

# Security force assistance to Cameroon: how building enclave units deepens autocracy

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Western countries have seemingly exhausted their appetite for combat deployments to counter terrorist threats in weakly governed spaces. The complete NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan reflects a longstanding trend towards downsizing global troop commitments. The US Department of Defense has even explored options for ending special forces missions in the Sahel, after four soldiers were killed in Niger in 2018.<sup>1</sup> France has similarly sought to reduce its military commitments in Africa: in June 2021, President Emmanuel Macron formally announced the end of Operation Barkhane and the drawdown of troops fighting in northern Mali.

How can the international community diminish the threat posed by violent extremist organizations, such as the jihadist groups of the Sahel, without directly deploying their own soldiers? Increasingly, western powers have turned to ‘remote warfare’ as a solution—a portfolio of tactics that allow intervening countries to remain at arm’s length from the battlefield. These tactics include air power, drones, cyber warfare, private military contractors and security force assistance (SFA). Indeed, building partner capacity in ‘weak’ states to create and sustain local counterterrorism capabilities has become a major pillar of international security policy.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, however, SFA has produced only meagre results.<sup>3</sup> SFA missions often avoid deep institutional reforms that would threaten the patronage and coup-proofing structures of recipient governments—structures that undermine combat effectiveness in the first place. Unsurprisingly, recipient militaries make only small performance gains despite large external investments, prompting a search for different and more creative solutions. Policy-makers and scholars are

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Tankel, ‘US counterterrorism in the Sahel: from indirect to direct intervention’, *International Affairs* 96: 4, 2020, pp. 891–2.

<sup>2</sup> Rubrick Biegon and Tom Watts, ‘Security cooperation as remote warfare: the US in the Horn of Africa’, in Alasdair McKay, Abigail Watson and Megan Karlsjøj-Pedersen, eds, *Remote warfare: interdisciplinary perspectives* (E-International Relations Publishing, 2021); Maria-Louise Clausen and Peter Albrecht, ‘Interventions since the Cold War: from statebuilding to stabilization’, *International Affairs* 97: 4, 2021, pp. 1212–13; Jahara Matisek and Ivor Wiltenburg, ‘Security force assistance as a preferred form of 21st century warfare’, in Rob Johnson, Martijn Kitzen and Tim Sweijis, eds, *The conduct of war in the 21st century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 176–8.

<sup>3</sup> SFA can encompass many types of military training and aid to a diverse array of partner states, including close allies and advanced industrial democracies, with different results.

now converging on the idea of building enclave units: small but highly proficient local military units, specializing in counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations, that are isolated from the pathologies of the rest of the military. Enclave units such as the Somali Danab and Iraqi Golden Division have shown great tactical promise, conducting sustained offensives and standing firm against attacks even as regular army forces have collapsed.

But can enclave units truly resolve the fundamental problems of SFA and provide a sustainable counterterrorism solution? This article focuses on the Bataillons d'Intervention Rapide (BIR) in Cameroon to build theoretical insights into the promise and perils of enclave units. Cameroon represents a typical case of counterterrorism-oriented SFA, given the current trend towards 'small-footprint' interventions, in which western advisers train and equip an existing elite unit isolated from the regular military. Owing to the closed nature of Cameroon's authoritarian political system, for sources I rely heavily on journalistic coverage (especially from *Jeune Afrique*), human rights documentation (especially from Amnesty International), and western government data and reports.

The Cameroonian case emphasizes that western countries should be wary of building enclave units in autocracies, especially ethnic minority dictatorships. While supporting enclave units may indeed create better counterterrorism capabilities than providing SFA to a patronage-ridden and coup-proofed military, that tactical effectiveness sits uncomfortably alongside rampant political malpractice. These regimes systematically exclude their populations, particularly non-co-ethnics, from power—creating widespread grievances and frequently engendering mass protests, insurgencies and secessionist movements. Dictators will perceive such uprisings as deeply threatening to their survival. Unless directly commanded by SFA providers, enclave units constitute a tempting resource for these embattled dictators: there sits a militarily effective unit that can be rotated away from counterterrorism operations and redeployed for internal repression, including against ethnic minorities. Even worse, by building more effective capabilities, SFA can shift domestic power dynamics and perversely embolden autocrats to avoid political compromise and govern more ruthlessly.

This article thereby sheds light on the unintended consequences of an emerging policy consensus. Drawing on a previously unexamined case within the SFA literature, it also deepens our theoretical understanding of the principal-agent dynamics underlying SFA. Interest asymmetries—the frequent existence of different priorities and threat perceptions on the part of donors and recipients, leading to conflict and aid failure—are well recognized. However, such interest misalignments are usually treated as exogenous and *ex ante*. My analysis demonstrates that interest asymmetries also form endogenously through the very provision of SFA.

The remainder of this article first outlines the turn towards SFA and its known problems, focusing on principal-agent theory and the pathologies that often prevent military reform in weak states. Enclave units are then discussed as the product of an emerging policy consensus that seeks to sidestep these problems. I next develop theoretical insights into how enclave units exacerbate repression

in autocracies, especially ethnic minority dictatorships. I then illustrate these mechanisms through my theory-building case-study of Cameroon's BIR. Finally, I briefly analyse two shadow cases of enclave units often held up as models for SFA: the Iraqi Golden Division and Somali Danab. Both demonstrate that political misuse was avoided only through direct US operational command. This suggests that an indefinite commitment to supervising SFA forces in-country may be necessary to avoid deepening autocracy in recipient societies.

## The turn to security force assistance

The sacrifices exacted by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have motivated western nations to seek alternatives to large-scale troop deployments to contain international terror threats. Understood here as attempts 'to develop effective security forces in a weak or collapsed state',<sup>4</sup> SFA has gained prominence as a promising option. The UK's 2021 Integrated Defence Review promotes a strategy of 'persistent engagement' that places greater emphasis on 'build[ing] the capacity of others to deter and defend against state threats [and] support, mentor and, where necessary, assist nations in countering non-state challenges'.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the Obama and Trump administrations made enhancing local capabilities and working 'by, with, and through' partner nations a cornerstone of US counterterrorism policy and the ongoing war against Al-Qaeda.<sup>6</sup> Continuing global troop withdrawals under the Biden administration—as well as those made by the UK, France and NATO—suggest that western reliance on SFA will only increase in the future.

Indeed, recent years have witnessed growing investments in SFA implementation. Since 2010, the EU has spent over €100 million annually across its five SFA missions in Africa.<sup>7</sup> In 2018, US Army Chief of Staff General Mark Milley spearheaded the creation of six permanent security force assistance brigades, one for each geographic combatant command.<sup>8</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa alone, from 2015–2020, the US provided over \$4.8 billion in SFA, mostly to recipient governments in the Sahel and East Africa where Islamic extremist groups are active.<sup>9</sup> In 2019, NATO established the Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence

<sup>4</sup> Jahara Matisek and Michael W. Fowler, 'The paradox of security force assistance after the rise and fall of the Islamic State in Syria–Iraq', *Special Operations Journal* 6: 2, 2020, p. 128. SFA is often more broadly defined as efforts to rebuild, improve or otherwise assist any part of the security sector of a partner nation. All such activities are important, but lumping them together often confuses analysis. See Rachel Elizabeth Tecott, *The cult of the persuasive: the US military's aversion to coercion in security assistance*, PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Claire Mills and Louisa Brooke-Holland, 'Integrated review 2021: summary', House of Commons Library briefing paper no. 9171, 17 March 2021; HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age: the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy* (London, March 2021), p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> Biegon and Watts, 'Security cooperation', pp. 155–6; Tankel, 'US counterterrorism', pp. 880–1.

