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Build Partner Airpower, Not Air Forces

Lessons Learned and Policy Recommendations from the American Experience of Building the Iraqi and Afghan Air Forces

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About This Paper

This paper examines lessons from U.S. efforts to build air forces in Iraq and Afghanistan during counterinsurgency operations from 2004 to 2021. Drawing on historical analysis and operational experience, the paper offers policy recommendations for future aviation security force assistance missions in irregular warfare contexts. This work addresses questions relevant to Department of War planning and resource allocation for security cooperation programs.[1]

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[1] The Department of War is designated the Department of Defense under Public Law 81-216, National Security Act Amendments of 1949.

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Finally, I acknowledge the sacrifices of the thousands of American and coalition air advisors, and their Iraqi and Afghan airmen, who were tasked with building new air forces under near-impossible conditions. They did the best they could with what they had.

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Build Partner Airpower, Not Air Forces: Lessons Learned and Policy Recommendations from the American Experience of Building the Iraqi and Afghan Air Forces

The U.S. Air Force (USAF) announced in its fiscal year 2026 budget proposal an intention to cut several units that train and advise foreign military partners, including two squadrons focused on what I term *aviation security force assistance* (AvSFA) in Latin America and Africa.[2] These cuts, following the 2022 deactivation of the service's only special operations and light attack foreign training units, could be rebuilt if needed, but their reconstitution would take years, time that might not be available in a contingency.[3]

Before engaging in debates on the force structure of air advising, the U.S. Department of War (DOW) should study the lessons of building air forces in Afghanistan and Iraq to see what can be learned about AvSFA.[4] History shows that building partner airpower is often a key element of the United States' approach to irregular warfare, such as in Colombia, El Salvador, the Philippines, and, most recently, Ukraine. The United States will likely need to employ AvSFA again to achieve its desired policy outcomes.

When the United States found itself facing insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, American and coalition aircrews assumed the risks of providing critical airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); aerial fires; medical evacuation; battlefield mobility; and logistical support to partner ground forces because neither country had the airpower to do the tasks on its own. However, the costs of supporting operations were heavy for American and coalition aviation forces. Even though insurgents could not contest the skies in Afghanistan, the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) coalition air components still lost 110 manned aircraft from 2001 to 2014, with losses peaking in 2009–2011 during a surge of American combat forces.[5] In Iraq, the coalition

[2] Cohen and Roza, "Air Force Looks to Cut Squadrons That Advise, Train Foreign Militaries."

[3] Roza, "The End of the Brown Beret"; Gillespie, "Air Force Deactivates 81 FS."

[4] The Department of War is designated the Department of Defense under Public Law 81-216, National Security Act Amendments of 1949.

[5] Wikipedia, "List of Aviation Accidents and Incidents in the War in Afghanistan." The U.S. government did not maintain (or no longer maintains) an official database of American and coalition aircraft lost during each conflict. A review of open-source media reports in sites such as this Wikipedia page indicates the rough estimate of the number and types of aircraft lost, as well as their likely causes; however, some incidents may not be included.

lost 50 manned aircraft to crashes and shootdowns during the height of insurgent violence, from 2005 to 2007.[6] These losses—coupled with the mounting casualties from improvised explosive devices (the Iraqi insurgency's signature tactic)—saturated U.S. media and helped erode public support for the war.

Part of the reason the United States and its coalition suffered such heavy losses to their aircraft and aircrews was because partner airpower did not come until after 16 years in Afghanistan and only partly in Iraq after eight years—too little too late. DOW needs more-effective approaches to the AvSFA mission first, rather than more air advisor units.

Studying Afghanistan and Iraq yields three key lessons about building partner air forces in the context of counterinsurgency (COIN) and counterterrorism (CT).[7] First, the USAF struggled to lead AvSFA in these two conflicts. Apart from the subordinate Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), which is operationally assigned to U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), institutionally and culturally, the USAF is mismatched for COIN and CT contexts. Second, complex technology undermines low-capacity states. Afghan and Iraqi airmen could not quickly absorb and employ much of the sophisticated capability the United States gave them. Finally, partner nations require long-term logistics and maintenance support to sustain airpower. As Afghanistan and Iraq showed, trying to create self-sufficient partner air force organizations while fighting a war is a self-defeating effort.

Each of these lessons leads to a policy recommendation for conducting AvSFA more effectively in future COIN and CT campaigns without having to provide in-garrison air advisor units. First, DOW should designate USSOCOM as the AvSFA lead, with the USAF in a supporting role. Commanders of special operations forces (SOF) in Afghanistan adopted a lean and scalable AvSFA approach to build a highly effective Afghan SOF air wing within a few years. Second, DOW should explicitly reject sophisticated technology for COIN and CT partners and use "cheap, fast, and good enough" as the criteria for AvSFA technology acquisitions. Finally, DOW should direct commanders to *build partner airpower* for combat, not air force bureaucracies.

These AvSFA lessons and recommendations from Iraq and Afghanistan apply to a specific worst-case scenario: low-capacity states with little indigenous airpower facing insurgencies and terrorism at home. Although this scope may seem overly narrow, the times the United States has employed AvSFA in these situations are not infrequent: Colombia, El Salvador, Vietnam, Lebanon, and so on. The findings and recommendations that follow may not apply to developed countries with established air force organizations, such as Ukraine, or in weaker states not yet overwhelmed by internal threats.

Building Air Forces at the Extreme

From 2004 to 2011, the United States helped stand up and build the Iraqi Air Force (IqAF) to fight an al Qaeda–led Sunni insurgency, growing the mission to nearly 1,200 air advisors.[8] Air

[6] Wikipedia, "List of Aviation Shootdowns and Accidents During the Iraq War."

[7] As part of a book project on airpower in COIN and CT, I conducted research interviews with civilian policymakers, military commanders, and Iraqi and Afghan airmen, and I read through the existing literature and media reports. Additionally, the USAF provided me access to its historical archives at Ninth Air Force (Air Forces Central) at Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina.

[8] Rock, "ITAM-Air Director/321 AEW Commander End-of-Tour Report."

advisors returned to Iraq from 2015 to 2020 to support the IqAF and Iraqi Army Aviation Command (IqAAC) to fight the Islamic State (IS), which had nearly overrun the country from Syria.[9] In Afghanistan, the United States began building the Afghan Air Force (AAF) in 2005 to combat the resurgent Taliban and continue the AvSFA mission until the United States withdrew in 2021.[10]

DOW implemented these lengthy AvSFA missions as part of the United States' overall strategy to enable the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan to secure their citizens and establish legitimate rule. The work of AvSFA included training, educating, advising, and assisting Iraq's and Afghanistan's airmen with the operations and maintenance of aircraft, as well as the management of both nations' air force organizations. The work was mainly done by air advisors from the USAF, but it also included significant contributions from joint and coalition advisors.[11]

The United States could not have selected more-difficult starting conditions to create highly technical and capital-intensive capabilities, along with bureaucratic organizations to manage them in Iraq and Afghanistan. The USAF began its AvSFA missions near the extreme limits of three parameters—active insurgencies, collapsed partner air forces, and low levels of human capital—in two different countries simultaneously.

