Capacity-building outside the state-building framework? A post-Afghanistan analysis

Article

Published Version

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See Guidance on citing.

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Capacity-Building Outside the State-Building Framework?

A Post-Afghanistan Analysis

Harmonie Toros

Submit your article to this journal ⬀

View related articles ⬀

View Crossmark data ⬀

Capacity-Building Outside the State-Building Framework?
A Post-Afghanistan Analysis

Harmonie Toros

International state-building has been severely criticised for being an externally led intervention based on a liberal democratic blueprint, with the rapid collapse of the Afghan state to the Taliban in 2021 epitomising the failures of such state-building. A better solution, many have argued, is to support locally led state-building. For many areas of capacity-building this may indeed be a much-improved approach, but it remains unclear what this local turn means for military capacity-building. Harmonie Toros argues that such changes are likely to result in capacity-building interventions with non-state armed groups that do not promote and may directly oppose state-building, and concludes by examining the principal risks and benefits of adopting such an approach.

The dramatic images of international forces leaving Afghanistan in 2021 profoundly impacted policy circles in major capitals around the world. After two decades and billions of dollars spent on international state-building programmes for Afghanistan, how could the Afghan state institutions crumble at such speed, allowing the Taliban forces to take over within weeks? Since then, other developments, such as in Mali[1] and South Sudan,[2] have further undermined a central premise of international action: that 'fragile' or 'collapsed' states are a key threat to international and human security, and that the response must be to assist in the (re)building of states.[3] Such states are to eventually become stable and contribute to international security while fostering the emancipation of their citizens.

Despite the recognition over the past two decades that achieving this goal was extremely complex, expensive and filled with ethical and practical challenges, modern day state-building has remained a central pillar of international action. It has developed into a vast international practice that has evolved over time, and has progressively moved away from a liberal-democratic blueprint – almost entirely externally imposed on the state – to hybrid forms of state-building practice. Such an approach aims to recognise local specificities and, crucially, local forms of governance.

The fall of Kabul, as it was dubbed, may have been one failure too many for the international community to ignore. It led many to ask whether state-building projects – for example, in Somalia or Mali – are inherently doomed.[4] What, however, are the implications of moving away from state-building both as a goal and as a practice? Specifically, for this article, what are the implications for the roles that are taken on by the military in state-building?

1. Joe Gazeley, 'The Strong "Weak State": French Statebuilding and Military Rule in Mali', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (Vol. 16, Issue 3, February 2022), pp. 269–86.
2. Leben Moro et al., 'Statebuilding and Legitimacy: Experiences of South Sudan,' Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, January 2017, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5acde0abe5274a76c13df800/15.-Statebuilding-and-legitimacy_experiences-of-South-Sudan.pdf>, accessed 11 August 2025.
3. See OECD, 'Concepts and Dilemmas of State Building in Fragile Situations: From Fragility to Resilience', in *OECD Journal on Development* (Vol. 9, Issue 3, 2009).
4. Michael Jones, 'Mired in Mogadishu: An Appraisal of UK Engagement in Somalia', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (June 2023).

Kurdish Peshmerga officers at their graduation ceremony, 17 October 2024. The Peshmerga forces have benefited from an exceptional level of international support. *Courtesy of SOPA Images Limited / Alamy*

This exploratory article examines the impact a move away from state-building, particularly in its past centralised forms, may have on military capacity-building. It aims to challenge established practice and investigate a possible new framing for military capacity-building internationally.

The first section of this article examines the centrality of state-building in international practice as well as the growing critiques put forward by both academics and practitioners. Oliver P Richmond has said that state-building 'failed by design', while others have looked at how state-building failed in practice across a variety of contexts.[5] The solution – scholars and practitioners have argued – is to replace top-down centre–periphery programmes with bottom-up approaches that build on local framings and practices. This shift is implicitly – and at times explicitly – based on the premise that even if the centralised state-building project fails, support for local actors and initiatives will strengthen governance practices and thus improve livelihoods in the affected areas.

The second section examines how the UK and NATO have integrated state-building logics. Indeed, their approaches have evolved as broader state-building approaches have moved from externally driven to locally grounded. This section addresses these questions: what happens to military capacity-building with this local turn in state-building? What do bottom-up and locally legitimate initiatives look like in the realm of security assistance and can such initiatives still claim to be an improved form of state-building? This article argues that military capacity-building that reflects the local turn may lead to – and likely does lead to – working with local armed actors outside of the state: non-state armed groups (NSAGs). It is argued that such an engagement is more akin to capacity-building outside of the state-building framework, than to a localised form of state-building. It is thus essential for researchers and policymakers alike to understand the potential benefits and risks of such engagement.

