

Civilian Protection through Civilian Control: An Overlooked Piece of Security Sector Assistance in the Sahel

By Alice Hunt Friend

Security sector assistance to African states often focuses primarily on the continent's military personnel—and bilateral and multilateral assistance for the countries of the Sahel have been no exception. The European Union Training Mission in Mali, Western military aid to the G5 Sahel countries, and U.S. counterterrorism training programs are all examples of how security-sector reform efforts emphasize military capabilities and capacity building. Although much of this training deals with tactical proficiency, some of it covers professional standards of conduct, including subordination to civilian control. In many ways, this emphasis on military professionalism makes sense, not just to help states supply security goods, but also in the humanitarian context. Professional militaries are defined, in part, by protecting civilian populations, facilitating humanitarian-assistance activities, and upholding international humanitarian law.

However, military competence is insufficient to guarantee humanitarian objectives in both ideal and practical terms. Ideally, militaries need a source of legitimacy and authority. In practice, they need an institutional context that assigns missions and manages the resources needed to carry those missions out. Military legitimacy and effectiveness can be achieved if a country [links democratic accountability to military professionalism](#). Although this is a generally understood principle among donors, it usually manifests as support to civil society or legislators. Left out are the civilians who would actually guide and control

military policy and the armed forces on a day-to-day basis. There is no capacity building for civilian control commensurate with the emphasis on building military capabilities.

Much of the research into the intersection of militaries and humanitarianism concentrates on **international interventions** during conflict, especially the relationship between third-party peacekeeping forces and non-governmental organizations. This line of inquiry has more to do with the civil-military relations of humanitarianism and does not offer many insights into how a country's civil-military relations affect humanitarian efforts. In short, a healthy civil-military relationship makes humanitarian operations both less likely to be necessary and easier to execute when they are.

This brief argues that humanitarian goals in the Sahel—and elsewhere—could be achieved more sustainably by adjusting security-sector assistance programming to expand civilian capacity to control the military. In particular, it recommends that donors conduct surveys of the history, political context, and existing practices of civilian control of the military in the states of the Sahel. Those surveys should then form the basis of tailored assistance programming to help bolster and sustain the development of a robust civilian professional cadre capable of managing the armed forces of recipient states. In the United States, these efforts should build on the progress made toward incorporating defense institution building (DIB) elements in security-sector assistance programming.

Security-Sector Assistance, Civilians, and Humanitarian Goals

Security is a fundamentally political good provided by the state because it is based on a series of bargains about who will have power, how they may keep it, and how they may exercise it legitimately. Security is therefore not simply a matter of technology and materiel, nor is it reducible to the mere existence of capable military units. Rather, security requires the existence of a capable military *controlled by* empowered state actors, themselves accountable to the law and the population.

From a humanitarian perspective, civilian control increases the probability that militaries will operate with respect for the population because it increases accountability to that population. Democratically accountable civilian control is also associated with more prudent internal uses of **armed force**. Militaries with excessive autonomy from the state—or with largely party- or identity-based lines of authority—often engage in corruption or **coerce the population** with impunity. But shortcuts to civilian control can also undermine security. **Coup-proofing efforts**, for example, can empower civilians but make the military less professional and effective. Civilians need to have the capacity to manage the military closely and in ways that do not implicate the military in domestic politics. Competent civilian controllers in an empowered Ministry of Defense (MoD) also serve coordination and centralization functions, saving NGOs from having to conduct separate negotiations with different military commands and allowing them to work more effectively with the government. Thus, both the existence and the quality of civilian control of the military have direct impacts on the safety of the population and the success of humanitarian activities.

Yet donor states involved in both security-sector reform and humanitarian assistance rarely emphasize capacity building for civilian control to the extent necessary. The trouble with most existing training about civilian control of the military is twofold. First, it is explained as a principle, rather than as a practice. It is therefore unclear how to facilitate it or even to know what it looks like. Often, the mere existence of civilians at the head of government can be misconstrued as fully satisfying civilian control, when in fact their presence is its most rudimentary condition. Exercising civilian control involves a broad range of activities, including developing policy aims, providing resources, conducting oversight, and ensuring accountability mechanisms. Ministers of defense embody most of these roles, but civilian specialists in

budgets, contracts, personnel policies, and logistics at all levels within the ministry cement the military's reliance on civilian management.

