momentarily stable set of knowledge of Lebanon as a ‘weak state’ in need of reinforced support to ‘sovereignty’; ii) the translations and coming to agreement of a shared SFA vision, and here the article draw on insights from a specific EU-led border security program; and iii) a vignette that illustrates how materiality is at work and stabilises SFA knowledge and networks.

Assembling Security Force Assistance in Lebanon

Recent Lebanese history of security politics can be divided into the civil war period (1975-1989), which came to an end with the Ta’if Agreement; the *Pax Syriana* (1990-2005), in which Syrian military and political influence dominated Lebanese politics and society; and the post-2005 period, which saw a re-intensification of sectarian politics and an increasingly polarised Lebanese state. To this, we may add the post-2011 period, in which the war in Syria and its ‘spill-over’ effects have deeply affected Lebanon and affected how the world sees Lebanon. In particular, this latter period was characterised by Hezbollah’s direct engagement in the Syrian civil war; large influx of Syrian refugees that have had an impact on already strained public services; the rekindling of violence along sectarian lines within Lebanon, including large-scale terrorist attacks and public fear; as well as direct spill-over of ‘Sunni extremists’, notably ISIS

and Jabhat al-Nusra, along the Eastern border. It is in particular this latter period which is interesting to analyse from the point of view of assembling security assistance and its main vehicles – relationality and materiality – not least due to the increase in external SFA and the domestic acceptance of an expanded role for security agencies in Lebanon.

Lebanon is often described as a weak state by design, inasmuch as consociational power-sharing arrangements have institutionalised a sectarian system that permits the survival of a centralised state, but with inbuilt limits on state capacity to govern effectively (cf. Salloukh et al. 2017; Fakhoury Mühlbacher 2009). Fragmented security politics is often used as an indicator of this ‘weak’ state of affairs (Knudsen and Gade 2017). In this image, security agencies – notably the Army (Lebanese Armed Forces – LAF), the Police (International Security Forces – ISF), the internal security agency (General Security – GS) and the state intelligence agency (State Security Directorate – SSD) – are co-opted by their sectarian leadership, and the relative position between them is constantly contested and negotiated (Nerguizian 2015). The extent to which SFA has been analysed in Lebanon, it is primarily through the lens of Lebanon as an agent of US interest in the Middle East (Karlin 2018). My own work has so far analysed Lebanon as a case of the EU extending its sphere of influence into these outer ‘borderlands’ of the Union (Tholens 2017) and the impact European policies has on areas of ‘limited statehood’ (Santini and Tholens 2018).

Some have sought to redress the ‘deficit perspective’ of the state by recasting it as ‘hybrid sovereignty’ (Fregonese 2012; Hazbun 2016). Certainly, civil-military relations are non-linear and complex, but also interdependent and embedded with patronage networks (Nerguizian 2015; Knudsen and Gade 2017). The increasing role of security agencies in performing post-2011 Lebanese sovereignty provides an opportunity to identify the critical and powerful role of local securocratic elites in joint venture with external SFA providers.

Establishing the epistemic object: The co-production of SFA and Lebanon as a 'weak state'

After the 2005 withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, and the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, UN Security Council Resolution 1701 authorised international support to “the territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon within its internationally recognized borders” (UNSC 2006). Resolution 1701 drew on a set of knowledges that made the Lebanese case legible for a global audience, in particular by localising the Global War on Terror, in as much as the world was divided into the US worldview of ‘with us or against us’, with Lebanon characterised as a ‘weak state’, and Hezbollah as a ‘spoiler’ supported by the ‘enemy’ powers, Syria and Iran (Makdisi 2011). Viewing Lebanon as a ‘weak state’, Hazbun (2016, 1054) writes, entails that “Lebanon is never considered an autonomous actor in the international system, but rather a geopolitical battleground for foreign powers and their non-state or sub-state proxies.” SFA, as it began to accelerate from 2006 onward, plugged Lebanon into a global security assemblage of GWOT, weak and failed states, and, increasingly, the geopolitics of Middle East sectarianism. This has made the epistemic object – overcoming weakness – more robust, while at the same time allowed Lebanon to be a site of competitive and fragmented SFA delivery.