In the third section, the article offers an empirical example by examining the case of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces – a collective term for certain NSAGs in northern Iraq. This case reveals the potential repercussions of military capacity-building outside of state-building objectives given the substantial scale and duration of international military capacity-building for the Peshmerga. Finally, the article concludes by offering an initial

---

5.   Oliver P Richmond, 'Failed Statebuilding Versus Peace Formation', *Cooperation and Conflict* (Vol. 48, No. 3, 2013), p. 382.

assessment of the implications, challenges and opportunities of uncoupling capacity-building from state-building for military capacity-building.

Three points are worth noting to clarify the parameters of this research. First, it is important to recognise that past practice has led to capacity-building beyond state-building in proxy-type interventions aimed primarily at pursuing national interests. This article does not focus on these cases as they are not aimed at improving local, regional or international security. Second, the distinction between state and non-state is not always clear. As Sukanya Podder points out, the two are often 'blurred and indistinguishable'. However, making this distinction is still analytically useful as it 'helps to uncover the discursive frames and political constructs' in policymaking.[6] Third, although the article focuses on UK policy and practices in military capacity-building, its conclusions can be useful for similar countries.

The research for this article analysed primary and secondary documents, including the principal policy documents on UK and NATO approaches to military capacity-building. This analysis was supplemented by 11 semi-structured interviews carried out – in-person and virtually – between January and March 2024. It was agreed that interviewees would not be personally named, but could be associated to these descriptors: one UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office official; two UK Ministry of Defence officials with direct experience of military capacity-building; two NATO officials with experience in policymaking on non-state armed groups; four independent security consultants, with experience in UK armed forces and engaging with NSAGs; and two UN human rights officials with experience in engaging with NSAGs.[7] The research process and design passed the required ethical review at the University of Reading.

State-Building: The Evolution of its Framing and Practices

In 2008, the OECD defined state-building as 'purposeful action to develop the capacity, institutions and legitimacy of the state in relation to an effective political process for negotiating the mutual demands between state and societal groups'.[8] The UK Ministry of Defence has a similar understanding. Its joint doctrine publication (JDP 05), 'Shaping a Stable World: The Military Contribution', states that state-building is 'concerned with the state's capacity, institutions and legitimacy, and with the political and economic processes that underpin state–society relations'.[9] It is both a practice and the end goal of activities: some have put it into practice by directly building the capacity, institutions and legitimacy of the state (for example, building a school for the nascent national police force or establishing a new ministry for women's affairs), while, for others, state-building is the long-term goal, such as the co-optation of local elites into a peace process. The distinction between practice and goal is not easy to delineate and the two clearly overlap. However, it is important to think of state-building as both.

State-building has been a central pillar of international action, whether led by the UN, regional organisations or coalitions of intervening foreign states. Robert Egnell and Peter Haldén state that 'Since the 1990s mainly Western countries and international institutions have invested large sums of money, manpower and considerable political capital in ventures of this kind from Liberia in the West to Cambodia in the East.'[10] This has involved security forces, but also 'civilian administrators, experts in development and in all fields of construction and engineering'.[11] Considerable academic and policy literature has been written on state-building and there is not enough space here to go through the long

---

6.   Sukanya Podder, 'State Building and the Non-State: Debating Key Dilemmas', *Third World Quarterly* (Vol. 35, No. 9, 2014), p. 1615.

7.   List of author interviews: independent security consultant, online, 14 March 2024; independent security consultant, Nairobi, 20 February 2024; independent security consultant, online, 12 March 2024; independent security consultant, Nairobi, 22 February 2024; NATO official, online, 13 March 2024; NATO official, online, 20 March 2024; UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office official, London, 8 February 2024; UK Ministry of Defence official, online, 18 January 2024; UK Ministry of Defence official, online, 13 February 2024; UN human rights official, online, 21 March 2024; UN human rights official, online, 15 March 2024.

8.   OECD, 'Concepts and Dilemmas of State Building in Fragile Situations', p. 72.

9.   Ministry of Defence (MoD), 'Shaping a Stable World: The Military Contribution', Joint Doctrine Publication 05, 8 March 2016, last updated 7 November 2022, p. 25, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/shaping-a-stable-world-the-military-contribution-jdp-05>, accessed 26 February 2024.

10.   Robert Egnell and Peter Haldén (eds), *New Agendas in Statebuilding: Hybridity, Contingency and History* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 1.