<sup>7</sup> Matisek and Wiltenburg, 'Security force assistance', p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> Jahara Matisek and Austin G. Commons, 'Thinking outside the sandbox: succeeding at security force assistance beyond the Middle East', *Military Review*, March/April, 2021, p. 35; Matisek and Wiltenburg, 'Security force assistance', p. 176; David H. Ucko, 'Systems failure: the US way of irregular warfare', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 30: 1, 2019, p. 240.

<sup>9</sup> Security Assistance Monitor, *Security assistance database*, <https://securityassistance.org/security-sector-assistance/>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 24 Aug. 2022.)

to support its Allied Rapid Reaction Corps. The British Army has also recently created a new brigade dedicated to SFA missions, comprising four specialized infantry battalions.<sup>10</sup>

SFA appeals to policy-makers because it promises long-term sustainability by reducing the financial costs and political risks of conducting counterterrorism.<sup>11</sup> Decision-makers can also point to important examples of success where SFA has helped achieve long-term stabilization in difficult circumstances. The British and US interventions in Sierra Leone and Liberia, respectively, rebuilt those nation's military and police forces after devastating civil wars, leading to stability and democratization.<sup>12</sup> The US Army counterinsurgency field manual lauds American support to El Salvador in the latter's prolonged struggle against the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front as a model for future SFA.<sup>13</sup> US assistance is credited with compelling the Salvadorean government to initiate military and political reforms through aid conditionality.<sup>14</sup>

### Known problems and limitations with SFA

Yet SFA has repeatedly yielded disappointing results. The most notable failures include heavy interventions in war-torn countries like Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, where decades of capacity-building seemingly came to nought—with state armies being overrun by insurgents soon after western advisers departed. A growing literature thus seeks to theorize why SFA routinely produces only meagre gains.

Delegating counterterrorism to local agents creates a classic principal-agent dilemma involving problems of interest asymmetry, costly monitoring and weak enforcement. The governments that need SFA the most—those without control over their territories or functional security forces—tend to be poor and undemocratic. This problem of adverse selection then leads to palpable differences in interests. While western nations focus on extremist organizations with purported transnational ties—currently jihadist groups—recipient governments are often more concerned with other internal threats such as mass uprisings, ethnic rebellions and coups. Indeed, coups thrown by disgruntled military officers unseat more dictatorships than any other mechanism of leadership change. Dictators often view a competent, meritocratic and independent army as more threatening to their survival than any terror group.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Louisa Brooke-Holland, 'Defence command paper 2021: summary', House of Commons Library briefing paper no. 9181, 19 March 2021; Matisek and Wiltenburg, 'Security force assistance', pp. 176–7.

<sup>11</sup> SFA has additional benefits, including thickening cooperation with key partner nations, deterring negotiation with terror groups, and securing basing access, airspace and transit rights. See Biegon and Watts, 'Security cooperation', pp. 163–5.

<sup>12</sup> Louis-Alexandre Berg, 'Elite bargains and external influence: security assistance and civil-military relations in post-war Liberia and Sierra Leone', *Civil Wars* 22: 2–3, 2020, pp. 266–88; Alex Neads, 'Improvise, adapt and fail to overcome? Capacity building, culture and exogenous change in Sierra Leone', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42: 3–4, 2019, pp. 425–47.

<sup>13</sup> United States Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency FM 3-24* (Washington DC, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Walter C. Ladwig, 'Influencing clients in counterinsurgency: US involvement in El Salvador's civil war, 1979–92', *International Security* 41: 1, 2016, pp. 99–146.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Biddle, 'Building security forces and stabilizing nations: the problem of agency', *Daedalus* 146: 4, 2017, pp. 126–38; Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald and Ryan Baker, 'Small footprint, small payoff: the mili-

To contain these threats, autocrats rely on systems of political control that build loyal followings and confound organized opposition. They typically practise pervasive clientelism while extensively coup-proofing the military, thereby enfeebling combat performance. Such means include maintaining counterbalancing units, overlapping and confusing command responsibilities, non-meritocratic recruitment and promotion systems, obstacles to communication among officers, and restrictions on live-fire training and unit movement.<sup>16</sup> To build effective militaries, SFA thus requires extensive institutional reforms that recipient governments are loath to grant. Rather, SFA is often diverted into patronage networks, further entrenching dysfunctional practices within the military.<sup>17</sup>

Recipient governments may also evaluate operations against particular extremist groups as undercutting more important strategic goals. For example, in Mali, the United States trained and equipped a special counterterrorism unit to help defeat the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Malian leaders, however, were reluctant to attract the attention of the GSPC, which they viewed as an Algerian problem. They also feared that sending troops north would upset their fragile detente with Tuareg rebels—who were perceived as a far greater security threat. The Malian government thus delayed, for many years, deploying their western-funded counterterrorist unit against any actual terrorists.<sup>18</sup>

Such interest asymmetries are compounded by costly monitoring and weak enforcement, which stifle the imposition of reform agendas on reluctant governments. Without monitoring, recipients can easily avoid implementing reforms, divert funding into their patronage networks or otherwise ‘shirk’ expectations without detection. But such careful observation requires boots on the ground—precisely what ‘small-footprint’ SFA missions lack.<sup>19</sup> Monitoring is also ineffective without enforcement. Both Walter Ladwig and Rachel Tecott convincingly show how aid conditionality vitally shapes whether client states comply with external

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tary effectiveness of security force assistance’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41: 1–2, 2018, pp. 89–142; Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, *How dictatorships work: power, personalization, and collapse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 179; Walter C. Ladwig, ‘Friendly persuasion is not enough: the limits of the Landsdale approach’, *Texas National Security Review*, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-lost-opportunities-in-vietnam/#essay3>; Milan W. Svolik, *The politics of authoritarian rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Caitlin Talmadge, *The dictator’s army: battlefield effectiveness in authoritarian regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 16–17.

<sup>17</sup> Biddle, ‘Building security forces’, p. 129; Biddle et al., ‘Small footprint’, p. 100; Daniel L. Byman, ‘Friends like these: counterinsurgency and the war on terrorism’, *International Security* 31: 2, 2006, p. 82; Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, ‘Disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel: constitutive effects of contemporary interventionism’, *International Affairs* 96: 4, 2020, p. 868; Marco Jowell, ‘The unintended consequences of foreign military assistance in Africa: an analysis of peacekeeping training in Kenya’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 12: 1, 2018, pp. 102–19; Jahara Matisek, ‘The crisis of American military assistance: strategic dithering and Fabergé Egg armies’, *Defense and Security Analysis* 34: 3, 2018, pp. 278–9; Denis M. Tull, ‘Rebuilding Mali’s army: the dissonant relationship between Mali and its international partners’, *International Affairs* 95: 2, 2019, p. 409; Paul D. Williams, ‘Building the Somali National Army: anatomy of a failure’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43: 3, 2020, pp. 376–7.

<sup>18</sup> Yvan Guichaoua, ‘The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel’, *International Affairs* 96: 4, 2020, p. 910; Tankel, ‘US counterterrorism’, p. 883.