First, each country was already experiencing raging insurgencies when U.S. policymakers decided to build the air forces. Security in Iraq deteriorated shortly after the U.S. invasion in 2003. By the time the USAF had fully engaged in its task of building the IqAF in late 2005, the Sunni and al Qaeda–fueled insurgency was already at its peak.[12] In Afghanistan, the Taliban was ousted from power in 2001 but never entirely vanquished. Its recovery and subsequent operations gradually consumed much of southern and eastern Afghanistan, increasing in violence every year from 2005 to 2008.[13]

Second, the AvSFA missions had nothing to build on. Although both countries had deep experience with combat aviation in the 1980s and early 1990s, nearly all of their aircraft were lost before the United States invaded. For Iraq, its airpower had been wiped out by the United States.[14] For Afghanistan, its air force organization ceased to exist after 1992, when the Taliban took control.[15] The United States had to not only provide new aircraft, equipment, and infrastructure but also recruit and train partner airmen to fill new squadrons, wings, and headquarters organizations to lead the air forces.

Third, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, air advisors encountered partner airmen shaped by war and undereducation who struggled to absorb the technology and management practices that the United States tried to transfer. In 2001, the United Nations estimated that less than 30 percent of Afghan boys were enrolled in school, and 70 percent of the male adult population was illiterate.[16] In Iraq, the

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[9] Sabia, *Iraqi Aviation Enterprise Assessment Report*, p. 7; Sean Cosden, former 370th Air Expeditionary Advisory Group commander (June 2019–April 2020), interview with the author via Zoom, December 21, 2020.

[10] Marion, *Flight Risk*, p. 47; Cunningham and Windrem, "What Happened to the Afghan Air Force?"

[11] Switzer, "Learning to Fly."

[12] Cully, *Adapt or Fail*, p. 2.

[13] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Afghanistan*.

[14] Haulman, "What Happened to the Iraqi Air Force?"

[15] Marion, "The Destruction and Rebuilding of the Afghan Air Force, 1989–2009."

[16] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Afghanistan*, p. 4.

human capital story was marginally more optimistic. In 2000, only 55 percent of Iraqi adult males were literate, with a similar rate of male primary school enrollment.[17]

Although some IqAF programs showed promise, language barriers slowed development, as most Iraqi officers could barely understand English, and none of the Iraqi enlisted personnel could read the English technical orders about maintenance, leaving the officers unable to accomplish tasks beyond a basic level—and even then requiring interpreters.[18] Nearly a quarter of Iraqi logistics trainees were unable to start their courses because they were illiterate in Arabic.[19]

English proficiency was a bottleneck in Iraq, but the problem was far worse in Afghanistan. The U.S. government found that only 13 percent of Afghan military candidates could read and write in their native language.[20] These shortfalls delayed instruction and severely limited the throughput of pilot and maintainer programs. For example, Afghan airmen could not maintain accurate records, track inventory, or produce reports for leaders to manage the organization and its fleets effectively.[21]

Neither country had the depth of human capital or education systems to support a technically demanding air force organization that could not only operate aircraft but also maintain and sustain them and their required infrastructure. Although the personnel requirement for each was relatively small compared with the army and police force, the effective pool of air force candidates shrank sharply after vetting for security and screening for literacy, English aptitude, willingness to serve, and retention possibility, making human capital the binding constraint for growth and sustainment. The effects of these shortages were pervasive throughout the United States' engagement in both countries.[22]

The challenges were especially felt in the AvSFA mission. Because of the United States' inability to deliver aviation training in Dari, Pashto, or Arabic, Iraqi and Afghan airmen needed to learn English to read aircraft manuals, converse with their advisors, and receive instruction from trainers. The United States found itself teaching basic literacy and numeracy in recruits' native languages before it could teach them English—so they could then sit for classes covering technical concepts embedded in manuals written for American high school graduates.

Two examples illustrate this problem. In Iraq, four of the original ten Iraqi pilots sent to the United States in 2011 to learn to fly the F-16 were sent home for failing to learn English well enough to begin USAF undergraduate pilot training.[23] In Afghanistan, a U.S. government report found that as of late 2018, after the United States had already begun delivering UH-60s to the AAF, air advisors had not yet established maintenance training programs, citing the challenges of teaching English-based skills to enlisted airmen who could not read or write in their native languages.[24]

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[17] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *Situation Analysis of Education in Iraq*, p. 94.

[18] Bauer, *Training the Iraqi Air Force*, pp. 10–14.

[19] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*.

[20] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Afghan National Security Forces*, p. 4.

[21] SIGAR, *Afghan National Security Forces*, pp. 6, 13.

[22] Hammes, "Raising and Mentoring Security Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq."

[23] Marion, "Comparing and Contrasting USAFCENT's Air Advising Mission in Iraq and Afghanistan, 2005–2015," p. 20.

[24] SIGAR, *Afghan Air Force*, pp. 13–14.

Building the Iraqi Air Force (2004–2011 and 2015–2020)

The United States conducted two AvSFA missions in Iraq. The first came in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in response to the insurgency and chaos that followed. The mission began in 2004 and ended with the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. The second, initiated in 2015, was in response to the invasion of IS into Iraq from Syria and lasted until 2020.

Immediately after its 2003 invasion of Iraq, the United States dissolved all Iraqi armed forces.[25] Initially, the U.S. plan to rebuild Iraq's military focused on gradually recruiting and training soldiers to protect the country and key infrastructure.[26] The plan did not include an air force, an explicit omission, according to the senior U.S. official in charge of Iraq's security reconstruction.[27] However, by early 2004, with a full-scale insurgency having taken hold of Iraq, U.S. policymakers issued orders to establish comprehensive armed forces, including a new air force.[28]

Upon receipt of the task to build an Iraqi air force, the USAF began deploying air advisors to Iraq in 2004.[29] However, a fatal aircraft mishap in 2005 caused the USAF to pause its advising efforts and regroup.[30]

By 2007, the IqAF began to develop a modest combat aviation capability suitable for irregular warfare. The United States delivered Iraq's first C-208 and KA-350 ISR aircraft and refurbished UH-1H helicopters for troop transport.[31] Also in that year, the IqAF increased its monthly sortie rate from 120 in January to 1,205 in December and was conducting troop and supply movements and ISR missions to monitor electric lines and oil pipelines.[32]

In 2008, the IqAF had approximately 1,300 personnel and 56 aircraft.[33] By the end of 2011, just before the United States withdrew its forces, the USAF estimated that the IqAF numbered around 5,000 personnel and nearly 80 aircraft.[34] The IqAAC—an offshoot of the IqAF—could count almost 2,500 personnel and more than 90 helicopters.[35] Combined, the two air arms averaged 350 sorties per week.[36] Although their work was far from complete, air advisors left Iraq at the end of 2011 when the United States and Iraq could not reach a defense agreement to keep U.S. troops in the country.