11.   *Ibid*.

development of state-building theory and practice.[12] What needs to be examined here is the evolution of the framing and practices of state-building – from a centralised, top-down model to a more organic, bottom-up and contextual approach.

A pointed – and arguably necessary – critique of early state-building was its insistence on trying to build states that failed to account for local context and aspirations. Such approaches followed a blueprint based on Western liberal democracies. A notable example was the US Department of Defense's aim for the reform of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police in 2010. The goal was to establish a force that was 'nationally respected, professional, ethnically balanced, democratically accountable, organised, trained and equipped to meet the security needs of the country, and increasingly funded by Government of Afghanistan revenue'.[13] This approach, according to Adam Grissom, led to an excessive centralisation of the Afghan security forces. It fuelled corruption, weakened legitimacy and undermined the possibility of widespread buy-in by key tribal groups. With hindsight, even the aim was unrealistic: 'state-building failed by design', as plans were 'based on blueprints determined by decontextualised and depoliticised agendas'.[14]

This crucial design flaw led to dramatic failures in practice. Indeed, the adoption of 'a liberal agenda of technocracy, institutionalisation and procedural democracy' resulted 'in a "misplaced concreteness" about the state system'.[15] Such state-building has been marked by the 'rule of intermediaries' in which power and security are 'personalised' and the elite in power becomes the main referent object to be secured.[16] There were also critiques of this approach beyond the academy, and UN agencies and the OECD have noted the flaws of a centralised,

top-down process.[17] Most actors came to the conclusion that the solution lay in moving from top-down to bottom-up approaches, understanding the needs at community level and adopting a more inclusive approach. This led to a strong literature on 'hybrid peace' supported by 'hybrid state-building'.[18]

By the mid-2010s, hybrid approaches to state-building became the aim across the sector: from international and regional organisations to the foreign ministries of major donor and intervening countries. UK engagement also reflected this shift. For example, in Somalia, the UK has played a leading role in supporting the establishment of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) over the past decade. Over time, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) – later the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) – feared that the FGS was turning the country into a 'donor-security cartel' (to use Alex de Waal's expression)[19] through which Somali elites leveraged access to government by promising donors to act as conduits for international security actors, thus both establishing security and making progress towards state-buidling. As such, the UK government's work in Somalia turned towards undertaking stabilisation efforts at the local level even when progress at the federal level remained uncertain.[20]

However, a change in the practice of state-building does not mean that the goal of state-building is abandoned. For the case of the UK's engagement in Somalia, Michael Jones notes that 'While the funding pattern has shifted to accommodate contextual changes and institutional learning – for example, Whitehall gradually prioritised support for local authorities to compensate for FGS weaknesses – the overarching objective remains consistent – developing a 'good enough' state

12. David Chandler and Timothy D Sisk (eds), *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Egnell and Halden (eds), *New Agendas in Statebuilding*; Roland Paris and Timothy D Sisk (eds), *The Dilemmas of Statebuilding: Confronting the Contradictions of Postwar Peace Operations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

13. Adam Grissom, 'Making it up as We Go Along: State-building, Critical Theory and Military Adaptation in Afghanistan', *Conflict, Security & Development* (Vol. 10, No. 4, 2010), p. 500.

14. Richmond, 'Failed Statebuilding Versus Peace Formation', p. 382.

15. Podder, 'State Building and the Non-State', p. 1616.

16. Ken Booth, *Theory of World Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

17. Executive Board of the UN Development Programme and of the UN Population Fund, 'Management Response to the Evaluation of UNDP Assistance to Conflict-Affected Countries', 12 April 2007, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/599650?ln=en&v=pdf>, accessed 15 February 2025; OECD, *International Engagement in Fragile States: Can't We Do Better?*, Conflict and Fragility (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2011).

18. Roger Mac Ginty, 'Hybrid Statebuilding', in Egnell and Haldén (eds), *New Agendas in Statebuilding*, pp. 14–31.

19. Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), p. 124.

