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The Spanish Army in Security Force Assistance: Lessons Learned in Iraq

El Ejército Español en la asistencia a las fuerzas de seguridad: Lecciones aprendidas en Irak

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ABSTRACT. This article analyses the lessons learned by the Spanish Army in the Security Force Assistance (SFA) Operation in Iraq between 2015 and 2020. The research uses primary data from 22 personal interviews conducted with Spanish officers and NCOs, as well as secondary data sourced from a database containing the Spanish Army's online mission register. The results identify the scenarios and activities performed in SFA operations, as well as the main lessons learned by the Spanish Army in Iraq. The two main lessons are the prevention of internal attacks and the relevance of awareness of cultural dimensions to improve training processes. Conclusions can be extrapolated to other European armies, providing policy recommendations for training local forces in SFA operations.

KEYWORDS: armed conflict; international conflicts; military training; military operations; organizational culture.

RESUMEN. Este artículo analiza las lecciones aprendidas por el Ejército español en la Operación de Asistencia a Fuerzas de Seguridad (SFA) en Irak entre 2015 y 2020. La investigación utiliza datos primarios de 22 entrevistas personales realizadas a oficiales y suboficiales españoles, así como datos secundarios extraídos de una base de datos que contiene el registro online de misiones del Ejército español. Los resultados identifican los escenarios y actividades realizadas en las operaciones SFA, así como las principales lecciones aprendidas por el Ejército español en Irak. Las dos principales lecciones son la prevención de ataques internos y la relevancia del conocimiento de las dimensiones culturales para mejorar los procesos de entrenamiento. Las conclusiones pueden extrapolarse a otros ejércitos europeos, proporcionando recomendaciones políticas para el entrenamiento de fuerzas locales en operaciones SFA.

PALABRAS CLAVE: conflicto armado; conflictos internacionales; cultura organizacional; entrenamiento militar; operaciones militares.

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Introduction

Armies' operational experience provides military organizations with a practical knowledge that contributes to improve doctrine and procedures (Nagl, 2002; Davidson, 2010). Due to the transformation of the security environment after the Cold War, Western Armies' organizational learning was mostly limited to the lessons learned from participating in expeditionary operations (Raitasalo, 2014; Doeser and Eidenfalk, 2019). The Spanish Army has been also affected by this global context, having improved its operability and materials (Colom-Piella, 2016). The deployments and professionalization of its armed forces has brought about a qualitative evolution, from being one the weakest members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Bento-Soares, 1984) to being an expeditionary force able to learn from experience.

Spain has conducted missions since 1991, providing humanitarian aid and stabilising conflict areas in the Balkans, Middle East and Afghanistan (García-Cantalapiedra, 2014; Martínez et al., 2013; Durán and Ávalos, 2013; Durán et al., 2016). Of all the different international deployments, Security Force Assistance (SFA) missions are currently the most common. However, the Spanish Army began to train and mentor local forces in 2008, due to a change of strategy in Afghanistan. From that year on, the Spanish government made a greater contribution to improving local security standards in Afghanistan and later in Africa, within the framework of the European Union Training Missions (EUTM), and also in Iraq in 2015. By conducting SFA operations with allies such as the US, the UK, France, Portugal and Italy, the Spanish Army has been able to learn from their knowledge and to exchange best practices.

This research focuses on how the Spanish Army has learned from its experience in SFA. Due to the scarcity of the literature on this topic (Mariano-Perez, 2014; Fernandez de la Cigoña, 2014), the study provides primary data from 22 personal interviews. Specifically, this research analyses the Spanish participation in the Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in Iraq (2015-2020). The analysis focuses on (1) the Spanish participation and tasks performed in SFA operations, (2) functions and tasks performed in SFA in Iraq and (3) how the deployment in Iraq has contributed to the Spanish Army's organizational learning.