When air advisors returned in 2015 to help Iraqi military aviation with its fight against IS, they found the IqAF and IqAAC in disarray. The Iraqis had added combat aircraft from Russia, China, and Iran, as well as other countries.[37] The IqAF was operating more than a dozen types of aircraft

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[25] Bremer, *Coalitional Provisional Authority Order Number 2*.

[26] Dobbins et al., *Occupying Iraq*, p. xxiv; Bremer, *Coalitional Provisional Authority Order Number 22*.

[27] Tyler, "U.S. to Form New Iraqi Army and Pay Soldiers of Old One."

[28] Bremer, *Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 67*.

[29] Cully, *Adapt or Fail*, p. 26.

[30] USAF, "Five Airmen Killed in Iraqi Crash."

[31] Cully, *Adapt or Fail*, pp. 104–107, 123.

[32] U.S. Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, 2007, pp. 54–55.

[33] U.S. Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, 2008, p. 54.

[34] Rock, "ITAM-Air Director/321 AEW Commander End-of-Tour Report," p. 3.

[35] Rock, "ITAM-Air Director/321 AEW Commander End-of-Tour Report," p. 3.

[36] Rock, "ITAM-Air Director/321 AEW Commander End-of-Tour Report," p. 4.

[37] Delalande, *Iraqi Air Power Reborn*.

from around the world, with a workforce of fewer than 5,500 airmen—the equivalent of one or two USAF flying wings, each of which usually employs only one aircraft type.[38] Iraqi airmen maintained these aircraft without U.S. oversight, a practice that began during the first AvSFA mission and expanded after advisors left.[39]

On top of this understaffed and undertrained air force, the Iraqis added a fleet of F-16 fighter aircraft. With the first delivery in 2015, and with coalition intelligence and defense contractor support, Iraqi F-16s began employing weapons against IS targets almost immediately but made only a marginal contribution to the air war.[40] From 2015 to 2017, the number of weapons employed by U.S. and coalition aircraft during Operation Inherent Resolve—the coalition campaign to defeat IS—averaged 33,000 per year.[41] Iraqi F-16s dropped approximately 1,300 precision-guided munitions between 2015 and 2017, which accounted for less than 2 percent of the total air-delivered munitions against IS.[42]

More important than the meager number of strikes was the narrow set of missions the Iraqis were capable of executing. Because of the program's slow development, the Iraqis could strike only preplanned, static targets. Iraqi F-16s could not provide close air support to Iraqi ground forces, engage moving targets, or accept targeting updates while airborne.[43]

IqAAC helicopters provided aerial fire support and battlefield mobility directly to Iraqi ground forces and were well suited to Iraq's immediate needs.[44] The helicopters' proximity to the battlefield, relative simplicity, and immediate tactical impact made them the workhorses of Iraqi airpower during this period. However, they struggled to hit mobile targets, especially IS's signature attack—the vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED).[45]

In Iraq, IS's suicide car bombs were a significant challenge to the Iraqi Army and SOF. IqAAC helicopter crews tried using their unguided rockets and machine guns and even dropping munitions from high altitude until the United States finally provided its Advanced Precision Kill Weapon System (APKWS)—a converted 2.75-inch laser-guided rocket.[46] By the end of 2016, the United States and Iraq had combined the APKWS with Iraqi scout helicopters, remarkably improving the

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[38] Bridges, *Iraqi Aviation Enterprise Assessment Report*, p. 8.

[39] Rock, "Airworthiness Assessment of Iraqi Air Force (IqAF) and Iraqi Army Aviation Command (IqAAC) Aircraft."

[40] "Iraq Uses New F-16 Jets for First Time in Raids Against Islamic State."

[41] Wasser et al., *The Air War Against the Islamic State*, p. 410.

[42] Dan Tippett, former Lockheed Martin senior program manager, Balad Air Base (2015–2018), interview with the author via Zoom, February 26–27, 2025.

[43] Andrew Croft, former deputy commanding general, Air, Joint Task Force, Operational Inherent Resolve, interview with the author via Zoom, February 17, 2025.

[44] Matthew Isler, deputy combined forces air component commander for air, Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (2016–2017), interview with the author via Zoom, February 19, 2025.

[45] Matthew Isler, deputy combined forces air component commander for air, Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (2016–2017), interview with the author via Zoom, February 19, 2025.

[46] Matthew Isler, deputy combined forces air component commander for air, Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (2016–2017), interview with the author via Zoom, February 19, 2025.

firing accuracy of the IqAAC.[47] With the precision rockets, the IqAAC could effectively counter IS's VBIEDs.[48]

The exogenous shock of COVID-19, coupled with an already strained political relationship between Iraq and the United States, ended the air advisor mission in 2020, well before the Iraqis had matured their airpower or air force organization.[49]

Building the Afghan Air Force (2005–2021)

The AvSFA mission in Afghanistan had two uneven eras. The first, from 2005 to 2014, focused on air mobility and logistical support to Afghan ground forces. The second era, 2015 to 2021, began as the United States ended combat operations and transitioned to a security assistance and CT mission. During this time, the AAF developed and matured several key COIN capabilities, including nighttime air assault, airborne ISR, and multiplatform strike.

Plans to build an aviation capability in Afghanistan started small. The United States envisioned a fleet of 15 aircraft, a mix of fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft.[50] However, as insecurity increased, so did aspirations for Afghan-led security, including the expansion of Afghanistan's aviation forces. Only in 2008 did the USAF begin in earnest to build the AAF when it activated an advisor wing.[51] The United States increased the AAF's size from 18 aircraft in the middle of 2006 to 57 aircraft—including 35 Mi-17s—at the beginning of 2011.[52]

This first era was challenging to the AvSFA mission for several reasons. First, in 2008, the USAF purchased 20 C-27 airlift aircraft for the AAF, but owing to poor contractor performance, the fleet never achieved its 80 percent mission-capability requirement, and even after the goal was lowered to 65 percent, the fleet met that standard in only one of eight months.[53] Moreover, the twin-engine aircraft had no single-engine climb capability at high altitudes, a critical requirement in mountainous Afghanistan. U.S. commanders grounded the C-27s in December 2011.[54] The loss of the C-27 left a multiyear airlift gap that was later backfilled with C-208s and C-130Hs.[55]

Second, in 2011, the AvSFA mission in Afghanistan suffered the deadliest insider attack of the war. A single Afghan gunman, an AAF pilot, murdered nine members of the USAF-led air advising mission at Kabul International Airport before Afghan security forces killed him.[56] This incident led to

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[47] Elliot, "Security Enterprise Sends Precision Weapon Systems."

[48] Matthew Isler, deputy combined forces air component commander for air, Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve (2016–2017), interview with the author via Zoom, February 19, 2025.

[49] Sean Cosden, former 370th Air Expeditionary Advisory Group commander (June 2019–April 2020), interview with the author via Zoom, December 21, 2020.

[50] Marion, *Flight Risk*, pp. 47–49.

[51] Marion, *Flight Risk*, p. 56.

[52] Marion, *Flight Risk*, pp. 53–54.

[53] SIGAR, *G222 Aircraft Program in Afghanistan*, p. 3.