20. Jones, 'Mired in Mogadishu'.

capable of out-competing Al-Shabaab functionally and militarily.'[21] This primacy of state-building, as a goal, remains in the policy documents of the UK and other countries. Indeed, although JDP 05 recommends that interventions 'consult widely', 'foster local ownership' and 'look beyond the state', the aim remains one of building a stable and resilient state.[22] The doctrine clearly states that the 'purpose of capacity building is to build the legitimacy of the fragile state which then ensures resilience'.[23]

Crucially, the turn towards hybrid state-building has so far largely ignored what this means for military capacity-building. For example, Sukanya Podder argues that a hybrid approach advances 'an argument in favour of mainstreaming "non-state" forms that are positive and useful for state-building'.[24] However, local actors are not always positive and useful for state-building, and this is particularly true for armed actors. There are numerous examples of local actors – armed or not – that have served their communities but ignored or outright rejected state-building goals. Indeed, the literature on rebel governance has brought to the fore how NSAGs can offer extensive and effective governance to local populations, in lieu of or side-by-side with the state.[25] Not all NSAGs aim to replace the state – at least in the short-term – but, as argued by Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, NSAGs that engage in governance practices aim for 'the formation of political order outside (and against) the state'.[26] International policymakers thus cannot assume that local armed actors are 'positive and useful for state-building'.[27] As such, it is important to ask whether the local turn in state-building reaches its hard limit when confronted with the inclusion of military capacity-building. Is such capacity-building more likely to become a form of support that is outside – or even against – state-building rather than a form of local support that enhances state-building?

Military Capacity-Building

Within the state-building agenda, the UK has engaged in a variety of military capacity-building initiatives in numerous international contexts. These range from designing and delivering security sector reform (SSR), to securing key infrastructure, to providing security force assistance (SFA) (see JDP 05 and NATO AJP-3.28).[28] In particular, SFA – generally defined as 'training and equipping a foreign security force' – has become 'an increasingly common form of intervention', often seen as a better alternative both to 'large-scale combat deployments' and 'broad and expensive security sector reform projects'.[29] The use of SFA, particularly by the US, has faced criticism.[30] By 'emphasizing training and equipment and by distancing itself from key political issues', the US approach to SFA 'wastes time, effort, and resources', argues Mara E Karlin, concluding that 'it is fundamentally flawed'.[31] Much of this literature focuses on SFA to state forces. In contrast, the focus of this article is on the conceptualisation and implementation of military capacity-building with local actors, particularly NSAGs. This highlights

21.   Jones, 'Mired in Mogadishu', p. 112.
22.   MoD, 'Shaping a Stable World', p. 113.
23.   *Ibid.*
24.   Podder, 'State Building and the Non-State', p. 1616.
25.   Ana Arjona, 'Armed Groups' Governance in Civil Wars: A Synthesis', 2009, <https://www.anamarjona.net/articles>, accessed 15 February 2025; Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly (eds), *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).
26.   Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, 'Stationary Bandits: Understanding Rebel Governance', PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2007, p. 56, <http://pages.vassar.edu/mampilly/files/2013/11/Mampilly-Dissertation-Final.pdf>, accessed 17 April 2019.
27.   Podder, 'State Building and the Non-State', p. 1616.
28.   MoD, 'Shaping a Stable World'; NATO, 'Allied Joint Doctrine for the Military Contribution to Stabilization (AJP-3.28)', Edition A, Version 1, January 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/allied-joint-doctrine-for-the-military-contribution-to-stabilization-ajp-328>, accessed 26 February 2024.
29.   Øystein H Rolandsen, Maggie Dwyer and William Reno, 'Security Force Assistance to Fragile States: A Framework of Analysis', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (Vol. 15, No. 5, 2021), p. 563.
30.   Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald and Ryan Baker, 'Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (Vol. 41, No. 1–2, 2018), pp. 89–142; Mara E Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).
31.   Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, p. 179.

how the local turn in state-building has complex implications for military capacity-building that may work against state-building.

This challenge – and the need to consider what military capacity-building with local actors implies – has largely been ignored in policy. NSAGs are often ignored or framed as hostile actors. The UK Ministry of Defence's capacity-building guidance makes no reference to NSAGs, with just a handful of references to the threat of terrorist groups. NSAGs take on a somewhat more prominent role in UK military doctrine on capacity-building (JDP 05), where they are framed as 'predatory armed groups [and] criminal networks' that need to be contained or neutralised.[32]

NATO's 2023 Allied Joint Doctrine for the Military Contribution to Stabilization (AJP-3.28) offers a deeper engagement with the potential role of NSAGs.[33] It recognises that 'non-state security forces' including local militias, neighbourhood watches and tribal forces 'are a frequent response when the state is unable to provide effective security'. It notes that SSR must 'acknowledge the presence of non-state actors and determine how best to deal with them. Indeed, intervening forces may quickly achieve a measure of local legitimacy by partnering with local non-state security actors in such situations'.[34] AJP-3.28 argues that NSAGs may be useful at the local level but acknowledges that they represent a threat to state-building at a regional and national level. They may also be potential threats to civilians due to their lack of accountability. As such, it states that the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) 'of non-state security forces is essential to reforming a HN's [Host Nation] security sector'.[35]

Thus, although doctrine has alluded to the potential challenges of undertaking military capacity-building at a local level, it has yet to explore this in detail. An in-depth understanding is essential as engaging in this kind of activity in the security sector involves a unique set of challenges that are not faced by engagement in other areas of governance (such as health, education or social services). Local non-state actors in the security sector are usually armed and often cannot be held accountable for their actions. They are organised – to greater or lesser degrees – in hierarchies that can be fluid and can have varying degrees of links with the local population. They can change alliances as well as splinter and engage in inter-group fighting.