<sup>19</sup> Biddle, ‘Building security forces’, p. 129; Biddle et al., ‘Small footprint’, pp. 101–3.

agendas.<sup>20</sup> Yet counterterrorism contexts create a dilemma for conditionality. Strongly proclaimed donor security interests can undermine the credibility of threatened SFA reductions. Believable threats of abandonment, however, leave the recipient nation fearful of undertaking difficult reform programmes.<sup>21</sup> Institutionalized SFA cultures, such as exist in the US military, compound enforcement problems by eschewing bargaining in favour of persuasion.<sup>22</sup>

These pervasive problems have led to highly technical SFA programmes that focus almost entirely on tactics, while ignoring broader political reforms and fundamental questions of military mission, organizational structure and personnel.<sup>23</sup> Despite large external investments, recipient militaries thereby only make marginal capacity gains, becoming what Jahara Matisek refers to as Fabergé Egg armies—expensive to construct but easily broken once western assistance departs.<sup>24</sup>

To make matters worse, SFA can produce perverse unintended consequences. It can displace development aid, diverting resources from tackling long-term problems that feed instability, such as poverty and inequality.<sup>25</sup> Foreign officer training may elevate the risk of coups.<sup>26</sup> Conditioning aid flows on a shared counterterrorism agenda encourages illiberal regimes to frame domestic dissent as an international threat.<sup>27</sup> Providing military resources to vulnerable and illegitimate leaders can lead to aggressive power consolidation and human rights abuses.<sup>28</sup> Research further suggests that arms transfers and other security aid ironically increase the longevity of terrorist groups, the duration of their operational campaigns and the volume of attacks.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ladwig, 'Influencing clients'; Tecott, *The cult of the persuasive*.

<sup>21</sup> Biddle, 'Building security forces', pp. 130–1; Biddle et al., 'Small footprint', pp. 102–3; Andrew Boutton, 'US foreign aid, interstate rivalry, and incentives for counterterrorism cooperation', *Journal of Peace Research* 51: 6, 2014, pp. 741–54.

<sup>22</sup> Tecott, *The cult of the persuasive*, pp. 56–74.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Jackson and Shivit Bakrania, 'Is the future of SSR non-linear?', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 12: 1, 2018, pp. 18–19; Mara Karlin, 'Why military assistance programs disappoint: minor tools can't solve major problems', *Foreign Affairs* 96: 6, 2017, pp. 111–20; Emily Knowles and Jahara Matisek, 'Western security force assistance in weak states: time for a peacebuilding approach', *RUSI Journal* 164: 3, 2019, p. 12; Jahara Matisek and William Reno, 'Getting American security force assistance right: political context matters', *Joint Force Quarterly*, vol. 92, 2019, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> Matisek, 'The crisis of American military assistance'.

<sup>25</sup> Moda Dieng, 'The multi-national joint task force and the G5 Sahel joint force: the limits of military capacity-building efforts', *Contemporary Security Policy* 40: 4, 2019, pp. 492–3.

<sup>26</sup> Jesse Dillon Savage and Jonathan D. Caverley, 'When human capital threatens the Capitol: foreign aid in the form of military training and coups', *Journal of Peace Research* 54: 4, 2017, pp. 542–57.

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Fisher and David M. Anderson, 'Authoritarianism and the securitization of development in Africa', *International Affairs* 91: 1, 2015, pp. 131–51.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Boutton, 'The dangers of US military assistance to weak states', *Texas National Security Review*, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-pros-and-cons-of-security-assistance/>; Andrew Boutton, 'Military aid, regime vulnerability and the escalation of political violence', *British Journal of Political Science* 51: 2, 2021, pp. 507–25; Michael Shurkin, 'France's war in the Sahel and the evolutions of counterinsurgency doctrine', *Texas National Security Review* 4: 1, 2020–21, p. 38; Patricia L. Sullivan, Leo J. Blanken and Ian C. Rice, 'Arming the peace: foreign security assistance and human rights conditions in post-conflict countries', *Defense and Peace Economics* 31: 2, 2020, pp. 177–200.

<sup>29</sup> Navin A. Bapat, 'Transnational terrorism, US military aid, and the incentive to misrepresent', *Journal of Peace Research* 48: 3, 2011, pp. 303–18; Andrew Boutton, 'Of terrorism and revenue: why foreign aid exacerbates terrorism in personalist regimes', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 36: 4, 2019, pp. 359–84; Boutton, 'Military aid'; Byman, 'Friends like these', pp. 109–10.

## **A new approach? The promise of enclave units**

The increasing reliance on SFA as a cornerstone of western counterterrorism policy thus sits uncomfortably alongside widespread pessimism about the potential for meaningful transformation of recipient militaries. This has prompted both scholars and practitioners to search for ‘new’ solutions. Given the lacklustre performance of the armies of Iraq and Afghanistan, both Stephen Biddle and Ido Levy recommend mentoring special operations forces instead. Small elite units pose less of a threat to the broader political system, making governments more willing to tolerate their professionalization.<sup>30</sup> David Witty further argues that ‘in countries where the MoD is traditionally politicized, sectarianized, and suffers from poor corrupt senior leadership, creating a small organization outside the normal military structure is one method to rapidly build effective capabilities’.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Matisek and William Reno claim that the best option in these contexts is to construct counterterrorism-focused militias ‘insulated from the bad politics of the state’.<sup>32</sup>

These works reflect a growing consensus around directing SFA towards what we might term ‘enclave units’. The basic premise is alluring: an elite unit can be carved out of existing security forces—or formed afresh—and isolated from the pathologies of the rest of the military, especially from patronage and corruption. Deploying small-footprint teams, SFA providers can strategically target their training and resources to create proficient forces with specialized counterterrorism capabilities. Those units can then deploy on missions aligning with western interests.

As an evolving practice, this idea of the ‘enclave unit’ requires conceptual development. There is broad agreement that enclave units should be small (e.g. special forces, paramilitaries or militias) and organizationally isolated from the military, with an independent chain of command. The definition should probably stop there, remaining fairly inclusive. Enclave units need not be built in the midst of large foreign troop deployments, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, or created from scratch. Small-footprint missions, in particular, may need to repurpose existing units. The degree of foreign control over recruitment, promotion, payroll, mission selection and command, among other vital functions, also varies considerably. While isolation fundamentally requires separation from the regular military hierarchy, enclave units must still be commanded by somebody. Unless western military officers retain high-level control indefinitely, that command will (eventually) reside with the recipient country’s political leadership. Bureaucratic isolation does not equate to political isolation.

<sup>30</sup> Biddle, ‘Building security forces’, p. 135; Ido Levy, ‘Don’t let over-the-horizon counterterrorism eliminate the premier security force assistance product: partner special operations forces’, Washington Institute, 18 May 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-let-over-horizon-counterterrorism-eliminate-premier-security-force-assistance>.

<sup>31</sup> David Witty, *The Iraqi counter terrorism service* (Washington DC: Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> Matisek and Reno, ‘Getting American security force assistance right’, p. 72.

Enclave units have shown great tactical and operational promise in the field. In Iraq, the ‘Golden Division’ was created in 2003,<sup>33</sup> expanding quickly to three special forces brigades focusing on counterterrorism. The United States invested at least US\$237 million in the unit, whose training was conducted by US Green Berets and Jordanian special forces.<sup>34</sup> US officers ensured the division promoted on merit and drew proportionally across Iraq’s ethnic and sectarian divisions. They also kept the division’s command structure separate from the military and outside the control of the ministry of defence.<sup>35</sup> The Golden Division gained a reputation for its strong combat performance. In 2014, as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) captured broad swathes of Iraqi territory, the regular army nearly collapsed: 60 of 243 combat battalions were completely lost and 5 of 14 army divisions were rated as ineffective.<sup>36</sup> And yet the Golden Division was able to maintain its cohesion and tactical proficiency. Stepping outside its core counterterrorism training, the division then spearheaded counter-offensives to retake ISIS-controlled areas—including Fallujah, Mosul, Ramadi and Tikrit.<sup>37</sup>

The United States has seen similar operational success with the Somali Danab, or ‘lightning brigade’. Originally created as an experimental platoon, the Danab grew into a company and then a battalion. It was trained and equipped by American advisers and the private military contractor Bancroft Global. Unlike army units, which often recruit from a single clan, the Danab is deliberately balanced across Somalia’s clans, sub-clans, and minority ethnic groups. Kept entirely separate from the regular military, Danab soldiers undergo rigorous training and are promoted on merit. They are even paid directly by their foreign backers through a privately managed payroll system. The Danab are known as a competent unit capable of engaging in sustained combat. They have conducted nearly all of the offensive operations against Al-Shabaab without suffering major defections or infiltrations.<sup>38</sup>

The track records of forces like the Golden Division and Danab have led western SFA missions to focus increasingly on supporting enclave units.<sup>39</sup> This raises the important question: do enclave units provide a sustainable solution to the political problems and military pathologies that have inspired their creation?