The main lessons learned from the experience in Iraq are directly related to Force Protection and cultural aspects. On the one hand, the results point to the improvement in protection procedures aimed at preventing internal attacks from Iraqi trainees. On the other hand, two cultural dimensions have been identified as relevant aspects for the organizational learning. This study identifies both organizational culture and cultural awareness as key elements in military performance. The interviewees noted that Spanish servicemen's previous experiences and organizational culture can help to strike a balance between Force Protection and cultural awareness.

The article is structured around an approach to the organizational learning as a source of military change. Since SFA has been selected as a case study, the theoretical approach also focuses on a comparative analysis of NATO's and the Spanish Army's doctrine. This doctrinal and theoretical framework underpins the research strategy and has been used to identify categories of analysis. Regarding the discussion of the results, a first section describes the Spanish Army's general experience in SFA, a second section focuses on the Iraq case, and lastly, a third section reflects on the lessons learned from the experience. The article concludes with a summary of the results, followed by policy recommendations and a consideration of future research avenues opened up by this study.

Scientific Literature Review

Organizational Learning and Security Force Assistance

The academic literature has identified a wide variety of military change sources. While early studies focused on top-down processing from a political level (Posen, 1984) and from within the military organisation (Rosen, 1991), later research revealed more subtle sources. These later studies addressed other relevant sources of transformation such as the emulation of other armies (Horowitz, 2010; Adamsky and Bjerga, 2010) and the introduction of new technologies (Van Creveld, 1991) or cultural dimensions (Farrell and Terriff, 2002; Kier, 1995; Murray, 2002). Related to cultural factors, some authors have noted their cross-sectional nature when driving a bottom-up change (Grissom, 2006; Haaland, 2016; Catignani, 2013) and also how organizational culture shapes organizational learning (Davidson, 2010; Nagl, 2002).

Organizational learning is a key factor in change processes as it provides an ability to analyse the operating environment and react to unpredicted situations (Alas and Shafiri, 2010). Organizational learning is shaped by the organizational culture, as it defines how learning happens, demonstrating a symbiotic relationship between the two dimensions (Catignani, 2014; Kober, 2015). Culture is a cornerstone of cognition and interpretation frameworks, enabling or preventing an environment for learning and feedback (Liao et al., 2011). Organizational learning is inherent to collective history and internal context, while at the same time being complex to duplicate, imitate or transfer (Pérez-Lopez et al., 2015). It is a complex process, created from personal experiences transmitted to other community members, firstly in an informal way and later through institutionalisation (Hsu, 2007; Brockman, 2013).

Organizational learning is a process that lies between equilibrium and change. As Cayla (2008) asserts, an evolutionary perspective is needed to clearly identify the improvement to be achieved and the process involved in doing so. At the same time, learning requires continuity to allow members of an organisation to understand the ends, means

and objectives and thus establish a distinction between real learning and random change. To this end, learning requires a systematic and structured process, composed of rules and organizational pedagogy. Among the elements that influence learning, Busch and Hostetter (2009) point to leadership and the chain of command as core to establish a learning-oriented culture. Furthermore, a change management process involving self-criticism and reflexivity is needed to foster organizational learning. These authors note that excessive institutionalisation or procedures can inhibit learning, hampering reflexivity and the diffusion of lessons learned. It can also lead to a lack of organizational memory and an overly homogenised organizational composition, which can prevent the evolution of learning.

In his analysis of organizational learning in military organisations during operational experiences, Catignani (2014) identifies two levels of learning. Firstly, he points to high-level learning, which happens when the institution itself reorients its operating procedures after detecting organizational mistakes. This involves long-term planning beyond the identification of immediate needs. Due to the rarity of this phenomenon, which most commonly occurs after strategic shocks (Nielsen, 1999; Nagl, 2002; Davidson, 2010), the author argues that low-level learning is more typical. Catignani (2014) views the latter as an equivalent process to adaptation (Farrell, 2005; Brustlein, 2011), which implies changes in routines within the framework of pre-established processes. Low-level learning leads to the correction of mistakes in the procedural system, in systems of belief or in attitudes towards military duty. He asserts that this kind of learning can be found in operational situations, in which tacit knowledge is accumulated through personal experiences and is amplified by informal diffusion. Despite its immediate utility, the organizational knowledge produced is focused on the short term and has a localised impact rather than influencing the whole organisation.