> By providing security to populations and controlling territory, NSAGs challenge the state's monopoly of the use of violence

Despite these legitimate concerns, it is important to recognise that NSAGs can play a variety of beneficial roles for local communities. The growing rebel governance or 'rebelocracy' literature demonstrates that across contexts, rebels or NSAGs have played key roles in governing large parts of territory, sometimes across national borders. It further notes that they sometimes have offered better governance to local populations than the state.[36] Importantly, this is true of armed groups fighting for very different goals, ranging from Islamist to left-wing to nationalist NSAGs. Often, the armed groups are linked to political factions intent and capable of offering social services (such as health and education) and varying degrees of justice. These governance practices of NSAGs directly challenge state-building, both in practice and as an ultimate goal. By providing security to populations and controlling territory, NSAGs challenge the state's monopoly of the use of violence (state-building in practice). They may also challenge the notion that their territory is part of a national state (state-building as goal). As such, providing capacity-building to such groups – arguably even when such interventions are carried out with the long-term goal of state-building – may work directly against state-building. This needs to be acknowledged so that the implications of military capacity-building outside state-building logics can be understood.

Indeed, numerous concerns can be identified. Current and past UK officials have expressed considerable caution when discussing military

---

32. MoD, 'Shaping a Stable World', p. 103.

33. NATO, 'Allied Joint Doctrine for the Military Contribution to Stabilization'.

34. NATO, 'Allied Joint Doctrine for the Military Contribution to Stabilization', p. 50.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Arjona, *Rebelocracy*; Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life During War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Harmonie Toros, 'Informal Governance of Non State Armed Groups in the Sahel', October 2019, <https://thesouthernhub.org/topics/terrorism/informal-governance-of-non-state-armed-groups-in-the-sahel>, accessed 26 February 2024.

capacity-building that is disassociated from at least the goal of state-building.[37] There is the immediate risk of building the capacity of actors that carry out violence against civilians, engage in widespread criminal activity, or attack UK or other allied forces on the ground. There is the risk of supporting actors that undermine stability within a state or in the broader region. There is the risk of alienating populations and elites that are not allied to the NSAGs either for ideological, ethnic or historical reasons. Finally, there are also reputational risks of engagement locally, regionally and internationally, if the NSAGs engage in practices that are illegal or deemed illegitimate. Such reputational risks may also extend to domestic politics for the military providing the capacity-building.

Nevertheless, many – if not all – of these concerns also exist when engaging in military capacity-building with state actors. State actors – particularly in states in need of external capacity-building – often use violence against civilians and engage in criminal activity, as well as undermine national and possibly regional stability. Support to state armed forces may alienate populations and elites (including diasporas) that are excluded from state power. Most importantly, support for such regimes may represent a reputational risk domestically, regionally and internationally. Although state forces are unlikely to attack foreign forces on the ground while they are being supported by the very same forces, state actors may attack or threaten international actors following a change of government. Thus, many of the concerns that can be raised about engaging in capacity-building with NSAGs also exist when working with state actors. Indeed, the UK's JDP 05 presents this as one the key concerns with stabilisation efforts: 'Injecting significant resources into the operational environment (for example, through contracts or military assistance projects) ... can also create opportunities for corrupt practices.'[38]

There are also potential advantages to offering some forms of capacity-building to NSAGs without adopting a state-building goal. A key advantage of disassociating capacity-building from state-building is that the success of capacity-building engagement is not linked to whether the state survives in the medium to long term. This raises the question of the criteria on which the engagement would be evaluated. Capacity-building interventions might be assessed on whether they reduce violence against civilians, for example, or on whether the human security (of local populations living in territory entirely or partially controlled by the NSAG) is increased. They might be linked to whether child recruitment, unlawful killings or sexual assaults are reduced, or to whether security is improved enough to allow for other services (such as health and education) to occur. Arguably, such benefits are valuable, regardless of whether the capacity-building activity is aimed at state-building. They might also offer reputational benefits if local communities appreciate foreign support for actors that they recognise as their champions.