<sup>33</sup> Sometimes the ‘Golden Division’ refers specifically to the 1st Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) Brigade, within the broader Counter Terrorism Service (CTS). I follow others who use the term to refer to the CTS more broadly and all three of its ISOF brigades.

<sup>34</sup> Witty, *The Iraqi counter terrorism service*, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Witty, *The Iraqi counter terrorism service*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>36</sup> Witty, *The Iraqi counter terrorism service*, pp. 34–5.

<sup>37</sup> Matisek and Fowler, ‘The paradox of security force assistance’, pp. 121–30; Michael Knights and Alex Mello, ‘The best thing America built in Iraq’, *War on the Rocks*, 19 July 2017; Levy, ‘Don’t let over-the-horizon counterterrorism eliminate the premier security force assistance product’; David M. Witty, *Iraq’s post-2014 Counter Terrorism Service* (Washington DC: Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, 2018), pp. 6–7, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Ido Levy and Abdi Yusuf, ‘The “lightning” brigade: security force assistance and the fight against Al-Shabaab’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* online first, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2045967>, pp. 6–13; Tommy Ross, ‘The dangers of incoherent strategy: security assistance in Somalia, 2009–2018’, *Texas National Security Review*, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-pros-and-cons-of-security-assistance/>; Williams, ‘Building the Somali National Army’, pp. 367–74.

<sup>39</sup> Matisek and Reno, ‘Getting American security force assistance right’, p. 67.



## The danger of enclave units

I argue that we should be wary of building tactically proficient enclave units in autocracies. Regardless of how isolated these forces seem from the dysfunctions of the regular military, they can never truly escape the political systems in which they are embedded. Enclave units will, eventually, face the grim prospect of internal redeployment for mass repression. This creates a tragic situation where SFA directly contributes to further violence and destabilization.

The following theoretical insights were generated from the experiences of Cameroon, an ethnic minority dictatorship—that is, an autocratic government that leverages shared ascriptive identity (usually ethnicity, sect or clan) to maintain power.<sup>40</sup> Identity shapes not just the dictator's inner circle but also many important state institutions, from the cabinet to the military. These regimes are thus characterized by the widespread and systematic exclusion of other identity groups. Ethnic minority dictatorships are commonplace (although by no means ubiquitous) throughout Africa, the Middle East, and south-east Asia—where colonialism often established legacies of ethnic exclusion across both military and civilian institutions.<sup>41</sup>

Within these regimes, enclave units can exacerbate ethnic conflict by empowering dictators to further exclude other groups. Scholars have already noted that foreign military aid can relieve pressures for reform and embolden otherwise weak dictators to consolidate power rather than negotiate with their opposition.<sup>42</sup> Obtaining control over highly effective counterterrorism units further insulates dictators from rebel challenges. That safety enables them to pursue more aggressive and marginalizing policies toward minority groups—potentially stripping them of patronage opportunities, imposing more draconian education and language laws, and taking away development and infrastructure investments. Basically, enclave units strengthen the repressive capacity of the state, facilitating a militarized approach to social control as opposed to benefits-based co-optation. Further marginalization and exclusion then increase the likelihood of rebellion.<sup>43</sup> Enclave units can thus perversely destabilize existing ethnic configurations of power, leading to worsening violence over the long term.

Ethnic minority dictators will perceive any ethnic rebellion—but especially secessionist movements—as far more threatening than the transnational terrorist

<sup>40</sup> I use the term 'ethnicity' broadly to capture all forms of ascriptive identity—e.g. those characterized by descent or a mythology of descent including region, ethnicity, race, clan, ethnic subgroup and sometimes religion. This follows Chandra's minimalist definition and is consistent with most comparativist understandings of ethnicity tracing back to Horowitz. See Kanchan Chandra, *Constructivist theories of ethnic politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 59–60; Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic groups in conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 52.

<sup>41</sup> Kristen A. Harkness, *When soldiers rebel: ethnic armies and political instability in Africa* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 35–41.

<sup>42</sup> Boutton, 'Military aid'; Shurkin, 'France's war in the Sahel', p. 38.

<sup>43</sup> On ethnic group exclusion and violence, see Lars-Erik Cederman, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Halvard Buhaug, *Inequality, grievances, and civil war* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Gudrun Østby, 'Polarization, horizontal inequalities and violent civil conflict', *Journal of Peace Research* 45: 2, 2008, pp. 143–62; Philip Roessler, *Ethnic politics and state power in Africa: the logic of the coup—civil war trap* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

organizations that currently concern western SFA providers (although sometimes these threats are one and the same). Eventually, enclave units will face orders to redeploy away from their original counterterrorist missions and towards suppressing ethnic minorities, becoming involved in worrisome acts of repression and potentially committing human rights abuses.<sup>44</sup> In this way, the very provision of SFA creates endogenously increasing disharmony between the interests of donors and recipients.

Even where ethnicity does not shape autocratic politics, enclave units still constitute a tempting resource for internal repression. Dictatorships constantly face threats of mass protests, budding insurgencies, regional secessionist movements and other challenges to their power. Given a tactically proficient enclave unit, they have more effective security forces at their disposal to suppress periodic outbreaks of resistance. The basic insight that enclave units are fundamentally subject to political misuse should thus generalize to autocracies more broadly.

### The Bataillons d'Intervention Rapide in Cameroon

To illustrate these theoretical dynamics, I analyse the case of the Bataillons d'Intervention Rapide (BIR) in Cameroon. Western nations have invested heavily in the BIR within their broader regional effort to counter Islamic extremism across the Sahel. Isolated from the regular military, with an independent chain of command, the BIR have become a tactically effective enclave unit. Yet the BIR are still subservient to President Paul Biya, who sits atop a longstanding dictatorship dominated by his Beti ethnic group. In 2017, increasingly harsh language policies in the south-west Anglophone regions provoked mass protests and the explosion of violent separatism. Biya responded with a military crackdown, including with redeployed BIR units. The BIR are now deeply implicated in heavy-handed minority group repression and human rights abuses, deepening autocracy in Cameroon.