Security Force Assistance from a comparative perspective

SFA operations are activities conducted by states to contribute to building security capabilities in allied states (Ansorg, 2017; Bellamy, 2003; Abrahamsen, 2016). This type of operations is performed by an external actor to train and equip armed units to reinforce their operability (Rolandsen et al, 2021). Since 9/11, SFA operations have been used to combat terrorism without deploying big military contingents (Wilén, 2021), seeking to improve security in the global South, as well as to increase their influence in regional scenarios (Rolandsen et al, 2021). SFA outcomes are highly difficult to be seized, as in some cases it has increased the host nation's stability but in others it has not succeed (Marsh and Rolandsen, 2021).

Armies participation in this kind of military operation is not only an input for organizational learning, but also demonstrates an ability to transmit knowledge from their

own experience to local forces (Ladwig, 2003; Donais, 2018). Definitions of the aim and scope of the SFA are set out in the Army's doctrine, with NATO members having both a common doctrine defined by the Alliance and one for each Army. NATO's SFA doctrine AJP 3-16 asserts that SFA is developed within the framework of the Security Sector Reform, which is an operation designed to transform a host nation's defence organisations into a stable environment (NATO, 2016). At the same time, NATO doctrine differentiates between military assistance and SFA, with the former being focused on a more informal approach to training Special Operations Forces (NATO, 2016).

While NATO defines SFA as a specific activity, US doctrine includes it as an additional element within Security Cooperation. Defined by the Joint Publication 3-20 (Department of Defense, 2017), Security Cooperation activities involve not only military actors but also civilian agencies, such as development cooperation and intelligence or law enforcement; its functions and objectives are more complex than those of other countries, in line with the possibilities and challenges of the US on a global scale. It is composed of all the Defense Department's activities involving interactions, programmes or operations with foreign security forces. Security Cooperation seeks to build security relationships and partner capacities, while gaining or maintaining free access to certain geographical spaces (Department of Defense, 2017). This Joint Doctrine includes SFA as part of the Security Cooperation, being developed at the same time as Foreign Assistance, Security Assistance (sales, funding or peace operations), Security Sector Assistance and Defense Institution Building. SFA is conducted simultaneously with other operations in the country, which may include Counterinsurgency, Civil-Military Cooperation, Stabilisation or Counterdrug operations.

In the Spanish Army's doctrine, SFA is an activity that forms part of the Spanish National Security Strategy, which seeks to reinforce defence and security capabilities in the advanced border in Sahel and the Middle East (DSN, 2013; 2017). Based on NATO's definition, SFA requires a request for assistance from the host nation, as well as a long-term political and economic commitment and planning at all operational levels (Spanish Army, 2017). In line with NATO's definition, SFA activities lie within stabilisation operations and the Security Sector Reform, but the Spanish doctrine shows more notable differences with respect to military assistance. For the Spanish Army, Military Assistance is an undercover type of operation, with a core role played by Special Operations, and it does not require a request from the host nation to be conducted (Spanish Army, 2017). According to the Spanish doctrine, SFA contributes to reinforcing the host nation's legitimacy, focusing on its transition to self-sufficiency.

