Leveraging LIMINALITY in Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform

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PHOTO: An Iraqi policeman stands guard while recruits await instructions at the police academy in Karbala, Iraq, 5 April 2009. (U.S. Navy, Mass Communication Specialist 2d Class Kim Smith)

AFTER ANY GIVEN CONFLICT, within the overall stability, security, transition, and reconstruction framework, the need for security sector reform will likely be very high. There is a significant likelihood that some aspects of the security sector will no longer be appropriate for the desired post-conflict context. Security sector reform is a complex task entailing a variety of factors and should be addressed under a comprehensive umbrella of national (or even multinational, if in the framework of a coalition) policies and support. The U.S. military, has undertaken several missions in pursuit of security sector reform in real-world operations and could do so again. One aspect to the military portion of security sector reform that the United States and other countries have not maximized when conducting these missions—the deliberate leveraging of liminality—could increase the viability of reform efforts, although ethical concerns arise.

What Is Security Sector Reform?

"Security sector reform," for this discussion, is consistent with the definition of "security system" used by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development:

> Core security actors (e.g. armed forces, police, gendarmerie, border guards, customs and immigration, and intelligence and security services); security management and oversight bodies (e.g. ministries of defence and internal affairs, financial management bodies and public complaints commissions); justice and law enforcement institutions (e.g. the judiciary, prisons, prosecution services, traditional justice systems); and non-statutory security forces (e.g. private security companies, guerrilla armies and private militia).[1]

This definition will be sufficient for "security sector," but the focus here will be on actions towards a relative handful of the core actors—primarily the armed forces and gendarmerie.

The "reform" in security sector reform is harder to pin down. Just as the sector itself spans a wide range of actors, reform seeks to address the problem from a systemic viewpoint. Ensuring that the organization of core actors is appropriate in size and function, ensuring that there is civil control over the core actors, and ensuring that there is good governance on the part

of the civil authority are readily apparent factors. Reform is more of a process than a goal.[2] Achieving certain conditions are the end states. The assistance of outside actors is required at the start, and indigenous actors of the state must follow through. There has been discussion that reform may not be the best word to describe the process because it possesses a pejorative connotation.[3] However, for the purposes of this discussion, it is assumed that a conflict has occurred or is on-going, and that at least one external state actor, specifically the United States, is assisting with the security sector reform process. This condition implies that there was some form of failure within the indigenous security sector and such failure warrants reform.

Dominant themes for security sector reform include—

● Civilian-military relations, especially dealing with the need for democratic oversight of the security sector.

● Maintaining stake-holder interest and investment, primarily from external actors;

● Reorganization of the resources and capabilities of core actors.[4]

A heavy emphasis on civilian-military relations is important—visions of a military junta running amuck among the population of some underdeveloped country leap to mind. Or worse, some capital city in flames as the military splits into opposing sides during an attempted coup. But there is more depth to civilian control than avoiding these pitfalls. Good governance—not using the security sector as a personal tool to further agendas and maintain rule in a nondemocratic fashion—is the goal.

Reform is needed to change authoritarian tendencies or to create an environment where such tendencies would not flourish to begin with. In short, security sector reform entails transforming the culture of institutions—changing or installing a specific ethos into something acceptable and useful within the context of the post-conflict environment.[5] However, there has been little public discussion on how to go about doing this; employing the term "liminality" can help address this void.

What is Liminality?

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vidual within a society. Victor Turner identified three distinct phases of the process: the separation phase, margin or threshold phase, and the reaggregation phase.[6] Most persons who have had experiences within the U.S. Army will already recognize a liminal process—the "Soldierization" process.[7] As new recruits arrive at the reception battalion, they are completing the separation phase, leaving home and heading into the unknown to undergo the rite of passage that is "basic combat training," which is the threshold phase. When the recruits complete this training, they are allowed to wear the Army's black beret and have a graduation ceremony. They are in this sense reaggregated into society, with the change in their position and status marked through the uniform and through the new headgear (to the society as a whole but within the Army as a subset of the society). Liminality exists any time there is some psychological change of status, and militaries around the world have been leveraging it as part of the process of transforming civilians into soldiers.