[54] SIGAR, *G222 Aircraft Program in Afghanistan*, p. 22.

[55] SIGAR, *G222 Aircraft Program in Afghanistan*, p. 12.

[56] Raddatz, Martinez, and Forer, "Nine Americans Methodically Killed by Afghan Pilot at Kabul Airport."

a profound shift in the advising mission, as the air advisors adopted much stricter force protection measures at all times around the Afghans and armed guards.[57]

The more profound effect, though, was psychological. The USAF secured its advisor headquarters with imposing physical enhancements—inside the Afghan air base itself—creating a forbidding compound nicknamed the "Fortress of Doom" by future air advisors. The insider attack cast a long shadow over the remainder of the AvSFA mission, creating what one commander called a "cold war, no trust" environment.[58]

By the end of 2014, the U.S.-led NATO mission had undergone a massive reorganization and downsizing in Afghanistan. With the Afghan government accepting full responsibility for its own security, the United States limited its military roles to focus on CT against IS and al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan and on developing Afghan security forces.[59]

The AAF began this new era of U.S. involvement with a fleet of Mi-17s, C-208s, and C-130s but could perform only daytime resupply and transport missions.[60] However, U.S. SOF began developing the Special Mission Wing (SMW), an Afghan-led air unit designed to support Afghan commandos and other CT units. By 2015, the Afghans had a nighttime air assault and a tactical ISR capability.[61] The newly formed unit gave Afghan SOF and NATO advisors a dedicated aviation capability for direct action, interdiction, and hostage rescue missions.[62]

The SMW became the first Afghan unit to integrate aviation capabilities in combat when the United States provided it with PC-12 ISR aircraft. Modified with electro-optical and infrared sensors and a laser designator, the SMW-flown PC-12s provided target reconnaissance, tactical overwatch, and broader intelligence support to Mi-17 air assault missions.[63]

This specialized air wing gave Afghanistan's ground forces an edge, enabling them to pursue the Taliban across the country. From its headquarters in Kabul and forward bases in Kandahar and Mazar-i-Sharif, the SMW flew most nights in support of Afghan special operations missions.[64]

One of the SMW's most visible successes came in March 2017, when IS attacked a hospital in Kabul and killed nearly 50 civilians.[65] With no notice, SMW crews inserted CT forces onto the hospital rooftop and into the grounds below in broad daylight, preventing the attack from becoming a larger massacre.[66]

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[57] Marion, *Flight Risk*, pp. 122–124.

[58] Marion, *Flight Risk*, p. 203.

[59] Hagel, "Statement by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel on Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Freedom's Sentinel."

[60] Hreczkosij, "The Coyotes of Kabul."

[61] Skovlund, "An Inside Look at Afghanistan's Elite Special Mission Wing."

[62] Michael Litwinowicz, former policy analyst, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Counter Narcotics (2010–2018), interview with the author via Zoom, September 4, 2024.

[63] Raridon, "CAA Operations Afghan Special Mission Wing," pp. 39–40.

[64] L. Shane Finison, former Special Operations Advisor Group commander (2019–2020), interview with the author via Zoom, April 21, 2025.

[65] Mashal and Abed, "After Deadly Attack on Kabul Hospital, 'Everywhere Was Full of Blood.'"

[66] Skovlund, "An Inside Look at Afghanistan's Elite Special Mission Wing."

In the case of Afghanistan, helicopter airlift was paramount to air support. To meet those requirements, the Russian-designed Mi-17 heavy lift helicopter was the mainstay of the AAF and SMW. It was well suited to Afghanistan's high-altitude terrain and relatively simple for Afghan crews to maintain.[67] But the fleet was under strain. Operational use was relentless, and Afghan pilots frequently crashed their helicopters, compounding pressure on maintenance crews and the reduced number of flyable airframes.[68]

However, the United States faced political challenges in maintaining access to spare parts and depot facilities for major repairs and inspections of the Mi-17s. DOW depended on Russian companies for Mi-17 logistics and maintenance support, but country relations soured sharply after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and its support for Syria's regime.[69] U.S. sanctions and Russian countersanctions soon made it impossible for DOW to buy more Mi-17s and spare parts for the Afghans.[70]

To meet Afghanistan's needs, Congress allocated funds to replace the Afghan Mi-17s with 159 refurbished and modernized UH-60s.[71] However, with the UH-60s, sophistication came at the expense of capacity and capability. Each UH-60 airlift mission required twice as many helicopters, maintainers, and pilots as an Mi-17 mission, because the UH-60's cargo capacity was less than half that of its Russian counterpart. The aircraft also struggled in Afghanistan's heat and high altitudes.[72]

In addition to the refurbished UH-60s, in the 2010s, the United States approved several acquisitions for the AAF as part of a broader modernization effort. These included A-29 propeller-driven air-to-ground attack aircraft; the AC-208; a modified transport with electro-optical and infrared sensors, a targeting laser, missiles, and small APKWS laser-guided rockets; and MD 530 armed scout helicopters.[73] Once fielded, these last three systems completed Afghan COIN airpower.[74]

The Afghans were able to put their air weapons to use relatively quickly because they were simple to operate. The MD 530s could provide close air support to Afghan ground forces and armed escort for convoys. The A-29s could strike Taliban positions anywhere in the country and provide close air support. Finally, the AC-208s integrated intelligence, ground forces, and air-to-ground weapons for a more comprehensive effect. The AC-208's ability to fly at night gave the AAF a rare round-the-clock strike and surveillance platform.

The AC-208, in particular, proved its value almost immediately. In July 2019, after a Taliban car bombing in central Kabul, an AC-208 crew responded to support Afghan CT forces engaging insurgents who had barricaded themselves inside a high-rise building. The crew fired small APKWS rockets through a window, killing the remaining Taliban fighters without harming civilians.[75] The

[67] Axe, "The Pentagon Forced Afghanistan to Take Inferior Helicopters."

[68] Axe, "The Pentagon Forced Afghanistan to Take Inferior Helicopters."

[69] SIGAR, *Afghan Air Force*, p. 2.

[70] DeYoung, "Congress Fuming over U.S. Purchase of Russian Helicopters for Afghanistan."

[71] SIGAR, *Afghan Air Force*, p. 1.

[72] Axe, "The Pentagon Forced Afghanistan to Take Inferior Helicopters."

[73] Gady, "US Extends A-29 Light Attack Aircraft Procurement Contract for Afghanistan"; Marion, *Flight Risk*, pp. 76–78.

[74] Marion, *9 AF (AFCENT)'s Air Advising Mission in Afghanistan, 2015–2021*, pp. 4–49.

[75] Marion, *9 AF (AFCENT)'s Air Advising Mission in Afghanistan, 2015–2021*, pp. 40–41.

strike not only demonstrated the AC-208's precision in complex urban combat but also catalyzed the expansion of Afghan airpower's role in coordinated operations.