NATO's doctrine (2016) states that SFA is applicable to all activities related to improving or supporting local forces and associated institutions. SFA should be planned and conducted with a comprehensive approach, integrating all civilian and military actors

involved. To reinforce the host nation's legitimacy, an understanding of the operating environment and local forces is required, as well as a deep awareness of local culture to avoid misunderstandings between the parties involved. NATO's doctrine underlines the need for cultural awareness to avoid conflictive interactions that can damage trust and lead to internal threats such as "green- on- blue" attacks. This kind of threat refers not only to attacks by trainees, but also by contracted personnel in military bases. It was a critical threat in the Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams (OMLTs) in Afghanistan but it is also a possibility across the whole SFA spectrum. While it is mentioned in NATO's doctrine, Spanish doctrine dedicates an entire Appendix to internal threats (Appendix A) and to how to counteract them through Force Protection (Appendix B). Although NATO's doctrine refers to both, the Spanish Army doctrine delves deeper into Force Protection protocols and those against green- on- blue attacks. However, the doctrine does not establish fully detailed procedures, which are specific to each military unit.

In line with NATO's doctrine, that of the Spanish Army includes in the first chapters conceptual definitions and assistance activities (Force Generation, Organising, Capacity Building, Training, Advising, Mentoring and Cooperating). From there, the planning process is defined, highlighting the importance of respecting the organizational dependence of trainers' units, as well as explaining the operational structure depending on the activities to perform. There is also an emphasis on the relevance of feedback on the lessons learned. The Spanish Army doctrine focuses on training and operational employment, introducing all preparation phases and the execution of function (Security, Training, Advising, Assistance and Interpreters). Unlike NATO's doctrine, the Spanish Army defines the specific doctrine for SFA, following different combat functions and defining the basis for procedures in Command, Intelligence, Manoeuvres, Force Protection, Fire Support and Logistics (Spanish Army, 2017).

Spanish Army has conducted SFA operations in conflict contexts, being the most relevant the deployment in Iraq. The outbreak of the Syrian civil war saw the proliferation of a large number of violent non-state actors in the country (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2016). Among the different armed groups, the Islamic State was a jihadist group with a defined expansionist agenda in the Middle East. After several victories won in Syria against military forces, it began a cruel offensive in Northern Iraq. The increase in its manpower, military material and social support, in addition to an extensive use of propaganda, allowed it to conquer and control Tikrit, Samarra and Mosul, where the Islamic State established its operations centre (Paasche and Gunter, 2016).

It consolidated its power through terrorist actions, wielding hybrid strategies against Iraqi forces, and securing effective territorial control. Due to the unstable situation, the Iraqi government requested the support of the international community via the UN. The political agreement reached by the main UN members led to resolution 2170/2014,

allowing the use of military means to defeat “Daesh” in Iraq. After the UN resolution, NATO decided in the 2014 Wales Summit to create an international coalition against terrorism. It comprises more than 60 countries, and is headed up by the United States. Spain is one of the members, and contributed to defeating Daesh in Iraq through the Operation Inherent Resolve (Spanish Ministry of Defence, 2021).

Due to the complexity of the conflict, the Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) has several areas of action. The main ones are stopping flows of foreign fighters, cutting off flows of money to Daesh, the provision of humanitarian aid to Iraqi civilians to delegitimise Daesh, and direct military intervention (Spanish Ministry of Defence, 2021). In addition to strategic bombing and joint operations with local forces, the military operation also involved SFA (Enstad, 2020). As in other cases, when local forces are not able to fight internal threats, foreign support to security forces is required (Ladwig, 2003). In 2015, Iraqi forces required proficient training to be able to successfully conduct operations against Daesh, preventing the defection of troops and reinforcing the national security system (EP09, EP22). In this context, Spain deployment in the OIR contributing to the generation, training and capacity building of local security forces.

Method and techniques

This research uses a qualitative approach to analyse the Spanish deployment in Iraq during the period 2015-2020. As in a previous research about the Spanish Army, 22 face-to-face interviews were conducted with Spanish servicemen between 2019 and 2021. A total of 13 members of the Spanish Legion (Almeria, Spain) contributed to this research, providing information about the military deployment in Iraq, while 9 officers of the Training and Doctrine Command (Granada, Spain) provided the doctrinal perspective of how Spanish Army develops the lesson learned process after SFA operations. The profile of participants was diverse, including officers as Colonels (4), Lt Colonels (5), Majors (3), Captains (5) and NCOs (5). Regarding their international experience, most of them have 4 or more deployments (11), between 1 and 3 (9), being few those not deployed abroad (2).