### *Violent extremism in the Sahel and the rise of Boko Haram*

The threat of Islamic jihadist groups across the Sahel, particularly Boko Haram, motivated western outpourings of SFA to Cameroon. Following 9/11, the United States considered the region a major front in the global 'war on terror'. It was feared that the low population density, porous borders and widespread poverty

<sup>44</sup> Enclave units could disobey these orders. They are often recruited across a diverse range of societal groups and imbued with western military training and norms of professionalism. However, defection short of a coup is unlikely. Dictators reward such political unreliability with disbandment or purges, while coups kindle new dictatorships, foment more coups, and further destabilize the country—as we have seen in Mali over the past decade. Thus even disobedience is likely to cause embarrassment and waste SFA investments. See Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, 'The snake that eats itself: why coups beget coups beget coups', *Foreign Policy*, 5 Aug. 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/05/the-snake-that-eats-itself/>; Kristen A. Harkness, 'Militaries', in Gabrielle Lynch and Peter VonDoepp, eds, *Routledge handbook of democratization in Africa* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 161–73; Andrew C. Miller, 'Debunking the myth of the "good" coup d'état in Africa', *African Studies Quarterly* 12: 2, 2011, pp. 45–70.

of Sahelian states would increase their vulnerability to violent extremist organizations. To encourage regional counterterrorism cooperation and enhance training, the Pan Sahel initiative was launched in 2002 with an original budget of US\$8 million.<sup>45</sup> The programme later evolved into the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, which distributed over US\$209 million from 2015 to 2020.<sup>46</sup>

Boko Haram emerged in northern Nigeria in 2003. A Salafist-inspired religious sect led by Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram was initially non-violent—operating its own mosques, preaching against western secular influences, and promoting the full implementation of shari'a law. In 2009, the Nigerian government attempted to repress the movement, extrajudicially executing its leader and committing widespread human rights abuses in Borno state. From 2010 to 2013, led by Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram went into hiding, transforming itself into a violent guerrilla organization that often perpetrated terrorist acts against civilians. Facing increasing deadly attacks and large-scale internal displacement, in 2013 Nigeria declared a state of emergency in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states. This enabled the army to expand operations and conduct aerial bombardments. Nonetheless, from 2013 to 2015, Boko Haram gained control over substantial areas of territory across north-eastern Nigeria, forcing its political and religious vision on civilians. The violence and refugee flows soon spilled over the borders into Cameroon, Chad and Niger.<sup>47</sup>

### Creating an enclave unit

The BIR predate the rise of Boko Haram. In the 1990s, chronic instability in neighbouring Chad and the Central African Republic fuelled militarized cross-border banditry in the far north region of Cameroon. *Coupeurs de route*—essentially, highway robbers—frequently targeted cash-flush herdsmen and traders returning from markets and then moved on to kidnapping for ransom.<sup>48</sup> The Bataillon Léger d'Intervention (BLI) was created in 1999 to provide security in the northern forest zones and monitor Cameroon's insecure borders. The BLI quickly gained a strong reputation for fighting the *coupeurs* and diminishing their illicit activities.<sup>49</sup>

In 2001, the BLI was expanded into three elite and highly mobile intervention battalions and renamed the BIR. Each battalion was assigned to one of Cameroon's

<sup>45</sup> Yahia H. Zoubir, 'The United States and Maghreb–Sahel security', *International Affairs* 85: 5, 2009, pp. 989–90.

<sup>46</sup> *Audit of the Department of State Bureau of African Affairs monitoring and coordination of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership program* (Washington DC: Office of the Inspector General of the United States Department of State, Sept. 2020).

<sup>47</sup> Isaac Olawale, 'Decapitation strategies and the significance of Abubakar Shekau's death in Nigeria's Boko Haram crisis', *International Affairs* 97: 6, 2021, p. 1694; Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, 'A sectarian jihad in Nigeria: the case of Boko Haram', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27: 5, 2016, pp. 879–80; Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: the history of an African jihadist movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Christian Seignobos, 'Le phénomène zargina dans le nord du Cameroun', *Afrique Contemporaine* 3: 239, 2011, pp. 35–59.

<sup>49</sup> Georges Dougueli, 'Cameroun: la politique du BIR', *Jeune Afrique*, 30 April 2013, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/137589/politique/cameroun-la-politique-du-bir/>; Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, 'Les violences dans l'extrême-nord du Cameroun: le complot comme outil d'interprétation et de luttes politiques', *Politique Africaine* 2: 138, 2015, pp. 163–77.

three military regions—the *régions militaires interarmées* (RMIA)—and primarily tasked with responding to both internal and external threats within that territory. However, President Biya retained the authority to deploy them anywhere.<sup>50</sup> Facing a growing threat environment, the BIR expanded again, to roughly 5,000 soldiers by 2015 and to five battalions and around 7,000 troops by 2018.<sup>51</sup> To compensate for growing desertions in the gendarmerie and army, in 2020 a recruitment drive was launched to augment the BIR with 2,200 new soldiers.<sup>52</sup>

The BIR joined an extensive security apparatus that was already heavily coup-proofed. President Biya counterbalances three parallel ground forces against one another: the army, the gendarmerie and the presidential guard. Their command structures are heavily personalized, with loyalty privileged over seniority and merit. They are also stacked with Biya's co-ethnic Beti and especially members of his Bulu clan. Soldiers are rewarded with generous salary packages, opportunities for bribery, and military resources made available for private businesses. Biya further maintains secretive intelligence units that police political dissent, including within the security forces.<sup>53</sup> The BIR certainly contribute another layer of counterbalancing to Biya's protection.<sup>54</sup> However, their basing throughout the countryside and early deployment to the remote far north (far distant from the capital) strongly suggest that their primary mission remains counter-banditry and counterterrorism.

Like other elite enclave units, the BIR are isolated from the regular Cameroonian military and its coup-proofing pathologies. Each of the five battalions has a separate chain of command that bypasses the general staff and the ministry of defence, reporting directly to the office of the president.<sup>55</sup> The BIR draw their entire budget from the 'Société nationale de hydrocarbures'—that is, from presidentially controlled state oil rents.<sup>56</sup> The BIR also recruit independently, drawing soldiers from across society without regard to their regional or ethnic origins.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Niagale Bagayoko-Penone, *Cameroon's security apparatus: actors and structures*, DFID Report GO/0717 (London: Department for International Development, 2008), pp. 19–22.

<sup>51</sup> Michel Goya, 'Combattre les organisations irrégulières africaines', *Défense et Sécurité Internationale*, vol. 133, 2018, p. 67; Georges Dougueli, 'Cameroun: Paul Biya sous protection israélienne', *Jeune Afrique*, 19 Nov. 2015, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/276021/politique/cameroun-paul-biya-sous-protection-israelienne/>.

<sup>52</sup> 'Cameroun: après de nombreuses désertions, le ministère de la défense veut procéder à des radiations', *Jeune Afrique*, 12 Dec. 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1090308/politique/cameroun-apres-de-nombreuses-desertions-le-ministere-de-la-defense-procede-a-des-radiations/>.

<sup>53</sup> Kristen A. Harkness, 'Cameroon: the military and autocratic stability', *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*, 2020, pp. 4–6, <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1800>.

<sup>54</sup> The BIR have even allegedly been trained to withstand sieges by the regular military: see Dougueli, 'Cameroun: Paul Biya'.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Griffin, 'Operation Barkhane and Boko Haram: French counterterrorism and military cooperation in the Sahel', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27: 5, 2016, p. 904.

<sup>56</sup> Dougueli, 'Cameroun: la politique du BIR'.

<sup>57</sup> Georges Dougueli, 'Cameroun: à qui vont les postes de commandement dans l'armée?', *Jeune Afrique*, 7 Nov. 2017, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/485082/politique/cameroun-a-qui-vont-les-postes-de-commandement-dans-larmee/>.