The events along the Eastern border with Syria in 2014, where ISIS and Jabat Al-Nusra (renamed Jabhat Fatah al-Sham after 2016) took hold of the city of Aarsal and engaged the Army in direct combat, served to stabilize the epistemic object of Lebanon as weak, ripe with sectarian factionalism and ‘porous borders’. At this point, the discourse of the Army as the only thing standing between Lebanon and a “terrorist invasion” was consolidated, and a flurry of media reports of SFA delivery emerged: “Kawagi: US to supply Lebanon Army with combat

weapons” (Daily Star 2014a): “Hariri: Lebanese Army to get Saudi-financed weapons soon” (Daily Star 2014b); “Russian Ambassador confirms military cooperation with Lebanon” (Daily Star 2014c); “France to begin Lebanon weapons deliveries in early 2015” (Daily Star 2014d); “UK delivers weapons, armour to Lebanese Army” (Daily Star 2014e); “Iran to donate military equipment to Lebanese Army” (Daily Star 2014f). The wide array of support that would bolster the Lebanese Army indicated *global* support for the territorial sovereignty of Lebanon. The stage was set for a new era in SFA delivery to Lebanon.

One of the ways in which SFA practices stabilised this knowledge of Lebanon as a weak state was through the so-called niche approach to SFA, in which the fragmented nature of the security landscape prompted a fragmented modality of SFA delivery (see Tholens 2017). Each donor became attached to a specific agency, unit or office, and delivered SFA bilaterally and directly to these partners without any significant central political ownership or control. As per UN Resolution 1701, the Support Group for Lebanon meets annually and reviews international aid mechanisms, but it remains a high level and relatively marginal oversight function, and arguably provides post-hoc justifications rather than direction and coordination. Because of the lack of a politico-strategic framework through which SFA enters Lebanon and meet identified security governance needs, external donor programs became embedded in the politico-sectarian scenarios that characterized Lebanese post-2005 society. For example, the US has been the main sponsor of the Army and, together with the UK, to the police. Moreover, the UK has worked specifically to establish four new Border regiments, while France has mainly worked with General Security and specifically their Beirut Airport outfit. Smaller donors (Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, the EU, etc) have developed even more specific niches, such as community policing, cyber security, and military medicine.

While such ‘distribution of labour’ was common also in the past, and elsewhere, the lack of any national strategic framework that connects these SFA programs leads to a

particularly fragmented situation (see also Rolandsen and Marsh 2021). This has provided room for security agencies, which have overall benefitted from and seen the opportunity in the ‘weak state’ label. In the post-2011 period, the Army and the Police have put separate strategic plans in place, and alongside General Security, have established long-term relationships with American, British, French, German, Dutch, Swiss, European and other Western security professionals. The SFA assemblage of a weak state, threats of spill-over from the Syrian war, and the incapacity of central political actors have enabled niche practices that in turn reinforces those same discourses. In other words, the ‘foundational myth’ of Lebanon as a weak state prompts apolitical SFA directly and bilaterally to the Army, the Police, GS and other Lebanese security agency, and this fragmentation further reinforces the weak state discourse.

Translation: Stabilising the boundaries of Border Management

In order to scrutinise the micro practices of such a niche approach, however, the assemblage framework requires scrutiny of network formation practices through *translation*, or ‘forging alignments’ as per Li (2009), in which interests and diverging agendas are brought into a network and converted into a lexicon that can be agreed upon. Border management serve as one such niche in which translation between actors participating in the network takes place. Building on the ‘weak state’ and ‘porous borders’ narratives, European SFA providers identified border management as a potential priority area early on in the post-2005 period. The Lebanon Independent Border Assessment Team (LIBAT 1) initiated an assessment of the border management situation in Lebanon in 2007, with a follow-up LIBAT 2 assessment mission in 2008. The first border management project to take off was the Germany-led (but funded also by the EU, UK, US and Canada) Northern Border Pilot Project (NBPP), in 2007-