Although each of the three aircraft significantly improved the AAF's capabilities, air advisors helped Afghan airmen conceptualize and execute a comprehensive air-to-ground fires package to attack Taliban forces proactively. Nicknamed *Thundercat*, the package integrated all three aircraft into a coordinated strike package. AC-208 crews would first detect Taliban formations massing near vulnerable Afghan army positions, then remain on station to provide overwatch and guide follow-on strikes by A-29s and MD 530s.[76]

The result was synchronized offensive airpower within two years of the AC-208's fielding. Using strike and ISR aircraft together gave the Afghans a way to proactively find and engage Taliban forces instead of reacting to ambushes, the Afghans' previous posture until then.

By 2020, after 16 years, the United States had built COIN airpower in Afghanistan.[77] However, that airpower was a force dependent on defense contractors to provide aviation logistics and maintenance, as demonstrated by the AAF's and SMW's insurmountable sustainment challenges after the United States pulled its air advisors and contractors out of Afghanistan in late spring 2021.[78]

Aviation Security Force Assistance Needs to Go Faster in Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism Campaigns

Building a nation's air force from the ground up is a technically demanding and capital-intensive task. When combined with conditions of low state capacity, low levels of human capital, and active insurgent hostilities, planners must think in years and decades, not months and quarters, to develop self-sustaining air force organizations. This kind of time is not typically available to counterinsurgents.

Even if the United States initiated the process of building a partner nation's airpower once an insurgency began—while rapidly bringing tremendous air advisory and acquisition capabilities to bear—the conflict might conclude before a partner's COIN air force could even make an impact. A comprehensive RAND study of modern insurgencies found that their median length is ten years.[79]

The United States needed 16 years of sustained air advisor engagement to field partner COIN airpower in Afghanistan, while in Iraq, the United States could only bring the IqAF and IqAAC to a partial capability in eight years, well past the insurgency's apex. In neither case was the partner able to independently manage or sustain their fleets or airmen.

The cold facts of Iraq and Afghanistan must catalyze DOW to find ways to accelerate partner airpower development as part of a solution to future insurgencies in states with poorly functioning air force organizations and low levels of human capital. Otherwise, the United States risks creating partner airpower that will arrive over the target too late or never reach it at all.

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[76] Marion, "Interview with Col Scott T. Yeatman."

[77] Marion, "Interview with Col Scott T. Yeatman."

[78] Cunningham and Windrem, "What Happened to the Afghan Air Force?"

[79] Connable and Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, p. xii.

Lesson One: The U.S. Air Force Struggled to Lead Aviation Security Force Assistance in Counterinsurgency

Although it is natural for policymakers to look to the USAF to build a partner nation's air force, there is a misalignment. Unlike other services, the USAF is designed around having centralized control of airpower, dominating the air domain, and acting independently to create strategic effects rather than tethering aircraft to support ground actions. With the exception of its forces organized under AFSOC and operationally controlled by USSOCOM, the USAF does not conduct battlefield mobility, air assault, tactical ISR, medical evacuation, and light attack missions for police and army units. These are essential to a COIN air force; however, they are not found in the USAF.

Also, the USAF is not organized, trained, or equipped to build foreign air forces from the ground up in underdeveloped countries amid an internal conflict. Not since the Vietnam War had the USAF done so, but once that conflict ended, the USAF eliminated all of its air advisory capability.[80] In 1994, the USAF resurrected a single SOF aviation advising squadron, not for its own AvSFA missions but under AFSOC for USSOCOM's taskings.[81] Unsurprisingly, the USAF was unprepared to conduct the comprehensive AvSFA missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The USAF struggled from the outset in Iraq. The USAF deployed its airmen to train and advise the IqAF without preparing them for the challenges of the AvSFA mission or providing them a chain of command to manage risk.[82] The aircraft crash and death of five USAF personnel and one Iraqi pilot in 2005 resulted from air advisors flying unstable modified aircraft they would never have been authorized to operate in the United States.[83] Once the USAF had properly evaluated the IqAF aircraft in this fleet, it grounded them all.[84]

By the middle of 2007, as U.S. and coalition forces began quelling the insurgency alongside the 130,000 soldiers of the Iraqi Army, the USAF had only managed to grow the IqAF to fewer than 1,000 airmen, who employed just 14 fixed-wing aircraft for ISR and transport.[85] None of the IqAF's helicopter squadrons had yet reached initial operating capability.[86] In fact, the USAF had grown zero additional capabilities in the IqAF since 2005.[87] Three years into the AvSFA mission, Iraqi airpower could make only marginal contributions to the COIN campaign.

If the Iraqi insurgency took off like a flash fire, then the conflict in Afghanistan was like a slow burn, which should have afforded the USAF more time to build. Yet the USAF did not establish an air advisor wing in Afghanistan until 2008. At the outset, the USAF made a critical error during this period when it fast-tracked a key decision to buy the Afghans the C-27, a medium-lift aircraft. Rushing to spend earmarked funds before they expired at the end of fiscal year 2008, the USAF issued

[80] Vick et al., *Air Power in the New Counterinsurgency Era*, p. 116.

[81] Vick et al., *Air Power in the New Counterinsurgency Era*, pp. 116–118.

[82] Cully, *Adapt or Fail*, p. 26.

[83] Cully, *Adapt or Fail*, pp. 43–45.

[84] Smith, *Deployed Flight Test of the Iraqi Air Force Comp Air 7SLX (CA-7)*, pp. 26–27.

[85] U.S. Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, 2007, pp. 40–43.

[86] U.S. Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, 2007, p. 43.

[87] U.S. Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, 2007, p. 41.

a $549 million sole-source contract for up to 20 refurbished airframes.[88] The lack of oversight led to the purchase of unreliable aircraft that were unsuitable for the high altitudes of Afghanistan and left a multiyear gap in airlift capability for the AAF.

Although insider attacks were prevalent throughout Afghanistan, the 2011 Kabul airport incident showed how mismatched the USAF was when conducting AvSFA in a COIN environment. Having ceded control of the U.S.-provided fleet of aircraft to the AAF, air advisors struggled against what they called the Afghan "cell phone" command and control. Instead of using the air advisor's centralized system to prioritize, plan, and authorize flights, Afghan military and political leaders would call AAF pilots directly to transport unscreened people and goods around the country on unscheduled missions, which air advisors believed were likely illicit. When the attack occurred, air advisors were trying to stop the AAF's off-the-book flights and regain transparency.[89]

Just weeks before the insider attack, the USAF commander of the air advisor mission issued his midtour assessment of the AAF and guidance to advisors.[90] During a surge of U.S. forces and combat operations—one of the conflict's most violent periods—the guidance emphasized AAF staff development, accountability, command and control, and pilot training, priorities consistent with building a professional air force organization. Any emphasis on operational urgency, expanding support to Afghan ground forces, countering enemy adaptation, and leveraging AAF airpower for COIN was notably thin. That the commander eventually rose to become the Chief of Staff of the USAF makes this guidance useful for framing how the USAF understood the AvSFA mission in Afghanistan.