## Western SFA

The BIR were initially trained by Israeli mercenaries. The BLI was created by Colonel Abraham Avi Sirvan, the former Israeli defence attaché to Cameroon. He retained command over the successor BIR until his death in a helicopter accident in 2010, when he was succeeded by the retired Israeli general Mayer Heres. By 2017, Heres had delegated command to Brigadier Bouba Dobékréo, a native of Cameroon's far north, but continued to exert influence over both the BIR and presidential guard as Biya's chief security adviser.<sup>58</sup>

The BIR soon became major recipients of western SFA. US security aid began flowing in the mid-2000s,<sup>59</sup> but skyrocketed after Cameroon joined the fight against Boko Haram. Under Section 1206 Train and Equip Authority, the BIR alone received US\$15.9 million in 2015 and US\$13.5 million in 2016.<sup>60</sup> The successor Section 333 Building Partner Capacity funding no longer reports the precise units assisted. Cameroon received US\$19.8 million under that programme in 2017, much of which presumably went to the BIR.<sup>61</sup> By 2019, around 300 US troops were providing on-the-ground military training annually. US Army special forces worked extensively with the BIR, and American soldiers were routinely seen at the BIR base in Salak.<sup>62</sup> While their numbers remain more opaque, France and the UK have also poured resources directly into the BIR.<sup>63</sup> For example, between January and April 2021, British military advisers trained both the BIR and the Directorate General of External Research, part of the Cameroonian intelligence services.<sup>64</sup>

Such western assistance helped the BIR become better equipped and trained than either the army or the gendarmerie. The BIR possess high-grade equipment such as light aircraft and helicopters. They even have their own small naval force (BIR-Delta).<sup>65</sup> They have earned a strong reputation for tactical effectiveness with US General Thomas Waldhauser, commander of AFRICOM, calling the BIR 'the top-shelf counterterrorism unit inside Cameroon'.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Dougueli, 'Cameroun: à qui vont?'; Dougueli, 'Cameroun: Paul Biya'; Georges Dougueli, 'Mort du Monsieur Sécurité de Paul Biya dans le crash d'un hélicoptère', *Jeune Afrique*, 23 Nov. 2010, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/183587/politique/mort-du-monsieur-s-curit-de-paul-biya-dans-le-crash-d-un-h-licopt-re/>.

<sup>59</sup> Tomás F. Husted, *Cameroon: key issues and US policy*, CRS report R46919 (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021), p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> Security Assistance Monitor, *Security assistance database*.

<sup>61</sup> Security Assistance Monitor, *Security assistance database*.

<sup>62</sup> Jaysim Hanspal, 'Cameroun: le discret soutien du Royaume-Uni à Paul Biya', *Jeune Afrique*, 7 Feb. 2022, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1309205/politique/cameroun-le-discret-soutien-du-royaume-uni-a-paul-biya/>; James Fahy, 'The dark side of America's "train, advise, and assist" missions', *Task and Purpose*, 11 July 2018; Siobhán O'Grady, 'US cuts some military assistance to Cameroon, citing allegations of human rights violations', *Washington Post*, 7 Feb. 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/us-cuts-some-military-assistance-to-cameroon-citing-allegations-of-human-rights-violations/2019/02/06/aeb18052-2a4e-11e9-906e-9d55b6451eb4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/us-cuts-some-military-assistance-to-cameroon-citing-allegations-of-human-rights-violations/2019/02/06/aeb18052-2a4e-11e9-906e-9d55b6451eb4_story.html).

<sup>63</sup> Mark Moritz and Paul Scholte, 'Ethical predicaments: advocating security for mobile pastoralists in weak states', *Anthropology Today* 27: 3, 2011, pp. 12–17.

<sup>64</sup> Hanspal, 'Cameroun: le discret soutien'.

<sup>65</sup> Helmoed Heitman, 'Optimiser les structures des forces de sécurité africaine', *Bulletin de la Sécurité Africaine* (Centre d'Études Stratégiques de l'Afrique), vol. 13, 2011, p. 5; Goya, 'Combattre'.

<sup>66</sup> O'Grady, 'US cuts some military assistance'. See also Bagayoko-Penone, *Cameroon's security apparatus*, p. 22; Jahara Matisek, 'International competition to provide security force assistance in Africa', *Prism* 9: 1, 2020, pp. 107–8.

## Deployment against Boko Haram

Initially, western and Cameroonian interests coincided. Responding to territorial incursions, in 2014 Cameroon joined multinational operations against Boko Haram and deployed BIR personnel to the far north region.<sup>67</sup> Violence then escalated rapidly. By the summer of 2015, Cameroon had become a major target for Boko Haram attacks. In response, Biya ordered a large military presence into the far north—growing to 8,000 and then 12,500 troops by 2016, over a third of which were from the BIR.<sup>68</sup> Extensively engaged in the struggle against Boko Haram, the BIR established military bases across the far north, including in Amchidé and Fotokol, and its troops were often deployed alongside army, gendarme and police units.<sup>69</sup>

Despite their western training, the BIR have notably never fully complied with international norms governing the treatment of civilians. The BIR typically conduct large-scale cordon and search operations against markets, villages and Qur'anic schools. These missions fail to distinguish properly between insurgents and civilians, detaining dozens or hundreds of people in a single sweep. The BIR also routinely use excessive force. Human rights organizations have documented beatings and torture during interrogations, collective punishment with homes destroyed by arson, and extrajudicial executions and disappearances.<sup>70</sup>

## The dictatorship of Paul Biya

The BIR are embedded in a broader political system characterized by repressive dictatorship and ethnic minority rule. Cameroon's founding president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, built a highly centralized one-party state. Local and regional governments lacked any autonomy. The entire country comprised a single electoral district, meaning the winning party gained every single seat in the legislature. Ahidjo also personally controlled his party's electoral candidates who, of course, always won.<sup>71</sup>

Ahidjo, however, governed by ethnic co-optation and inclusion—at least within civilian institutions. 'Ethnic barons' were appointed to party, cabinet and

<sup>67</sup> Philippe Susnjara, 'Révolution dans les affaires militaires africaines', *Revue Défense Nationale*, vol. 792, 2016–17, pp. 38–42.

<sup>68</sup> Griffin, 'Operation Barkhane', pp. 897–905; Hans de Marie Heungoup, *In the tracks of Boko Haram in Cameroon* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2016). The one-third BIR contribution statistic is calculated from Heungoup, who reports that at some point in 2016 there were 8,000 soldiers deployed to the far north, 2,400 of which were BIR.

<sup>69</sup> 'Cameroun: un défenseur des droits humains accuse l'armée d'exactions en zone anglophone', *Jeune Afrique*, 7 April 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/549425/politique/cameroun-un-defenseur-des-droits-humains-accuse-larmee-dexactions-en-zone-anglophone/>; Amnesty International, *Right cause, wrong means: human rights violated and justice denied in Cameroon's fight against Boko Haram* (London, 2016), p. 15; Heungoup, *In the tracks*.

<sup>70</sup> Amnesty International, *Amnesty International report 2014/15* (London: Amnesty International, 2015); Amnesty International, *Amnesty International report 2015/16* (London: Amnesty International, 2016); Amnesty International, *Amnesty International report 2016/17* (London: Amnesty International, 2017); Amnesty International, *Human rights under fire: attacks and violations in Cameroon's struggle with Boko Haram* (London: Amnesty International, 2015).