There are therefore risks, but also potential benefits, of considering military capacity-building with NSAGs outside of a state-building framework. For the principle to be considered, however, a key focus must be on the specific risks and advantages posed by each activity. A thorough assessment – such as through an adapted UK Overseas Security and Justice Assistance (OSJA) mechanism that takes NSAGs, not host nations, as the referent object – would have to be made for each activity. As OSJA notes, ensuring that capacity-building 'supports our values and is consistent with our domestic and human rights obligations' is 'not always straightforward' and each activity must be assessed in each context.[39]

It is not possible to offer a comprehensive list of activities which takes into account all contexts. Nonetheless, it is useful to offer examples of risks and benefits that such military capacity-building may represent. On the low-risk side of the spectrum, training NSAGs in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and civilian protection would likely represent a low-risk/high-gain activity. Similarly, training on specific forms of violence against civilians – whether gender-based violence or child recruitment, for example – is also likely to be low-risk. In both these cases, even if NSAGs turn against the state or international forces, it can be argued that training in IHL and in reducing various forms of violence against civilians is always beneficial. Some work in this area is already carried out by international NGOs – such

---

37. Author interview with independent security consultant, online, 14 March 2024; author interview with independent security consultant, Nairobi, 20 February 2024; author interview with UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office official, London, 8 February 2024; author interview with UK Ministry of Defence official, online, 18 January 2024.

38. MoD, 'Shaping a Stable World', p. 110.

39. HM Government, Stabilisation Unit, 'The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation: A Guide for Policy Makers and Practitioners', March 2019, p. 4, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c7ff073ed915d17b68b2b0e/The_UK_Government_s_Approach_to_Stabilisation_A_guide_for_policy_makers_and_practitioners.pdf>, accessed 26 February 2024.

as the Berghof Foundation and Fight for Humanity[40] – such as training NSAGs on IHL and human rights standards. Reputationally, there is arguably only a small risk of backlash as this training cannot be used nefariously. That said, if the NSAG then engages in war crimes or crimes against civilians, the capacity-building exercise would be seen as a failure and waste of resources.

Other capacity-building activities have greater risks. Strengthening command and control of an NSAG may make the group a stronger adversary, which may pose risks in the medium- to long-term. Similarly, police reform or supporting an NSAG in building a functioning detention system could be directly used to subdue populations as well as help the NSAG divert resources from such activities to fighting. Currently, NATO's AJP-3.28 only takes into account supporting NSAGs through DDR. Indeed, it argues that the 'DDR of non-state security forces is essential to reforming a Host Nation's security sector'.[41] However, there may also be considerable benefits of engaging with NSAGs if they refuse to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate. If a country is to remain divided and parts of it remain controlled and governed by NSAGs in the medium- to long-term, civilian populations may benefit greatly from being governed by a group that has a clear chain of command, a greater understanding of accountable bureaucratic processes, and a structured detention system that complies with human rights standards. Reputationally, however, in cases when international actors have supported the construction of prisons and detention centres by NSAGs (such as in northeast Syria by the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)), foreign assistance nations may be held accountable for the detention mechanisms and potential abuses.

Certain forms of capacity-building are likely to be of particularly high risk. For example, directly assisting an NSAG in increasing its capacity in fires and manoeuvre – when there is not even the goal of integrating the group into a formalised national force – presents considerable risk. Such assistance can be turned against civilians and national and international forces. It can directly work against state-building as well as against regional and international security. Reputationally, such assistance also carries very high risk. The Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies (GATIA) in Mali carried out serious human rights violations against civilians while receiving assistance from the French.[42] Although it was widely believed that French forces did not participate in the violence nor were they even present when it took place, the very fact that France had provided assistance to the group strengthened opposition to French presence locally and had domestic and international reputational costs. Notwithstanding such risks, short- and medium-term concerns of regional and international security – as well as national interests – may in some cases be best served by SFA to NSAGs regardless of their position on state-building. One example is the longstanding support offered to Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Iraq.