2008. The project sought to introduce basic coordination and information exchange between the Lebanese border agencies on the Northern Border. But, as an expert consultant stated, “they put members from the four agencies together in a car thinking it would facilitate coordination. It did the opposite, of course”.ⁱ According to the expert consultant, the border pilot project (NBPP) had also failed to accept that the Army had a major role to play in border management in Lebanon, and that this insight was key to facilitate effective translation necessary for the border management assemblage. In this way, practical knowledge of Lebanese dynamics and the *sine qua non* role of the Army were early on translated into the SFA program and made a core tenet, with subsequent implications for establishing boundaries of the Border Management assemblage.

The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) – a Vienna-based inter-governmental organisation and a ‘favoured partner’ of the EU on border management issues – was selected for a 36 months project to set up an EU-funded Integrated Border Management program (hereafter EU-IBM), and came in on the tail end of the failed German project in North Lebanon. The ‘gaps and needs assessment’ was conducted in 2012 – after the outbreak of unrest in Syria, but before the major escalation and subsequent refugee crisis began to seriously put pressure on the Lebanese-Syrian border. As a part of ‘module 0’ of the EU IBM project planning framework, the Head of the program – a former UK Customs officer who could draw on both professional expertise as well as practical knowhow through his involvement in drafting the *Guidelines for Integrated Border Management in European Commission External Cooperation* – engaged in what he described as ‘shuttle diplomacy’ between the four agencies in charge of Border Management in Lebanon: the Army, General Security, the Police as well as Customs. Individual liaison officers – English speaking ‘everyday diplomats’ – from the four agencies became key focal points for formulating the respective interests and needs. The ICMPD engaged a former general in General Security to

ensure that communication and everyday diplomacy between the agencies ran smoothly. Their priorities and agendas varied greatly and the process of a joint and formal forum, or network, was perceived as alien.

The deliberate choice of including the Army was not without difficulties. Involving the Army in non-military activities is a double edged sword: the fear of endowing it with expanded roles and expertise was coupled with the awareness that the Army's authority was needed for the project to be feasible – not least due to its reputation as the only non-sectarian or cross-sectarian institution in Lebanon. The Border Management assemblage had to actively take distance from 'sectarianism', and establish boundaries to that end. The Police, for example, was hampered by its reputation as a 'sectarian agency' and a 'Hariri creation', given its Sunni affiliation. It was also seen as rife with internal disorganisation, which made it difficult to engage with as a cohesive institution, according to the ICMPD. Instead, GS was highlighted for its 'coherent hierarchy', which corresponded to the EU's agenda of 'effectiveness'. The Border Management assemblage thereby built in 'effective' and 'well organised' as organisational elements, and on that basis included and excluded stakeholders, such as the cumbersome General Directorate for State Security. Civil Defence was added later on, around 2015, once it demonstrated a certain level of organisational capacity. In addition, other external actors operating in the same space, e.g. some actors working on migration, refugee and displaced persons in Lebanon, were largely excluded from the network, and their expertise silenced. The network had to be tight, given the challenging situation of crafting a collaborative space between the Army and the other security agencies, and non-security actors were seen as 'problematic' to that end.

In parallel to establishing contact with the different agencies the project eventually needed sanctioning from the political level. At this point, the boundaries of the network was emerging, consisting of the EU-IBM represented by the Head of the mission (our former UK

customs officer); a liaison officer in the Customs brigades (whose training in the military academy enabled good personal relations and common understanding and lingo); a committed and high level Army General; key figures from General Security; and a liaison officer from the Police. The political approval was ensured through informal mechanisms. According to the Head of the EU-IBM, the minister in charge of Border Management was a “weak minister”, but he was open to the idea of border management, and became an important vehicle for launching the project.ⁱⁱ This post-hoc approval fit well with the broader SFA assemblage in Lebanon, which seeks distance from the political sphere seen as characterised by personality cults and sectarian bickering.