<sup>71</sup> Mark W. DeLancey, 'The construction of the Cameroon political system: the Ahidjo years, 1958–1982', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 6: 1–2, 1987, pp. 11–12; Joseph Takougang, 'The post-Ahidjo era in Cameroon: continuity and change', *Journal of Third World Studies* 10: 2, 1993, p. 273.

ministerial positions with a complex arithmetic balancing representation across Cameroon's regional cleavages and important ethnic groups, including the Anglophones. The barons sat atop a sophisticated clientelist system within which they spoke for their communities, distributed patronage and maintained order in their fiefdoms.<sup>72</sup> The military, on the other hand, was stacked with Ahidjo's northern Fulbe co-ethnics. They were integral to maintaining order, including defeating the southern *maquis* rebellion of the early 1960s.<sup>73</sup>

When Ahidjo retired in 1982, Paul Biya inherited power—and has ruled ever since. Like his predecessor, Biya has maintained an iron grip on the centralized state, refusing to permit meaningful political competition. He has not hesitated to use military force to repress internal dissent, including against the pro-democratization *Villes mortes* ('ghost towns') campaign of the early 1990s and the mass demonstrations protesting against his abolition of presidential term limits in 2008.<sup>74</sup>

Biya has also increasingly deepened ethnic exclusion. After the failed coup attempt of 1984 by Ahidjo loyalists, Biya purged Fulbe soldiers from across the security sector, replacing them with co-ethnic southern Beti, especially from his Bulu clan.<sup>75</sup> On the civilian side, Biya further centralized and personalized power while departing from Ahidjo's system of ethnic balancing. Instead, he relied on co-ethnics to govern. His inner circle is colloquially derided as the 'Essingan' or 'Beti mafia'. The Beti also monopolize key positions in the cabinet, ministries, civil service and state-run businesses.<sup>76</sup>

### Redeployment against the Anglophones

There is a long history of conflict between the Anglophone areas and the central government. Once part of the British colonial empire, the two western regions voted to join Francophone Cameroon at independence—having received promises of democracy, federalism and autonomy that were never fulfilled. Rather, during the *maquis* rebellion, Ahidjo imposed military governance, quartered gendarmes and deployed the army throughout the south, including Anglophone territory. These forces were accused of systematic abuses against local populations.<sup>77</sup> Heavy-

<sup>72</sup> DeLancey, 'The construction of the Cameroon political system', pp. 15–16; Ndiva Kofele-Kale, 'Ethnicity, regionalism, and political power: a post-mortem of Ahidjo's Cameroon', in Michael G. Schatzberg and I. William Zartman, eds, *The political economy of Cameroon* (New York: Praeger, 1986), pp. 76–7; John Mukum Mbaku, 'Cameroon's stalled transition to democratic governance: lessons for Africa's new democrats', *African and Asian Studies* 1: 3, 2002, p. 136.

<sup>73</sup> Harkness, *When soldiers rebel*, pp. 92–3. The Fulbe are also sometimes referred to as the Fulani or Peuhl.

<sup>74</sup> Jean-Germain Gros, 'The hard lessons of Cameroon', *Journal of Democracy* 6: 3, 1995, pp. 112–26; Lauren Sneyd, "'We eat what we have, not what we want': the policy effects of food riots and eating after the 2008 crisis in Cameroon', in Naomi Hossain and Patta Scott-Villiers, eds, *Food riots, food rights, and the politics of provisions* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 98–115.

<sup>75</sup> Harkness, *When soldiers rebel*, pp. 98–9.

<sup>76</sup> Dickson Eyoh, 'Conflicting narratives of Anglophone protest and the politics of identity in Cameroon', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 16: 2, 1998, p. 255; Joseph Takougang, 'The 1992 multiparty elections in Cameroon: prospects for democracy and democratization', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 31: 1–2, 1996, p. 62.

<sup>77</sup> Walter Gam Nkwi, Henry Kam Kah and Martin Sango Ndehm, 'The gendarmerie, (in-)security and popular reaction in West Cameroon, Federal Republic of Cameroon 1961–1964', *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* 4: 2, 2016, pp. 117–39.

handed repression returned from 1990 to 1992 as Biya attempted to thwart the *Villes mortes* campaign. The political opposition was spearheaded by Anglophone John Fru Ndi and his Social Democratic Front. Military governance returned with mass protests violently dispersed across Anglophone cities, killing hundreds.<sup>78</sup> Even after defeating the democratization movement, Biya continued to use his security forces to harass Anglophone political parties, break up protests and suppress voter turnout.<sup>79</sup>

The first armed Anglophone separatists emerged in the late 1990s. They were met with an effective, and brutal, government response. The conflict then simmered for many years before exploding in 2017.<sup>80</sup> The previous year, Biya had further stripped the Anglophone regions of important local accommodations and linguistic rights—most notably replacing English-speaking with French-speaking judges. A wave of demonstrations engulfed Anglophone cities, including Bamenda, Buea and Kumba. The security forces used heavy-handed tactics to disperse these protests, including live fire, resulting in several fatalities.<sup>81</sup> For many, this latest round of government intransigence was the final straw. Hundreds of new combatants joined secessionist organizations, the most prominent of which is the Ambazonia Defence Force.<sup>82</sup>

Not backing down, President Biya unleashed massive force against the Anglophones. This has included gendarme, army and BIR units which often conduct operations jointly.<sup>83</sup> While Yaoundé intentionally conceals the numbers of troops involved,<sup>84</sup> we can reasonably infer a significant redeployment of the BIR from the far north to the western regions. While in 2016 Cameroon had 12,500 soldiers fighting against Boko Haram, the next year saw them drawn down to 8,500 troops—precisely as the Anglophone crisis escalated.<sup>85</sup> A fifth RMIA was then created towards the end of 2017, with its new affiliated fifth BIR battalion headquartered at Bamenda in the heart of the Anglophone region.<sup>86</sup> BIR soldiers

<sup>78</sup> Kristen A. Harkness, 'Military loyalty and the failure of democratization in Africa: how ethnic armies shape the capacity of presidents to defy term limits', *Democratization* 24: 5, 2017, p. 812; Milton Krieger, 'Cameroon's democratic crossroads, 1990–4', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 32: 4, 1994, p. 611; John Mukum Mbaku, 'The state and Cameroon's stalled transition to democratic governance', in George Klay Kieh and Pita Ogaba Agbese, eds, *Reconstructing the authoritarian state in Africa* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 33.

<sup>79</sup> Piet Konings and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, 'President Paul Biya and the "Anglophone problem"', in John Mukum Mbaku and Joseph Takougang, eds, *The leadership challenge in Africa: Cameroon under Paul Biya* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), p. 224.

<sup>80</sup> Piet Konings and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, 'Anglophone secessionist movements in Cameroon', in Lotje de Vries, Pierre Englebert and Mareike Schomerus, eds, *Secessionism in African politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 77.

<sup>81</sup> Amnesty International, *Report 2015/16*; Amnesty International, *Report 2016/17*, pp. 106–7.

<sup>82</sup> 'Au Cameroun anglophone, les séparatistes armés dans une logique de guérilla', *Jeune Afrique*, 17 Feb. 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/532575/politique/au-cameroun-anglophone-les-separatistes-armes-dans-une-logique-de-guerilla/>.

<sup>83</sup> 'Cameroun: plusieurs morts lors d'une opération de l'armée dans une localité du sud-ouest anglophone', *Jeune Afrique*, 15 Dec. 2017, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/502775/politique/cameroun-plusieurs-morts-lors-dune-operation-de-larmee-dans-une-localite-du-sud-ouest-anglophone/>.

<sup>84</sup> Mathieu Olivier, 'Crise anglophone au Cameroun: qui sont les "sécessionnistes"?', *Jeune Afrique*, 28 Jan. 2019, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/715489/politique/crise-anglophone-au-cameroun-qui-sont-les-secessionnistes/>.

<sup>85</sup> 'Cameroun: un défenseur'; Olivier, 'Crise anglophone'.