The second problem with most training about civilian control is that those who should practice civilian control of the military are not the ones, by and large, receiving the training. Instead, civilian control is usually included as a brief addendum to the military professionalization curriculum, suggesting that civilian control is possible largely through military inaction rather than civilian action. This has been improved in recent years by Defense Institution Reform Initiative (DIRI) efforts within the U.S. **DIB framework**. But the fact remains that the nuts and bolts of exercising civilian control are not taught to civilians. Taken together, these two problems mean that even when civilian control is part of a curriculum, it is presented to people in uniform as an abstract standard for them to uphold, not taught as a skill set to the civilians whose job it truly is to carry out.

To be fair, the dearth of training in civilian control is not confined to security-assistance programming in emerging democracies. Civilians in the United States do not get specific education and training in guidance, management, and oversight of the military either. Abilities that one might consider part of “civilian control” are typically built as a byproduct of lengthy experience in and around government rather than through deliberate skill development. Such lengthy experience is possible because the Constitution and the structure of the Department of Defense and the National Security Council are geared toward allowing only civilians to serve in key roles of authority over the military. These formal rules have been bolstered by a political culture that also **values civilian leadership**. Countries without such a tradition of investing in and elevating a capable civilian security cadre that also have a history of unstable, coup-prone domestic politics must take a deliberate approach to developing capacity for civilian control of the military.

Security and Civilian Control in the Sahel

Most states in the Sahel have a long post-independence history of **military involvement** in national politics that makes it difficult to establish the ideal equilibrium between civilians and the military sketched above. Indeed, Senegal is the only country in the Sahel never to experience military rule of some type. With the exception of the military-run transition government in Mali, most of the region's states are now run by civilians. But their militaries continue to **focus more on internal than external threats**, at best complicating—and at worst implicating the military in—humanitarian outcomes.

For transitioning democracies, **civilian control of the military** often means a loss of power and prestige for military officers and is therefore rife with friction. Burkina Faso showcases this tendency for military officers to **resist meaningful civilian control**, including via repeated coups against the government even after that government was popularly installed. The Malian government has a long history of failing to provide adequate logistical support and supplies to the Malian Armed Forces while also neglecting other areas of national life, in the process **fomenting deep distrust of political leaders** among the ranks. It is in these contexts that wobbly civilian governments often choose to coup-proof their militaries by making them dependent on the ruling party rather than a permanent bureaucracy. Such efforts often lead to cultures of corruption that siphon funding away from the equipment, training, and logistics the military needs to be effective. In Niger, for example, an **audit** conducted in late 2019 found systematic overcharging at the Ministry of Defense over a period of eight years. In Burkina Faso, the former minister of defense from 2017–18 was **arrested on charges of money laundering**.

Moreover, the range and capabilities of armed groups across the Sahel add a sense of urgency to providing security that can **delegitimize civilian control** even as it increases the need for it. In Burkina Faso, a dra-

matic increase in militancy across the northern half of the country has put pressure on the government—and particularly the military—to fight back. But the Burkinabe military has often acted indiscriminately, **allegedly killing civilians** in sweeping operations to retaliate against militancy. The Burkina Faso defense institutional environment provides little to no accountability for these actions, and politicians seem reluctant to increase justice efforts while the military feels under extreme risk of attack. All of this is complicated by civil-military politics. Divisions within the armed forces and between the police and the military, many engineered by successive presidents, have left the country's elites protecting themselves from each other rather than working together to **protect the population**.

Many of the pathologies in the ministries of defense are merely symptoms of broader political logics. A fundamental prerequisite for effective democratic civilian control is political legitimacy under the rule of law. That legitimacy need not take the same form in every country, and many scholars have written about the importance of allowing for **African-specific sources of justice and political power**. But for African militaries to become professional and impartial providers of security, the larger political apparatus that sustains those militaries must itself be marked by the professional and ethical pursuit of public interests. Much as with coup-proofing, shortcuts can improve some aspects of civilian control but undermine its overall effectiveness. The tendency for heads of state to **install political loyalists** as ministers of defense can lend political legitimacy to defense management. But if these loyalists have little background or expertise or do few things to improve the operations of the ministry and the support it provides to the armed forces, this proximity to political power will not realize meaningful influence over the military.