Following the emerging construction of inter-personal relationships between a core group consisting of the Head of the EU-IBM and the designated contact points in the four ‘vetted’ Lebanese security agencies, a ‘gaps and needs analysis’ was conducted. This ‘intangible artefact’ was critical for the purpose of *translation*, i.e., the struggle between the actors over the shape and content of their relationship, and coming to an agreement around which they could all agree that is worth their efforts. The gaps and needs analysis were designed to identify what the Lebanese border agencies perceived as most needed in order to advance their work. This artefact created investment on the part of the network, and initiated processes of negotiating the commonly shared vision for where, how and by whom the border should be enforced. Subsequently, the EU-IBM team initiated negotiations with the respective agencies, and reassured the agencies that they had full decision making powers – the approach was first, persuading the Lebanese stakeholders that doing border control as per an ‘integrated approach’ was beneficial to the overall capacity of the agencies and, second, to its effectiveness on controlling the border.ⁱⁱⁱ The gaps-and-needs analysis was an important platform to translate security agencies’ interests and ensure that the dividends of external assistance – training, equipment, but also legitimacy as partners of international donors – were shared proportionally

to domestic standing and in line with Lebanese power sharing norms. Their ‘integration’ was a secondary matter; above all it was an exercise in reproducing and solidifying, not challenging, the carefully calibrated equilibrium that exists between Lebanese security institutions, each with a sectarian identity as set out in the post-war settlement at Ta’if.

After the gaps and needs assessment was completed, the four Lebanese security agencies and the EU-IBM built a second artefact – a National IBM Strategy. This document proved to be an important vehicle for rendering the Border Management assemblage actionable, as it provided the opportunity to draft common goals together, hence working as platforms of translation onto which the participants advanced their interests and agendas while adjusting for the possibly conflicting interests of others. The fact that an IBM strategy was drafted and agreed on was a major network building achievement, giving evidence that the four agencies could work together and perform through the production of a collectively owned document. However, the strategy was formally approved only in October 2019 – 7 years after program ‘activities’ began. Until then, it was “dusting away in the minister’s drawers”.^{iv} Yet, that did not prevent it from serving as an important network artefact, inasmuch as it assembled the expectations, internal references, and codification of the network. For example, including the Army (and identifying training of soldiers to do (civilian) border control emerged as core to the Border Management assemblage. Excluding a shared intelligence database was another compromise emerging through the negotiations over the IBM strategy, which prevented internal friction and rendered it stable. Through the construction of this artefact, notably without formal political approval, a shared vision of the assemblage and its boundaries emerged, and that shared vision embodied knowledge co-produced by the stronger and weaker participants: the Army ensured legitimacy for its objective of reaching deeper into the borderlands on the Eastern border, and ensure its presence if not at the expense of so at least alongside Hezbollah, while the other security agencies who are considered weaker actors in the

system were ensured access to SFA providers and status as legitimate collaborators in the reinforced Lebanese security architecture. This co-production, among the stronger and weaker security agencies, was needed to render cooperation a core element of the Border Management assemblage.

As the network took off and ‘was filled with contents’ through years of translations, new platforms of rearticulating the scope and priorities of the network were produced. The creation of a Border Control Committee (BCC), in which representatives for the four agencies as well as international stakeholders meet weekly to discuss the border situation and divide labour according to principles of ‘coordination’, serves as an example. Functionally, the BCC has developed into an established framework of cooperation and has created a modicum of communication between the agencies. Visits to the BCC offices at Yarzeh military base on the outskirts of Beirut in 2016 and again in 2019 confirm the continued existence of this structure, and the willingness of its leadership to ensure its existence. Noteworthy, the BCC has adopted narratives around externalising border security from the US and Europe to Lebanon: “every euro spent here [Lebanon] is better than spending 8 euro there [Europe]”.^v Moreover, narratives of Lebanon as “a victim – all external actors intervene here”, is reproduced, with the associated proscription that “the Army is indispensable for the time being”.^{vi} The endurance of the BCC is attributed partly to the fact that it was initially headed by a particularly dynamic, enthusiastic and well-connected Army General, who was seen as a strong figure supportive of the IBM idea, and who enjoys respect by all the involved agencies.^{vii} As the news of the approval of the IBM Strategy broke (on the eve of the protests that erupted on 17th October 2019), the new (Army) head of the BCC was seen as having given the “final push”.^{viii} Additional evidence of the key role of the Army in controlling the SFA assemblage can be seen in the establishment of a Central Training Centre (CTC) at the Rayak Air Base in the Beqaa valley, under Army command. At the newly refurbished CTC, external donors have since May 2018 offered a suite