No advising mission proceeds without mistakes, but these examples demonstrate a systemic mismatch between an organization that employs exquisite multi-billion-dollar technology with highly trained airmen and coalition partners and the need to teach basic flying and maintenance practices to culturally and linguistically distant airmen in a low-capacity state. The USAF should not be the default lead future for AvSFA missions in irregular warfare contexts, although its support and expertise remain vital because it retains critical expertise in airpower employment, as well as acquisitions and contracting capacity for aviation technology and services.

Recommendation One: Designate U.S. Special Operations Command as the Lead

Considering the extremity of the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is unlikely that any of the U.S. armed services could have succeeded in rapidly creating self-sustaining COIN airpower in each country. However, SOF demonstrated a different approach in Afghanistan that proved effective, showing that USSOCOM should lead the development of partner-nation airpower for COIN, with the military services, particularly the USAF, providing support through training, acquisitions, and air advisors.

[88] Sweigart, "Air Force Spent $549M on Planes for Afghan Military That Were Sold for Scrap."

[89] Marion, *Flight Risk*, pp. 101–116.

[90] Marion, *Flight Risk*, pp. 217–220.

The U.S. special operations task force commander in Afghanistan oversaw the SMW alongside other Afghan special operations units. The SMW's air advisor group included U.S. and NATO personnel and was supported by comprehensive contractor training, logistics, and maintenance services.[91] Developing this capability required years of additional training and rigorous vetting of Afghan airmen, prioritizing quality over quantity. Air advisors did more than organize and train the SMW: They routinely flew combat missions with Afghan aircrews, ensuring that planning and execution met U.S. standards and personally certifying crew qualifications.[92]

Although the USAF attempted to establish a comprehensive, self-sustaining AAF, along with a staff organization to manage it, U.S. SOF commanders developed a bespoke Afghan COIN wing. Interestingly, USSOCOM did not deploy an existing special operations unit to build the SMW. It selected SOF personnel for the advisor group's command teams and employed general-purpose service members from across the joint and coalition forces as air advisors.[93]

Training, advising, and assisting foreign military partners are core USSOCOM activities, not additional or secondary tasks. Special operations leaders have a deeper understanding of cultural contexts, influence, and risk in advising missions. SOF aviation officers and senior noncommissioned officers should lead AvSFA for COIN and CT campaigns in low-capacity states, providing the command-and-control and advisory frameworks, while the military services supply most of the air advisors and acquire the needed aircraft and contractor support. This recommendation would require USSOCOM to bear the burden and cost of training conventional air advisors, as well as using additional leaders from within its ranks, but the recommendation does not require standing advisor units to implement.

Lesson Two: Complex Technology Undermines Low-Capacity States

The evidence from Afghanistan and Iraq shows that the more complex the technology the United States transferred, the slower the partner's adoption. Not only was advanced technology difficult for the fledgling air forces to employ, but it also pulled resources and airmen away from more-productive aircraft and missions.

By fielding the UH-60 to the AAF and SMW, DOW chose complexity over simplicity, committing the Afghans to a human capital requirement they could not meet. U.S. commanders could have regulated Afghan Mi-17 flight hours at the outset or sought an exception to Russian sanctions. If a replacement were truly necessary, a handful of other American-made utility helicopters could have filled the Mi-17 gap or done most of the work, a 2015 RAND report found.[94] For example, although cargo limitations mirror those of the UH-60, several variants of the far simpler Bell helicopter, such as

[91] L. Shane Finison, former Special Operations Advisor Group commander (2019–2020), interview with the author via Zoom, April 21, 2025.

[92] Erik Gilbert, former Special Operations Advisor Group commander (2013–2014), interview with the author via Zoom, September 6, 2024.

[93] L. Shane Finison, former Special Operations Advisor Group commander (2019–2020), interview with the author via Zoom, April 21, 2025.

[94] Mouton et al., *Cost-Effective Helicopter Options for Partner Nations*, pp. 45–51.

the UH-1Y and Huey II, have been proliferated to low-capacity states and operated in high-altitude environments, and they come from a family of helicopters that has existed since the 1950s.[95]

Training enough Afghan crews and technicians for 159 UH-60 cockpits was a challenge. Afghan student pilots—who had already passed English exams and other prerequisites—had a 26 percent failure rate in helicopter training.[96] This attrition rate is roughly three times higher than for USAF undergraduate student pilots.[97] The UH-60 was also much more difficult to maintain. As one air advisor commander put it, the Mi-17s were "kind of like working on a '57 Chevy with Craftsman tools," whereas UH-60s resembled a "new BMW that you have to take to the service department."[98]

Iraq's F-16 program ran into similar implementation challenges. The nearly $4 billion sale of 36 F-16s and support contracts to Iraq in 2011 represented an aspiration for both countries.[99] For the United States, it was a strategic investment—a way to strengthen a nascent security relationship in the Middle East, support its defense industrial base, and build an interoperable force that could contribute to future coalition operations. For Iraq, the F-16 symbolized regional prestige and the hope of securing its air sovereignty in a volatile neighborhood.[100]

Building an F-16 program, though, was akin to creating a whole new Iraqi air force. Maintaining and sustaining a unit of F-16s requires an extensive division of labor in such work centers as electronic warfare, avionics test stations, egress, propulsion, and armament and munitions.[101] Many of these technical specialties did not exist in the IqAF at the time. The F-16 even required subspecialists to maintain test and support tools, such as avionic test equipment and aerospace ground equipment.[102] The Iraqis had not flown an advanced fighter with jet propulsion in more than a decade and had never flown an American one. The requirements to fly and maintain a fleet of F-16s could not be grafted onto an existing IqAF capability.

Worse still, with Iraq unstable because of domestic threats, the IqAF needed a light air-to-ground attack capability to support its ground forces and SOF. That capability would likely have cost just 2–4 percent per flying hour of the F-16 or similar aircraft.[103]

Again, human capital was the binding constraint for fielding the F-16 as a potent combat capability. Defense contractors built weapons, loaded aircraft, conducted preflight inspections, and served as crew chiefs for launch operations. Iraqi technicians were restricted to pulling safety munitions pins during end-of-runway arming, whereas contractors maintained quality assurance and

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[95] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

[96] SIGAR, *Afghan Air Force*, p. 11.

[97] Schulker et al., *Understanding Demographic Differences in Undergraduate Pilot Training Attrition*, p. 35.

[98] L. Shane Finison, former Special Operations Advisor Group commander (2019–2020), interview with the author via Zoom, April 21, 2025.

[99] Switzer, "Into Thin Air."

[100] Hama Ameen, Iraqi Air Force F-16 squadron commander (2015–2019), interview with the author via Zoom, March 2 and 23, 2025.

[101] McGarvey et al., *Analysis of the Air Force Logistics Enterprise*, pp. 95–96.

[102] McGarvey et al., *Analysis of the Air Force Logistics Enterprise*, pp. 24–25.

[103] Hoehn, *Air Force OA-X Light Attack Aircraft/SOCOM Armed Overwatch Program*.

production superintendent responsibilities throughout the program.[104] This arrangement reflected the persistent inability of Iraqi forces to assume full operational responsibility, even seven years after purchasing the aircraft.[105] Language barriers and cultural incompatibilities complicated training efforts; Iraqi leadership demanded compressed timelines to produce maintainers who were "qualified on paper" but lacked true proficiency.[106] The IqAF did not use defense contractors as specialized or surge support; as with the USAF and other developed air forces, the IqAF depended on contractors to remain viable.