There is another more subtle aspect to liminality. Liminality rests in the linkages that the individual has, both before and after the process is complete. For instance, before starting to undergo the liminal process of basic combat training, an aspiring Soldier has links to family, friends, community, and school, among other things. There will be separation from these things in the first phase, and during the threshold phase new links are formed—to fellow recruits and to the Army community. With reaggregation, the old links will be re-established, albeit changed. Now the young Soldier has a larger set of links—those before starting the liminal process and those formed during the liminal process.

Liminality's Potential

Liminality's potential comes into play if an organization can intentionally leverage the process and adjust those societal links, especially the

preliminary links, for behavior modification. In a liberal democratic society, with professional armed forces, the adjustment could be so extreme as to lead to isolation of the military from the society.[8] This improbable situation hints at liminality's potential to enhance security sector reform by facilitating cultural changes of the security sector's core actors. By radically adjusting the culture of the institution through socially engineering the individuals which form it, just as the U.S. military does, an organization can adjust or marginalize less constructive linkages. The inculcation of codes and slogans and even political associations are examples of how liminality can be manipulated. All organizations do this to some extent to enhance the organizational vision, and the point at which it becomes sinister can be a pitfall. It would be useful to examine a few real-world security sector reform examples to see where liminality could have been leveraged in a constructive manner. It would be counter-factual to make any assessment of how much impact such actions could have had, and so I emphasize only the opportunity points.

Liberia and United Nations Mission in Liberia

In September 2003, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1509, establishing the United Nations Mission in Liberia and mandating, among other tasks, security sector reform—

● "To assist the transitional government of Liberia in monitoring and restructuring the police force of Liberia, consistent with democratic policing, to develop a civilian police training programme, and to otherwise assist in the training of civilian police, in cooperation with ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States], international organizations, and interested States."

● "To assist the transitional government in the formation of a new and restructured Liberian military in cooperation with ECOWAS, international organizations, and interested States."[9]

While not seeking to downplay the importance of police reform or the justice system as a whole—or the role of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs—the task of the second paragraph is of interest here.

After 14 years of civil war, a concept for the structure of the new armed forces of Liberia was

UN Photo, Shima Roy

Members of the International Police Service of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) attend the daily morning briefing at UNMIL headquarters in Monrovia before they engage in their patrols with the officers from the Liberian Police Service, 7 January 2004.

generated, and recruiting and vetting of applicants began. Recruits were drawn from all across the country and from every ethnic group. Those who were accepted entered into an initial entry training program, loosely based on U.S. Army basic training, which was envisioned as being 11 weeks long. Due to budget constraints, this was reduced to eight weeks, and the three weeks devoted to human rights training, civics, and civil-military relations education were cut. This training was pushed to permanently formed units and alternative instructional organizations, such as the American Bar Association.[10]

For the Liberian context, human rights training and civil-military relations do play a large role in shaping how the armed forces will relate to their society, especially after such a long civil war filled with rights violations. Had these classes been included in the initial entry training, the values which the UNMIL was trying to instill would have likely taken root earlier and come to fruition because of the effects of liminality. Institutional

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cultural change occurs as new soldiers move through the linkages of liminal changes, and it could have occurred in this context. There is no evidence that providing this training within permanent units would not be effective, but it appears that it takes longer for institutional change to occur.

The more subtle aspect of liminality is also here. Although it is difficult to say whether less training time means less effective liminal transition, there is no evidence that UNMIL efforts were focused explicitly on maximizing the effects of liminality. A large effort was made to ensure that the entire country was represented in the armed forces, both geographically and ethnically. Each of the recruits likely would have linkages to his geographic area, his home town or village, and his ethnic or tribal identity. Bringing this diverse group together not only represented an effort to create a cultural transformation, but also provided an opportunity to deliberately weaken the preexisting links and substitute new links in the minds of the recruits. Some of these links can be associated with societal fault lines, along which instability and conflict could emerge in the future. It would be too difficult to fully break these links in the recruits, but deliberate weakening of them could potentially strengthen the institution of the armed forces against succumbing to these fault lines. It appears this opportunity was lost, in both the original and shortened basic training programs.