of training courses to the various Lebanese security institutions.^{ix} While seen as a form of ‘empire building’ on the part of the Army,^x thereby recognising how critical the control over training and thereby over who is doing security work in Lebanon, the CTC caters well to the broader SFA assemblage in Lebanon, where the weak state can be overcome by delivering more, better and targeted SFA – directly to Lebanese security agencies without much political oversight or direction. What it also does is to translate the priorities of the actors participating in the network on an everyday basis, ensuring that the assemblage is constantly negotiated and performed. The CTC becomes part of the materiality onto which the power configurations in the Border Management assemblage in Lebanon are inscribed and reproduced.

Materiality: The Traveling Towers at work

Sale and donation of weapons, surveillance technology, helicopters and infrastructure are elements of the SFA assemblage, and at the same time made legible by the assemblage. A vignette of the ‘Traveling Towers’ may serve as an illustration of the way networks of actors and materiality inform SFA assemblages in Lebanon, in which local security agencies’ interests in attracting direct and bilateral ‘assistance’ produces and is produced by global security assemblages.

The Lebanese Army was, in particular from 2014 onwards, identified by international SFA providers as a bulwark against regional instability and against the further expansion of the Syrian civil war and ISIS in particular. Consequently, the Army has rolled out five new border regiments, complete with infrastructure, surveillance equipment, weapon systems, and soldiers to operate the new outposts. Never has the Lebanese state controlled these borderlands to the extent it now does. In this context the story of the ‘Traveling Towers’ serves as an illustration of how global knowledges and materiality come together and form the backbone of the

Lebanese SFA assemblage: In 2014, the UK donated 7 mobile watchtowers to the Army. The towers had been used in Northern Ireland during ‘the Troubles’ and were now recycled to Lebanon, with the stated aim that it would strengthen the fledgling Lebanese state’s attempt at controlling its northern and eastern border with Syria. The watchtowers’ materiality stands in direct contrast to the ‘no man’s land’ of the Lebanese-Syrian border, with its arid, vast landscapes, always depicted void of human activity. They symbolize the concrete efforts by Western SFA providers to the Lebanese Armed Forces in their ‘fight against terrorists’. When the British Embassy and the Lebanese Army organised tours for journalists to view the towers, the headlines sounded: “Tango 10: the British-built watchtowers beating back Jihadists” (*The Telegraph*, 2014) and “Keeping ISIS fanatics at bay: How 30ft UK watch towers on Lebanon's border are part of a £62million drive to repel a terrorist invasion” (*The Daily Mail* 2019). The narrative provided in these media reports is unequivocal about the causal relationship:

“The makeshift structure, bristling with artillery, is the only thing standing between Isil and the Bekaa valley of Lebanon, where thousands of Christians, Druze and Sunni and Shiite Muslims live in a scattering of villages. For years, this area was a no-mans land but now, with British help, it has been reinforced as a Lebanese stronghold” (*The Telegraph*, 2014).

The symbolic value of representing successful application of past counter-terrorism/border control efforts in Northern Ireland embed the towers in a global discourse of ‘managing global security’, which in turn plugs Lebanon into strong global discourses and render it knowable – even to the Daily Mail readership. The towers can be seen as material artefacts that take on agency in the security assistance assemblage in Lebanon through their invocation of a mastodontic physical presence in no-mans space; of masculine characteristics of sovereign power; of the geopolitical Middle East against which SFA is designed as a cure; and the enduring knowledge of victory against terrorism, as drawn from the Northern Ireland analogy. In this co-functioning assemblage of material-discursive practices, SFA providers, local

security actors and material artefacts come together and render the current practice of pouring money, training, equipment and weapons into the Lebanese Army and other Lebanese security agencies with next to no strings attached legible, acceptable, and for the time being, enduring.