Case Study: Kurdish Peshmerga

From their battle against the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1980s to their highly publicised practices promoting gender equality to their key role in the defeat of the Islamic State, Kurdish Peshmergas (which translates as 'those who face death') have long-captured international imagination. They have also benefited from an exceptional level of international support. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), of which the KDP and PUK share partial control – have received military assistance from a variety of countries for decades.[43] The US spends up to $20 million per month paying Peshmerga salaries in addition to the hundreds of millions of dollars it sends yearly in equipment and ammunition.[44] Since the early 2000s, and especially since 2014, the UK has also provided military assistance. This has included advisory missions, training programmes

40. Fight for Humanity, 'New Project Phase: The Role of Armed and Political Movements in Women's Protection and Participation', 30 October 2023, <https://www.fightforhumanity.org/post/new-project-phase-the-role-of-armed-and-political-movements-in-women-s-protection-and-participation>, accessed 25 May 2025.

41. NATO, 'Allied Joint Doctrine for the Military Contribution to Stabilization', p. 50.

42. Rémi Carayol, 'Après le Niger, une nouvelle donne au Sahel ? conversation avec Rémi Carayol' ['After Niger, is There a New Deal in the Sahel? A Conversation with Rémi Carayol'], 7 August 2023, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2023/08/07/apres-le-niger-une-nouvelle-donne-au-sahel-conversation-avec-remi-carayol/>, accessed 26 February 2024.

43. 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* (Vol. 6, No. 2, 2020), pp. 118–38.

44. Winthorp Rodgers, 'Peshmerga Reform Hangs in the Balance in Iraq's Kurdistan Region', Middle East Institute, 17 August 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/peshmerga-reform-hangs-balance-iraqs-kurdistan-region>, accessed 26 March 2024.

and logistical support to Kurdish institutions in northern Iraq. In 2019, the UK government told the Foreign Affairs Committee that it was 'leading an international effort to reform the Peshmerga so that it is more capable, more affordable, and more accountable to democratic bodies'.[45]

A stated goal of this reform is to transfer control of the Peshmerga from the KDP and PUK to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (MoPA) of the KRG.[46] Indeed, of the estimated 140,000–150,000 peshmergas, approximately two-thirds continue to be directly controlled by the PUK and KPD.[47] The parties, however, have stalled in handing over control of their better trained units, frustrating international actors. These actors, led by the US, rely heavily on the KDP and PUK to maintain control over an area that is still regarded as key in the fight against the Islamic State and as a stable base for international action in the broader geographic region.

The question is to what extent does this sustained military support to the Peshmerga reinforce or undermine the stated objective of Iraq's state-building. Indeed, the UK, the US and other major international actors insist that they continue to back the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq, albeit with its current federal structure. Policy documents state that integrating the Peshmerga in KDP and PUK into the regional state structure of MoPA is part of a broader Iraqi state-building agenda that would ensure that they are integrated into the national Iraqi Security Forces.

However, Kurdish parties continue to be very reticent to integrate their forces, particularly after the battle against the Islamic State when Baghdad largely failed to back up Kurdish forces. Brendan O'Leary states that 'had the KDP and the PUK listened to US security advice, and the constitutional counsel of the State Department, the KRG would have been governed by ISIS after 2014'.[48] This distrust of Baghdad and the ongoing power struggle between the KDP and PUK mean that any integration is viewed with suspicion and the KDP and PUK are widely accused of only paying lip service to the integration plans. The position of the two political parties has been repeatedly criticised by international actors and has seen the US reduce its financial support for the Peshmerga from $20 million to $15 million in 2023.[49] UK officials also continue to push for Peshmerga reform, but have recognised that it could take 10 to 15 years.[50] Thus, international actors continue to support the Kurdish parties and the KRG even though they continue to challenge Iraqi state-building.

Furthermore, integrating the Peshmerga under the MoPA may not necessarily support Iraqi state-building. A stronger politically and militarily unified Kurdistan region is likely to offer a greater challenge to Iraqi state-building and be an entity more capable of pushing for Kurdish statehood. Indeed, when Kurdish factions work together, such as when US-supported Kurdish units 'cleared out terrorist hotbeds in Iraq and eastern Syria, this contributed to the expansion of Kurdish territories – even areas with no legitimate claims'.[51] A strong KRG is also likely to consolidate its position as the principal ally of Western powers in the region.[52] It can therefore be argued that Western powers are also only paying lip service to Iraqi state-building while pursuing extensive capacity-building with Kurdish institutions and parties that do not share this longer-term state-building goal.