Liminality under Fire: Iraq

On 23 May 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) issued "CPA Order 2" dissolving the Iraqi security sector.[11] The appropriateness or inappropriateness of this act is not a concern here, but it does stand out as a significant event that would urgently call for security sector reform, since only non-statutory forces (primarily political party militias) remained intact. A variety of training efforts have occurred in Iraq since 2003.[12] Little discussion on the structure and content of these military training programs has occurred, beyond the length of basic training (eight weeks at the longest point, although the length has been shorter at other times).[13] Instead, discussion focuses on numbers of recruits in training, members of the security forces who have graduated and are on duty with a regular unit, or shortfalls in recruiting. Clearly an urgent need exists to generate indigenous forces and recreate a security sector. Moreover, there is a need to rapidly integrate nonstatutory forces in the official security sector to field experienced soldiers.[14] This heavy push to indigenize the security sector, is understandable. However, such haste creates a secondary effect on the training system, one which may hinder longer-term success of security sector reform.

Even with the short training periods for Iraqi security forces, liminality was still present; however, no effort was made on the part of coalition forces to leverage this phenomenon. While clearly there was a focus to generate forces, this was not an either/or situation—liminality will be there regardless. But what comes into question is how much effort is put into maximizing its effects and to what end the effects are focused.[15] Longer exposure times would help, but even as training time for Iraqi recruits shortened, opportunities were still present.

That is not to say that efforts towards leveraging the liminal situation of Iraqi recruits would have eliminated the problems Iraqi security forces faced

U.S. Army, SSG Brendan Stephens

Iraqi army recruits from the 39th Brigade, 10th Division, clean their weapons at the Regional Training Center at Camp Ur, Dhi Qar, Iraq, 16 May 2009.

—absenteeism, initial poor battlefield performance, and rejection by other elements of the security forces and the population at large.[16]

However, one could argue that a deliberate manipulation of the liminal phenomenon could have helped reduce the likelihood of such events. Deliberately leveraging liminality could have established a positive sense of linkage in the recruits toward the security forces and could have weakened links that could be associated with tribalism. Iraqi security forces possess tribal, confessional, and political links. If such links were weakened before individuals entered into formations, it could make correction by coalition mentors of undesirable behavior an easier task.

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Difficulties

It is relatively simple in hindsight to identify opportunities where liminality, as a method of social engineering, could have been used during the security sector reform process. However, the difficulty of doing this rests in three areas:

● Having a sufficient understanding of the overall end state, as well as a reasonably clear vision of intermediate points, for the state in which the security sector reform is occurring. This vision requires a well thought-out and comprehensive strategy from the political masters who decide to render security sector reform.

● Having sufficient understanding of the local context for security sector reform and sufficient time to plan an effective training package that allows for effective leveraging of the liminal phenomenon toward intermediate points and an overall end state created in the preceding point.

● Having sufficient time and space to execute a well thought-out plan in light of pressures such as budgetary constraints (the Liberian example) or a poor security situation (the Iraq example).

Notwithstanding these difficulties, there is little that cannot be overcome. If the political masters

have the will to assist another state through security sector reform effort, then all of these factors can occur. A comprehensive strategy can be developed, political and cultural understanding can be gathered to conduct planning, and basic resources such as funds and time can be protected. However, success rests on an assumption that getting into the business of social engineering is something that we, as a nation, wish to do. One cannot help associating social engineering with sinister cases of brainwashing.

There are thus serious ethical considerations that must be addressed with the idea of leveraging liminality in security sector reform. Although the question of whether to undertake such efforts does not rest with the military, it is incumbent on the military to understand the ethical implications and to ensure that the civilian masters who are responsible for the decision are fully aware of ramifications. Specifically, if the liminal process is leveraged to assist in achieving a larger end state for security sector reform, then an aspect of choice has been taken away from the reformed society as a whole. A cultural transformation will have to be planned for the entire society if the security sector reform is to take root—a modern-day version of Kemalism (from Kemal Ataturk's policies in reforming Turkey) modified for the specific security sector reform context.

Such a policy creates two distinct ethical dilemmas—the loss of choice for the society undergoing the transformation and the potential damage that such actions may have on the assisting states. The fact that security sector reform end states deal with ensuring civilian control over military forces and good governance in a democratic fashion does have the underlying foundation of self-determination and choice. And, if governing choices are not self-selected, but chosen for the state by other actors who already adhere to the concepts of good governance through democratic processes, then an air of colonialism begins to appear. Positions such as this can lead down a hypocritical path, unless the level and sequence of actions are chosen very carefully. Luckily, as mentioned earlier, the decision on whether to pursue such activities is beyond the military's scope, but a thoughtful and watchful attitude would be necessary.