The interviews were developed in the frame of a research project about military change in the Spanish Army. They were semi-structured, as the research required flexibility due to the lack of scientific literature. The researcher posed general questions as “How has Spanish Army changed after the participation in international operations?” or “Have you ever needed to adapt procedures to success in operations? Do you consider that your adaptation has fully or partially turned into doctrinal change?” Specific questions were posed about SFA operations as “What is the best solution to improve the language gap?” “Which solution is the most accurate to reduce or prevent internal attacks?” “What is the role of Training and Doctrine Command in turning operational experience into doctrine?”

Two other participants were interviewed in 2019 and 2021 to help ensure data saturation, seeking to guarantee a coherence between narrative discourses. The interviews were anonymised by applying the label EP and the number of the interview (e.g. *EP 20*). Due to security reasons, the researcher provided participants with confidentiality agreements. The document included the commitment to (1) not using data for non-academic purposes, (2) not using information from informal conversations, (3) not using data that could supposed a risk for participants, (4) providing participants with transcriptions or audios and (5) not misrepresenting or exposing information out of context.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish, recorded on MP3 and transcribed for subsequent analysis with the qualitative research software MAXQDA. The research strategy is divided into categories, some of which were identified from the theoretical framework, while subcategories were built from data compilation in the interviews. The core category seeks to answer the research question, and is supported by the main categories of military change and the Spanish Army's SFA experience. Following the theoretical categories, subcategories capture the specific Spanish experience in missions abroad, providing a defined structure to the research results.

Tabla 1.

Research strategy			
Core category	Main categories	Theoretical categories	Subcategories
	Military change	Organizational learning	Lessons learned
		Bottom-up drivers	Adaptation
SFA as a source of organizational learning	Spanish Army's SFA experience	Cultural dimensions	Organizational culture
		Operational environments	NATO operations EUTM operations
		Operational experience	Iraq (Inherent Resolve) Green on blue threats Cultural awareness

In addition to the interviews, subcategories were built from the analysis of a Spanish Army operations records database. It had previously been used to analyse the participation in international deployments since 1989. From a total of 221 observations from the period 1989-2021, since the beginning of Spanish deployments abroad to the present. In this study we selected a sample of 62 observations exclusively related to different SFA deployments. Following the same process as in the previous research, some dimensions were identified for the analysis. Firstly, data was classified and analysed by country, region, international organisation and time frame. Secondly, key operational and organizational

elements were identified, including tasks performed, support unit, number of rotation, total servicemen deployed and upper military deployed. Quantitative data provided specific information about the SFA operations abroad. They indicated the current relevance of these missions, showing the increasing participation in SFA since 2008. Iraq was selected as the case study since training in Besmayah ended in 2020, with the Spanish Legion having been deployed twice, a first rotation in 2015 and later in 2018. This fact provided the opportunity to interview servicemen deployed twice in the same operation, which allowed comparative information from two different periods of time.

Results and Discussion

Spanish Army in Security Force Assistance

The results of the research reveal the scenarios and functions performed by the Spanish Army in SFA operations. After explaining its general experience in SFA activities, the study focuses on the Iraq case. The Operation Inherent Resolve was an intense experience, as the first deployments involved generating and training Iraqi units to fight against the Islamic State. The main lessons learned were linked to the prevention of internal green-on-blue attacks, as well as the promotion of cultural understanding as a way to improve military performance.