<sup>86</sup> Amnesty International, *A turn for the worse: violence and human rights in Anglophone Cameroon* (London, 2018), p. 6.



have been injured in secessionist attacks using improvised explosive devices, and have raided rebel positions.<sup>87</sup> They have also been observed across the Anglophone region manning checkpoints during elections, conducting security missions in rural villages and breaking up urban protests.<sup>88</sup>

The BIR are now directly implicated in worrying repression against an historically repressed minority group. Excessive force has repeatedly been used against non-violent protesters in Anglophone cities. Villages accused of supporting the secessionists have been communally punished. Beatings and unlawful killings have also been reported.<sup>89</sup> For example, after two gendarmes were fatally wounded in January 2018, the BIR assisted in conducting retaliatory raids against Kombone and Kwakwa villages, burning the latter to the ground. And during a February 2018 operation in Belo, ostensibly to retrieve two guns stolen by separatists, the BIR stand accused of shooting one civilian in the back and arbitrarily arresting and beating dozens more, with four people dying in custody.<sup>90</sup>

The experiences of the BIR in Cameroon thus underscore the inherent danger of building enclave units in ethnic minority dictatorships (and perhaps under any authoritarian regime). While isolation from the pathologies of the regular military can enable SFA to create tactically proficient counterterrorism forces, these units can never truly escape from their repressive governing systems. Rather, enclave units strengthen the hands of dictators, destabilize domestic power balances, and feed into deepening authoritarianism and devolving cycles of violence.

## Revisiting the Iraqi Golden Division and Somali Danab

The Iraqi Golden Division and Somali Danab are both held up as templates for future counterterrorism capacity-building in weak states. They demonstrate that SFA targeted at enclave units can achieve tactical success. But have they evaded the dangers of political misuse? In short, no. Returning to these two cases reveals that direct US control initially prevented redeployment away from counterterrorism missions. When command was transferred to domestic leaders, however, abuses soon emerged. This suggests that an indefinite commitment to remain in-country and exercise command over enclave units may be necessary to prevent their becoming a tool of repression.

<sup>87</sup> 'Crise anglophone au Cameroun: un gendarme tué par des sécessionnistes', *Jeune Afrique*, 26 Jan. 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/521838/politique/crise-anglophone-au-cameroun-un-gendarme-tue-par-des-secessionnistes/>; Mathieu Olivier, 'Cameroun: le général des Forces de défense de l'Ambazonie abattu par l'armée', *Jeune Afrique*, 21 Dec. 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/693934/politique/cameroun-le-general-des-forces-de-defense-de-lambazonie-abattu-par-larmee/>.

<sup>88</sup> Amnesty International, *A turn for the worse*, pp. 20–5; Amnesty International, *Cameroon: rise in killings in Anglophone regions ahead of parliamentary elections* (London, 2020); 'Cameroun: à la veille de la présidentielle, la peur règne à Buea en zone anglophone', *Jeune Afrique*, 6 Oct. 2018.

<sup>89</sup> 'Amnesty International, *Report 2015/16*; Amnesty International, *Report 2016/17*, pp. 106–7; Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2017/18* (London, 2018); Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2020/21* (London, 2021).

<sup>90</sup> Amnesty International, *A turn for the worse*, pp. 23–5.

### 'Fedayeen al-Maliki'?

In its early years, the Golden Division was thoroughly controlled by the US military, with advisers embedded at every level of organization. In September 2006, the United States and Iraq signed a memorandum of understanding to transfer command. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki then passed a series of executive orders to ensure that the Golden Division fell directly under his authority. A phased transition began in January 2008.<sup>91</sup> Almost immediately, US advisers reported that Maliki was interfering with recruitment and promotion, privileging loyalty over merit. Officers not sharing his Shi'a identity were punitively reassigned to less elite military units. Maliki then refused to cede power after losing the March 2010 elections. Instead, he purged Sunnis from the government and accelerated his campaign to gain loyalist control over Iraq's security forces.<sup>92</sup>

Accusations soon emerged that Maliki was deploying the Golden Division against political opponents and to intimidate Sunni communities. Perceived as a praetorian guard and coup-proofing force, the division acquired the derisive sobriquets of 'the Dirty Brigades' and 'Fedayeen al-Maliki'. The Golden Division was specifically implicated in raiding government offices and arresting politicians, harassing political parties and operating a secret prison where detainees were abused.<sup>93</sup> Even after Maliki finally stepped down in 2014, the Golden Division continued to experience political misuse far removed from its core counterterrorism training. After the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum, the division was ordered to deploy eight battalions to northern Iraq to take control of Kirkuk province from the Peshmerga. In 2018, the unit was used repeatedly to provide government security and protect infrastructure during mass protests—including those following the May parliamentary elections as well as the demonstrations across southern Iraq in July over government corruption and poor service provision.<sup>94</sup>

### *The Danab after the US withdrawal from Somalia*

From its creation, the United States exercised a high degree of control over the Danab. Direct command by American officers combined with veto power over missions allowed the US to block political misuse. For example, in 2020, the US prevented President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed from deploying the Danab to the Gedo region in order to pursue and capture political opponents.<sup>95</sup> Only months later, circumstances changed. President Trump withdrew the permanent US presence in Somalia, removing approximately 700 troops.<sup>96</sup> Restricted to small

<sup>91</sup> Tecott, *The cult of the persuasive*, p. 323; Witty, *Iraq's post-2014 Counter Terrorism Service*, pp. 9–24.

<sup>92</sup> Tecott, *The cult of the persuasive*, pp. 287, 325; Witty, *Iraq's post-2014 Counter Terrorism Service*, p. 16.

<sup>93</sup> Knights and Mello, 'The best thing'; Witty, *Iraq's post-2014 Counter Terrorism Service*, pp. 4, 16–18.

<sup>94</sup> Witty, *Iraq's post-2014 Counter Terrorism Service*, pp. 62–3.

<sup>95</sup> Levy, 'Don't let over-the-horizon counterterrorism eliminate the premier security force assistance product'.

<sup>96</sup> 'Somalia: President Biden reverses Trump's withdrawal of US troops', BBC News, 16 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-61467478>.

rotational training teams, US forces were compelled to hand the Danab over to the Somali government. Shortly thereafter, on 23 October 2021, the Somali president ordered the Danab to attack a Sufi militia in the Galmudug region—an ostensible ally in the fight against Al-Shabaab.<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion

The Cameroonian BIR, the Iraqi Golden Division, and the Somali Danab all reflect efforts to build partner capacity in weak states by targeting SFA at enclave units. Working with elite forces avoids the wholesale transformation of coup-proofed and patronage-ridden militaries that autocrats are loath to reform. Instead, western advisers can train small, tactically proficient forces devoted to counterterrorism operations. In all three contexts, these units have performed well in combat, conducting sustained offensives against violent extremist organizations.

Nonetheless, we should still be wary of building enclave units in autocracies, especially ethnic minority dictatorships. As the case of Cameroon demonstrates, enclave units perversely strengthen the repressive capacity of the state. This enables autocrats to avoid political compromise and rely instead on militarized social control—leading to harshening policies and further marginalizing ethnic minorities. When rebellions break out, embattled dictators then redeploy their proficient western-trained forces to re-establish order, entangling them in worrying repression and human rights abuses. Only an indefinite commitment to stay and command enclave units may prevent such political misuse and deepening of autocracy.

Democracies and liberalizing countries are far more promising sites for SFA investments. Consolidated democracies tend not to deploy their militaries for internal repression. Countries emerging from civil war often have political power-sharing agreements in place, which formalize ethnic inclusion. Former opposition leaders turned presidents in democratizing countries are usually keen to overhaul their inherited security forces. Conditional aid can even benefit these leaders, providing political cover for the implementation of desired reforms despite domestic resistance from hard-liners.<sup>98</sup>

There are times and places where SFA can make a significant difference. But western providers must analyse the local political context thoughtfully and in depth before committing themselves to military assistance, carefully weighing the gains to counterterrorism against the potential harm to recipient societies. Unfortunately, it is usually the most difficult and fraught autocratic contexts that produce the need for SFA in the first place—forcing a choice of lesser evils.

<sup>97</sup> Levy and Yusuf, 'The "lightning" brigade', p. 12.

<sup>98</sup> Berg, 'Elite bargains and external influence'.