Although the UH-60s and F-16s offer tremendous capabilities to air forces that can absorb the technology, they slowed the Afghans and Iraqis, who lacked the human capital to support the aircraft. It is irrelevant that in the case of the UH-60s, the United States paid for the aircraft and contract support, whereas the Iraqis paid for their F-16s. Either way, the United States bore the operational costs of less capable partner air forces needing to cover the gap with U.S. and coalition airpower.

Recommendation Two: Adopt "Cheap, Fast, and Good Enough" as the Criteria for Aviation Security Force Assistance Technology Acquisitions

In contrast, the AvSFA missions in Iraq and Afghanistan provide numerous examples of air advisors and their partner airmen innovating to solve tactical and operational problems using simple-to-operate, easy-to-maintain, and widely available technology. These innovations were made possible by the less sophisticated aircraft and the support the United States provided, not despite them.

The most effective technology the Iraqis and Afghans employed was not the most complex. Instead, it was the less expensive technology—delivered within a year or two and simple enough for the partners to absorb and employ right away—that had the greatest effect on the conflict. In irregular warfare contexts with low-capacity states, "good enough" means getting partner airmen to operate a narrow subset of COIN and CT airpower within a few years, even if that capability is fragile and permanently contractor dependent, to shift combat risk away from U.S. and coalition aircrews.

APKWS was a tailor-made solution for AvSFA scenarios such as this because it gave the Iraqis a vital capability that was compatible with their existing equipment and economical ($30,000 per unit) compared with the cost and effectiveness of other weapons.[107]

Thundercat, the lethal combination of AAF strike and ISR aircraft, embodied a core truth of AvSFA in COIN: Simple dominates complex. Simple offered lower costs and faster timelines and kept space open for innovation. The AAF got each of the three systems—A-29, AC-208, and MD

[104] Dan Tippett, former Lockheed Martin senior program manager, Balad Air Base (2015–2018), interview with the author via Zoom, February 26–27, 2025.

[105] Dan Tippett, former Lockheed Martin senior program manager, Balad Air Base (2015–2018), interview with the author via Zoom, February 26–27, 2025.

[106] Dan Tippett, former Lockheed Martin senior program manager, Balad Air Base (2015–2018), interview with the author via Zoom, February 26–27, 2025.

[107] Keller, "BAE Systems Gets Big Order for APKWS Electro-Optical Laser-Guided Smart Munitions."

530—airborne and into the conflict within a few years.[108] Minor adaptations to existing aircraft, such as integrating small precision-guided rockets into Iraqi helicopters or modifying C-208s for ISR or strike missions, can have outsize effects without the long-term investment required for sophisticated technology.[109]

Policymakers and military strategists should favor widely proliferated, easy-to-maintain, and simple-to-operate technologies in future situations like those in Iraq and Afghanistan. Sophisticated technologies offer greater capabilities than cheaper, simpler alternatives. However, sophisticated technologies are a human capital tax on undeveloped air forces with low levels of education, diverting airpower from partner ground forces that depend on air support.

Lesson Three: Partner Nations Require Long-Term Maintenance and Logistics Support to Sustain Airpower

Although Iraq and Afghanistan were able to field airpower to varying degrees with U.S. assistance, both relied on American defense firms for logistics and maintenance of their fleets. These services included such tasks as aircraft and engine overhaul, repair of parts and auxiliary equipment, and stocking and distributing supplies. DOW coordinated the work through contractor logistics support (CLS) legal agreements.

U.S. air advisors trained and mentored their partners on following maintenance practices, scheduling aircraft repairs, forecasting and ordering parts and supplies in advance, tracking warehouse inventories, and managing these processes and budgets. Yet little of the training was absorbed and put into practice. Instead, the Iraqi and Afghan air forces were on a trajectory toward long-term, continuous CLS.[110]

Advisor commanders faced a dilemma. To fly with their partners and manage the fleet's safety and longevity, Afghan and Iraqi aircraft had to be maintained to U.S. airworthiness standards—the same maintenance, inspection, and operational requirements used by the U.S. military—procedures the Iraqis and Afghans were incapable of meeting on their own. However, by outsourcing aircraft maintenance and management to CLS technicians, partner airmen could shirk their responsibility, knowing that U.S. contractors would handle it, stunting organizational development.

In 2011, after nearly eight years of working with the IqAF, the final commander of the AvSFA mission in Iraq noted in his end-of-tour report that the IqAF maintained only 56 percent of its airplanes to airworthiness standards, whereas the IqAAC maintained only 22 percent of its helicopters to airworthiness standards.[111] Airworthiness depended entirely on whether U.S. defense contractors or Iraqi technicians were responsible for aircraft maintenance.

Whenever air advisors handed over maintenance responsibilities to the AAF, the Afghans skipped major inspections and routine servicing and even introduced counterfeit parts into the supply chain—a problem that emerged almost immediately when the Afghans assumed responsibility for logistics

[108] Marion, *9 AF (AFCENT)'s Air Advising Mission in Afghanistan, 2015–2021*, pp. 4–49.

[109] Marion, *9 AF (AFCENT)'s Air Advising Mission in Afghanistan, 2015–2021*, pp. 4–49.

[110] Marion, "Interview with Col Scott T. Yeatman."

[111] Rock, "Airworthiness Assessment of Iraqi Air Force (IqAF) and Iraqi Army Aviation Command (IqAAC) Aircraft."

oversight.[112] Predictably, aircraft readiness rates plummeted. When the United States withdrew its forces and defense contractors in early 2021, aircraft availability quickly and predictably declined.[113]

Although AvSFA had delivered COIN airpower in Afghanistan and, to a lesser extent, in Iraq, the capabilities were fragile. The United States had introduced large, complex fleets of combat aircraft into societies gutted of the personnel needed to absorb and care for them. Air advisors could either maintain the viability of partner airpower through costly defense contractors or allow the Iraqi and Afghan air forces to learn maintenance and sustainment practices by destroying aircraft and lowering readiness—but not both.

In short, long-term CLS was not a failure of execution; it was the only operational approach that could keep the Iraqis and Afghans flying and fighting for their countries' security. As seen in both Iraq and Afghanistan, partner air operations quickly stopped once the United States withdrew its support.

But dependence on external support has an upside; should the United States see the need to stop its partners or should the aircraft fall into adversary hands, long-term CLS creates a natural circuit breaker. If the United States walks away from the engagement and removes its defense contractors and logistical support, it can be confident that the partner's aircraft cannot be used for long.

This is a level of control and influence that ground forces do not typically enjoy.

Recommendation Three: Build Airpower, Not Air Forces

These sobering facts should prompt future policymakers to reconsider their assumptions about establishing new military aviation organizations in situations like Iraq and Afghanistan. Embracing long-term CLS as an enduring requirement for partner COIN airpower relieves AvSFA missions from the Sisyphean task of developing partner-nation air force organizations, such as staff bureaucracies, professional military education schools, and aircraft maintenance groups.