Putting the Civilian Back in Security Capacity Building

Assistance programs should take a threefold approach to building capacity for civilian control. First, new and ongoing security-sector assistance programming should conduct surveys of the state of civilian control in partner countries. Every country is different, with different histories and political bargains forming the **background for civil-military relations**. Building the capacity for civilian control will require an understanding of the incentives for and barriers to civilian authority and influence over the armed forces. These surveys should examine the legal, institutional, political, and practical state of play for civilians in positions of defense management.

- *Legal:* Surveys should begin with an understanding of civilians' formal authority and what form of defense governance is required. This part of the surveys should include a comprehensive review of national, provincial, and local laws and authorities and of what mechanisms or structures those laws lay out for establishing defense institutions. This part should also identify the formal roles civilians play in military justice and accountability regimes.
- *Institutional:* The survey work should then turn to the state of national security and defense institutions themselves, particularly the MoD and any office directly connected to the head of state. Essential information includes each institution's budget and number of personnel, including the size of the permanent civil service or its equivalent. This section should also survey educational aspects of civilian oversight capacity, including the institutions of higher learning that offer training in defense leadership and management and the educational standards and requirements for professional civilian bureaucrats.
- *Political:* As described above, the wider political context will ultimately enable or impede effective civilian control of the military. Donors should make honest assessments about the nature of political survival in a recipient state and the degree to which the ministries of defense and the armed forces

factor into that survival. The survey should examine the degree to which political affiliations affect hiring and management decisions in the MoD: is the ministry of defense an essentially professional, apolitical bureau, or is the role of minister and other senior posts used as a reward for party loyalists? The survey should also look for evidence of coup-proofing activity and corruption in defense and security budgeting.

- *Practical:* Finally, the survey should cover the nuts and bolts of how civilians in positions that control the military do their work. How are budgets built, plans developed, and policies adopted? What are the procedures for communication between ministry civilians, military leadership, and deployed forces? How does the MoD interact with other security institutions in the country?

Once a survey is complete, civilian control capacity programming should use it to tailor country-specific assistance programs. This is already the practice with the largely bottom-up, embassy-led system for the United States, and tailored approaches to security-assistance programs have had **success elsewhere**. The key is for training to reflect the country's specific history of civilian control and military management rather than a template or formulaic curriculum. If a country's military frequently does not receive its pay or lacks basic supplies, then the personnel and logistics elements of the MoD are most in need of bolstering. If civilian training is lacking, the United States could build upon recent efforts to confer with African partners over developing the African Military Education Program (AMEP) curriculum for both civilians and military personnel.

Finally, programs should be designed with an understanding that building capacity for civilian control is a long-term project that is part of a comprehensive security-assistance approach to each partner state. This may be a particular hurdle for the United States because it not only requires reliable funding year after year, but also integration with programming aimed at military capacity building so as to ensure that civilian overseers are being given the tools to monitor and manage new or newly trained military units. New programming and authorities are not always necessary, either. The International Military Education and Training program, as with AMEP, could increase its own emphasis on training civilian officials alongside their uniformed colleagues.

Conclusion

At a minimum, an honest survey of the political context and the state of civilian control over Sahel militaries will inform donors about the likely outcomes of any military training. It is futile to ask a country's armed forces to become professionals in a context where corruption and cronyism characterizes governance. In places where institutions are sure to fail militaries, security assistance is best focused on improving civilian, not military, capacity. And for countries with a tradition of—or trend toward—political legitimacy and accountability, civilian-control capacity building can help make militaries more accountable to their societies and give humanitarian actors powerful partners in their work. ■

Alice Hunt Friend is a senior fellow of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C.

This report was produced in partnership with the CSIS Humanitarian Agenda.

This report is made possible by general support to CSIS. No direct sponsorship contributed to this report.

This report is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2020 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.