Conclusions

External providers of security assistance in Lebanon sit comfortably in a series of Security Council resolutions, bilateral agreements, and with the global duty of supporting the fragile Lebanese states against the destabilising fragility and sectarianism witnessed in the Middle East, especially since the Arab uprisings from late 2010 onwards. The last decade has witnessed an acceleration of a practice that has been described by SFA observers as driven primarily by support to “our man in Beirut” (see Karlin 2018), indicating its geopolitical nature. This article has sought to unpack and unsettle this accepted understanding of geopolitics as giving impetus to a linear, if competitive, rollout of SFA, in which all that we can discern and analyse are how much SFA has arrived in Lebanon, and how effective it has been to reach predefined strategic objectives. As such, it has taken charge with the transactional and contractual assumptions of PA theory, so predominant in much of the proxy warfare and US SFA literature. It has also departed from the peace-normative literature, and its preoccupation with tracing the imposition of, and resistance to, global norms. Instead, it has sought to introduce an alternative vocabulary based on epistemic practices to study the social processes behind the SFA assemblage – knowledge production, network formation, translation, artefacts, materiality – that can enable a closer scrutiny of preconceived assumptions of the “where, how and who” of SFA. It has demonstrated how global discourses of weak states and terrorism, supported by the representation of material artefacts such as Watchtowers, coordination mechanisms and

intangible artefacts, have enabled the delivery of SFA, but also the way in which these same narratives have allowed for a bypassing of domestic political institutions. The niche approach and the bilateral nature of SFA in Lebanon stabilise the technical and apolitical character of this practice, silencing the fierce and everyday political struggles over access, resources and legitimacy. Moreover, the article has shown that expertise emerges from practical knowhow gained through embedded and everyday diplomacy on the part of security practitioners – SFA expertise rest with the practical knowledge its field operatives and liaison officers acquire through daily and painstaking translations. Such constant assembling and reassembling over the terms of the network constitute the politics at play in contemporary SFA interventions.

In Lebanon, the implications of assembling SFA as bilateral and non-political support to the sovereignty of Lebanon came to the fore on 4th August 2020, when 2750 metric tons of ammonium nitrate that had been stored in the Port of Beirut for more than six years exploded, leaving more than 200 dead, thousands injured and vast swathes of urban infrastructure shattered. Observers are largely in consensus that the reasons such a catastrophe could happen are a “failing political system, a greedy political class, and entrenched mismanagement and corruption” (Leenders 2020). This article has argued that the SFA assemblage is not without blame: the conditions producing the explosion implicate overlapping authorities over the Port itself, and lack of political control over these fragmented security authorities, indicating that providing SFA directly to security agencies without demands for deeper political reform is risky and irresponsible. While the political leadership is at breaking point, the economic crises has hit a dangerous low point, and the pandemic has again exposed the dramatic lack of public services, the Army, police and GS remain as the only expressions of ‘sovereign’ power on Lebanese streets. . As this article has argued, the relative stability of the assemblage is again made visible, and is likely to produce further deepening of the securocratic monopoly on sovereignty in the years to come.

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ⁱⁱ Interview Head of ICMPD Lebanon, Beirut 28 April 2016

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview ICMPD project staff, Beirut 7 June 2015

^{iv} Interview ICMPD trainer, Masnaa 11 November 2015

^v Interview Brigadier General in the Lebanese Armed Forces, Head of Border Control Committee, Yarzee Army base, Beirut 16 October 2019

^{vi} Interview Brigadier General in the Lebanese Armed Forces, Head of Border Control Committee, Yarzee Army base, Beirut 16 October 2019

^{vii} Interview Head of ICMPD, 28 April 2016.

^{viii} Email correspondence with Head of EU IBM, 17 October 2019

^{ix} Interview Brigadier General in the Lebanese Armed Forces, Head of Border Control Committee, Yarzee Army base, Beirut 16 October 2019.

^x Email correspondence with Head of EU IBM, 7 October 2019