Considering the United States' aircraft losses in Iraq and Afghanistan while countering their insurgencies, getting partner nations into the air to assume those risks is a strategic priority. However, American policymakers and commanders should abandon organizational development and focus air advisors on fielding partner airpower as quickly and effectively as possible.

The Afghan SMW, developed by U.S. SOF, provides one model. Although it had more than 30 Mi-17s and 18 PC-12 aircraft, the SMW was an independent air wing and was lean, with approximately 800 personnel.[114] U.S. defense contractors were responsible for aircraft maintenance and logistics support, as well as training Afghan aircrews and maintenance technicians.[115] Although contractors integrated Afghan airmen into their processes, the SMW was never responsible for its own aircraft maintenance and sustainment.

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[112] Jeffrey D. Valenzia, 438th Air Expeditionary Wing and Train, Advise, Assist Command–Air commander, NATO Air Command–Afghanistan (June 2019–March 2020), interview with the author via Zoom, April 24, 2025.

[113] Schogol, "Pentagon Has No Idea How the Afghan Air Force Will Stay in the Air."

[114] Michael Litwinowicz, former policy analyst, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Counter Narcotics (2010–2018), interview with the author via Zoom, September 4, 2024; Skovlund, "An Inside Look at Afghanistan's Elite Special Mission Wing."

[115] L. Shane Finison, former Special Operations Advisor Group commander (2019–2020), interview with the author via Zoom, April 21, 2025.

Indeed, as both countries demonstrate, none of the airpower will likely survive the end of the COIN AvSFA mission. Afghan airpower, a 16-year endeavor to build, collapsed in less than six months. And after air advisors departed Iraq in 2011, the Iraqis abandoned the maintenance practices their American advisors had taught them.[116]

Future AvSFA missions with low-capacity partners experiencing insurgencies should prioritize the combat capacity of the partner air force over building its organizational capability. In practice, this means developing flying squadrons and wings focusing on crews to operate aircraft, training technicians to prepare and recover aircraft for missions, and selecting the partner unit's leadership. In theory, the trade-off of this approach is that air advisors will have to manage all the functions of the partner's air force organization, such as training schools, parts inventory, and comprehensive maintenance procedures. In practice, and with long-term CLS, air advisors managed these processes for the AAF and IqAF anyway.

Conclusion

The United States' attempts to build air forces in Iraq and Afghanistan revealed a fundamental tension between creating airpower to immediately fight insurgents and developing self-sustaining air force organizations. The two AvSFA missions showed that the USAF was mismatched for the task. It deployed ill-prepared air advisors to each country, tried to impose centralized control of airpower, and selected inappropriate aircraft for its partners. Policymakers, in turn, tried to graft overly sophisticated technology on Afghanistan and Iraq, societies bereft of the human capital and education systems to employ and sustain the technology. Both treated CLS expenditures as a bridge to the time when the Iraqis and Afghans could sustain their air forces on their own. This was a fundamental misunderstanding: Contractors made it possible for Iraqi and Afghan airmen to even fly at all.

But failure is instructive. The Afghan SMW demonstrates that USSOCOM should lead COIN AvSFA with other military services providing advisors, acquisitions support, and expertise. At 800 personnel with contractor-sustained aircraft, the SMW reached operational effectiveness in a few years—a fraction of the 16 years and 7,500 personnel the AAF required. The Iraqi and Afghan experiences absorbing aviation technology demonstrate that simple dominates complex. Afghan crews developed integrated strike packages using A-29s, MD 530s, and AC-208s, and Iraqi helicopter crews employed APKWS precision rockets on existing platforms; meanwhile, sophisticated F-16 and UH-60 programs struggled to become operationally ready. "Cheap, fast, and good enough" should be the AvSFA acquisition mantra in COIN and CT contexts with low-capacity states. Air advisors should focus on fielding combat-ready partner squadrons that can fly and fight, with long-term CLS as an enduring requirement throughout the mission, and should not attempt to build self-sustaining bureaucracies.

Military leaders should ensure that these lessons and recommendations are available to future security assistance planners and air advisors by incorporating them into doctrine and training.

[116] Brad Bridges, former 370th Air Expeditionary Advisory Group commander, interview with the author via Zoom, February 28, 2025.

However, these lessons are bounded. They apply to low-capacity states fighting insurgencies without air forces, not to every partner the USAF might work with. In some cases, transferring complex airpower and aiming for self-sufficiency are viable goals. Ukraine after Russia's 2022 invasion is one such case. The Ukrainian Air Force already fielded experienced MiG-29 fighter crews, had relatively high human capital, and had spent nearly three decades training alongside U.S. fighter aircraft from California's Air National Guard before receiving F-16s.[117] Those conditions bear little resemblance to Iraq's situation when the United States sold it F-16s or to Afghanistan's when the United States handed UH-60s to the AAF.

Considering the recent changes in the United States' strategic focus on China and Russia and the growing use of drones in warfare, these lessons and policy recommendations may seem dated; however, irregular warfare and the need to develop partner airpower will arguably play a greater role over the next few decades. In the last strategic competition between superpowers, the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union avoided direct conflict. Instead, they chose to compete indirectly through proxies, insurgencies, and support to partner nations, most of which were underdeveloped states without competent air force organizations.[118]

The growing use of small drones in warfare, including by IS and in Ukraine's defense against Russia, raises the question of whether the United States can substitute unmanned for manned platforms when building partner airpower. This possibility warrants further study. However, although small drones have been used successfully for some ISR and strike missions, there is not yet a suitable unmanned substitute that can move troops and supplies around a theater, insert ground forces into combat zones, and perform casualty evacuation. For now, the United States can expect that it will have to train and advise its partner airmen to fly aircraft.

Even though the United States and its coalition partners controlled the skies throughout the COIN campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, enemy combatants still inflicted heavy losses on U.S. and coalition aircraft and crews. For the next irregular conflict in an underdeveloped partner nation, the United States will likely experience tremendous internal pressure to shift the risk to local aircrews and minimize American losses. DOW should embrace these recommendations to accelerate the development and effectiveness of partner airpower to affect better strategic outcomes.

[117] Roza, "After Training Together for Years, Air Force Pilots Are Watching Ukrainian Friends Fight for Their Lives."

[118] Shapiro and Collins, "Great Power Competition Will Drive Irregular Conflicts."

Abbreviations

AAF	Afghan Air Force
AFSOC	Air Force Special Operations Command
APKWS	Advanced Precision Kill Weapon System
AvSFA	aviation security force assistance
CLS	contractor logistics support
COIN	counterinsurgency
CT	counterterrorism
DOW	U.S. Department of War
IqAAC	Iraqi Army Aviation Command
IqAF	Iraqi Air Force
IS	Islamic State
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SMW	Special Mission Wing
SOF	special operations forces
USAF	U.S. Air Force
USSOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command
VBIED	vehicle-borne improvised explosive device

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