Empirically, current UK and allied capacity-building for the KRG and its party-based military appears to function independently of any credible long-term Iraqi state-building strategy. Despite this, strengthening Kurdish forces – including better command and control – and reducing the capacity of factions to use violence against one another in case of disagreement appears to be, in practice, a sufficient rationale for capacity-building, regardless of its likely detrimental effect to long-term Iraqi state-building. That said, maintaining the nominal

45. House of Commons Library, 'Bilateral Relations with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq', Debate Pack 2019-0056, 1 March 2019.
46. Kamaran Palani, 'Peshmerga Reform: High Stakes for the Future of Iraqi Kurdistan', Italian Institute for International Political Sciences, 15 September 2022, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/peshmerga-reform-high-stakes-future-iraqi-kurdistan-36155>, accessed 26 March 2024.
47. Winthorp Rodgers, 'US Reduces Peshmerga Funding amid Iraqi Kurdish Political Tensions', *Al-Monitor*, 4 January 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/us-reduces-peshmerga-funding-amid-iraqi-kurdish-political-tensions>, accessed 26 March 2024.
48. Brendan O'Leary, 'The Kurds, the Four Wolves and the Great Power', *Journal of Politics* (Vol. 80, No. 1, 2017), pp. 22–36.
49. Rodgers, 'US Reduces Peshmerga Funding amid Iraqi Kurdish Political Tensions'.
50. Surkew Mohammed, '"There's Not Even a 1% Chance that Kurdistan Will Have a National Army," Senior Commanders', Kirkuknow, 22 July 2023, <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/69551>, accessed 26 March 2024.
51. Matisek and Fowler, 'The Paradox of Security Force Assistance', p. 131.
52. Rodgers, 'Peshmerga Reform Hangs in the Balance in Iraq's Kurdistan Region'.

support for state-building in Iraq may be helpful in reducing tensions with regional actors that are strongly opposed to Kurdish statehood – such as Türkiye, Iran and Syria – and non-Kurdish Iraqi factions. Thus, capacity-building with Kurdish factions may not serve the purported goal of Iraqi state-building – and indeed may work against it – but maintaining the illusion of working towards Iraqi state-building may still serve to placate regional actors wary of Kurdish nationalism.

Concluding Remarks

This article has argued that the local turn in state-building is difficult to both conceptualise and implement when looking at military capacity-building. Such interventions often resemble a form of capacity-building outside of state-building logics that engages with NSAGs which often do not promote – or may actively oppose – state-building. Such interventions come with varying degrees of risks and benefits. Although military capacity-building of NSAGs may follow a broader move within the international community to adopt a locally led bottom-up approach to engagements, it may also represent a challenge to the state-centric international system. Supporting NSAGs might also be associated with proxy-type interventions. In the past, these have had high reputational costs, domestically and internationally. However, as analysed in this article, the distinction between state and non-state is not clearcut. State institutions are often captured by powerful elites that fail to represent the broader population and instead are focused more on maintaining their control of the state – and of donor funds – than in governing efficiently and fairly. Indeed, many of the concerns raised against military engagement with NSAGs also exist in engagement with state actors.

Military capacity-building outside the state-building framework can also offer noteworthy advantages. First, the success of a capacity-building intervention would no longer be solely linked to whether the state has survived in its current form. Considering the real failures in state-building, particularly since 2020, such an approach would likely better reflect the contribution that capacity-building activities have made to security – human, national, regional and international. Second, it may improve the lives of civilians, both in terms of their physical and broader human security – by improving the practices of NSAGs in their engagement with civilians. It may help in stabilising areas controlled by NSAGs that do not match with state boundaries, thus contributing to regional and international security. Finally, it may better reflect the current state of the international system: one in which aiming for strong states with armed forces that are 'nationally respected, professional, ethnically balanced, democratically accountable, organised, trained and equipped to meet the security needs of the country'[53] is less and less credible, and comes at a price that most parties are unwilling to pay.

For such an approach to be considered, an in-depth analysis of each capacity-building practice is the logical next step. This article has provided a few examples, but far more work is required. Such work would draw on insights from military and diplomatic officials, as well as those in international organisations. Crucially, further insights would be needed from representatives of communities that have been on the receiving end of military capacity-building. Indeed, the risks and benefits of military capacity-building outside of state-building is extremely context-dependent. A broad policy is likely to focus primarily on how such risks and benefits can be assessed. Certain capacity-building activities are likely to be dismissed as too high-risk. Yet, crucially, some may be deemed beneficial to both local communities and to international security. ∎

Harmonie Toros is Professor in Politics and International Relations at the University of Reading. Her research focuses on various forms of engagement with non-state armed groups, from negotiations to capacity-building interventions. She regularly advises UN agencies, NATO and national governments on negotiations with non-state armed groups in East Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. She is the co-author of *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Polity, 2024).

---

53. Grissom, 'Making it up as We Go Along', p. 500.