Security sector reform is a complex set of tasks and end states. The military alone cannot cover all

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of the required areas for a successful program. A comprehensive concept should be sought before initiating assistance to another state in the form of security sector reform. However, within the tasks and actions that the U.S. military can perform, leveraging the liminal processes of making recruits into new security forces can be much more effective than in the past. Liminality is already in existence, it simply requires forethought to guide it towards directions that would be of greatest use to achieving the desired end states. Such efforts will not provide a silver bullet to solve all the difficulties that may be encountered, but they require little additional resources—mainly time and thought—and may make overcoming those difficulties slightly easier. This does become one of the first steps in social engineering, and so the dangers inherent in that path do become real; so if the decision to pursue leveraging liminality is appropriate in security sector reform, caution should also be part of the plan. **MR**

NOTES

1. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform: Supporting Security and Justice*, 2007 edition. Online at: <www.oecd.org/dataoecd/43/25/38406485.pdf>, 7.

2. Theodor H. Winkler, "Keynote Paper: Managing Change. The Reform and Democratic Control of the Security Sector and International Order," Alan Bryden and Philipp Fluri, eds., *Security Sector Reform: Institutions, Society and Good Governance* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2003), 20.

3. Rocky Williams, "African Armed Forces and the Challenges of Security Sector Transformation," Albrecht Schnabel, and Hans-Georg Ehrhart, eds., *Security Sector Reform and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding* (New York: United Nations University, 2005) 47.

4. The literature review for this article is by no means comprehensive, but more along the lines of a population sample: Alan Bryden and Heiner Hanggi, eds., *Reform and Reconstruction of the Security Sector* (Piscataway: Transaction, 2004); Albrecht Schnabel and Ehrhart, as well as numerous issues of the journal *Conflict, Security and Development*.

5. Williams, 48.

6. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 231-70.

7. Carmen Slaybaugh, "Soldierization: Training an Army of One," four-part series from U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command News Service.

8. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 94-95.

9. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1509, 19 September 2003. Online at: <http://unmil.org/documents/resolutions/reso1509.pdf>.

10. Mark Malan, "Security Sector Reform in Liberia: Mixed Results from Humble Beginnings," U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle, PA, 2008, 26-34.

11. Coalition Provisional Authority Order 2, "Dissolution of Entities," 23 May 2003. Online at: <www.iraqcoalition.org/regulations/20030823_CPAORD_2_Dissolution_of_Entities_with_Annex_A.pdf>.

12. The Department of Defense "Measuring Security and Stability in Iraq" quarterly reports are an excellent source and can be located online at: <www.defenselink.mil/home/features/Iraq_Reports/Index.html>. Additionally, Anthony Cordesman, *Iraqi Security Forces: A Strategy for Success* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006) and Anthony Cordesman, "Iraqi Force Development in 2006, Center for Strategic and International Studies," Washington, DC, 2006 provide a lengthy catalogue of numbers of Iraqi security forces over the campaign.

13. Cordesman, *Iraqi Security Forces*, 169.

14. Coalition Provisional Authority Order 91, "Regulation of Armed Forces and Militias within Iraq," 2 June 2004. Online at: <www.cpa-iraq.org/regulations/20040607_CPAORD91_Regulation_of_Armed_Forces_and_Militias_within_Iraq.pdf>.

15. The author contacted Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq, the organization responsible for developing, organizing, training, equipping, and sustaining Iraqi security forces, seeking a program of instruction for Iraqi army basic training, with the caveat that the request be filled with "off the shelf" materials so as not to create an additional workload or distract personnel from fulfilling their training mission. No information could be provided on the basic training program. The result was the same when Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, also focused on indigenizing the security sector, was contacted with the same request with caveat.

16. See Al Pessin, "US Proposing Increase in Target Number of Iraqi Security Forces," Voice of America 31, October 2006; Cordesman, *Iraqi Security Forces*, 198-200. This particular citation references early 2005, although a variety of articles and reports on this topic could be cited for almost any point in time; and "Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq," 6 September 2007, 109.