Spanish participation in SFA: Scenarios and functions performed

SFA operations represent 28.05% of total missions conducted by the Spanish Army since the first deployment in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991. Relative to the deployments in 2021, SFA missions represent 44.4% of current operations. SFA experience began anecdotally in 2003 in Iraq: one of the interviewees (EP20) mentioned that the Spanish Legion trained regular Iraqi infantry units there in order to build the new Iraqi Army after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Nevertheless, it was not until 2008 that the full SFA experience began, with the implementation of the Optimization and Machine Learning Toolkit (OMLT) in Afghanistan (11.68% of SFA operations). OMLT activities were conducted at the same time as other humanitarian and stabilisation activities to boost Afghan forces' self-sufficiency. Data analysis shows constant SFA activity between 2008 and 2021, with the most active years being 2014 and 2015 (12.9%), when a specific SFA mission distinct from OMLT activities began, the Spanish Army was deployed in Iraq and it conducted EUTM operations in Africa.

Operational scenarios: Africa, Afghanistan and Iraq

The Spanish Army has conducted SFA missions in Afghanistan (30.6%), Mali (27.4%), Iraq (21%) and the Central African Republic (21%). NATO organised operations in

Afghanistan and Iraq while missions in Africa were performed under the European Union (EU) command (Spanish Ministry of Defence, 2020). Analysing data on the international organisation responsible for the mission, we found a fairly even distribution between NATO operations (51.6%) and EUTM (48.4%), but no UN training missions recorded. Analysis of the continuity or discontinuity of SFA operations related to government changes reveals some interesting findings.

SFA activities are instigated by the Socialist Party government in 2008 (32.3%), increased by the People's Party government between 2011 and 2018 (61.3%) and continued by the coalition government from 2020 (6.5%). An analysis of the time frame indicates that missions are not determined by internal politics, but rather by strategic changes made by NATO and the EU. The Afghanistan mission was exclusively dedicated to SFA in 2014, EUTM in Mali and the Central African Republic began in 2013 and 2014, respectively, and The OIR in Iraq began in 2015 (Spanish Ministry of Defence, 2020). The international context in those years was characterised by the presence of hybrid jihadist actors in Sahel and the Middle East, which had to be combatted by local forces trained and mentored by foreign militaries. This prompted an increase in SFA missions as part of a broader strategy to counteract terrorist threats at their source.

Activities performed

Analysis of data on SFA operations was carried out inductively, building analysis dimensions once data had been compiled. Unlike contextual data from operations, activities performed were captured by dichotomous yes/no questions about the kind of assistance provided. This research points to the predominance of training (73.72%) over advising (11.68%) and teaching courses (2.92%). It should be taken into account that a single category was created for OMLT in Afghanistan. This was because it involved training, advising, mentoring and direct support, with a more holistic approach than SFA in EUTM and OIR. Within training activities, the data showed a predominance of Special Operations training (25.5%), followed by a fairly even distribution of regular forces training such as infantry (18.98%), fire support (14.6%) and light armoured vehicles (14.6%).

Contingency tables of training activities and countries where they took place show that the activities conducted in Afghanistan included infantry training (2.3%) and advising (2.3%), with OMLT having a core role (12.4%). On the other hand, there is a balance between activities conducted in the Central African Republic: training infantry (6.2%), Special Operations (6.2%) and advising (8.53%). This homogeneity is due to the small number of troops deployed, with an initial presence of 97 servicemen, later reduced to 30 and currently standing at 8. More troops were deployed in Iraq (225-300 soldiers) and Mali (50-300 soldiers), which allows for a wider variety of activities on request from the host nation. In contrast with the Central African Republic, where the core role was

played by Portuguese trainers, the other two operations were focused on generating, organising and training.

Due to the key role of the Spanish Army in Iraq and Mali and the requests from both host nations, more activities were performed. In EUTM Mali, training was focused on Fire Support (15.5%) and Special Operations (12.4%), as well as on light armoured vehicles (8.53%). The Spanish Army in Iraq conducted brigade training; running activities in two separate centres. The first was in Baghdad, where a Special Operations training was performed (8.53%). The second training centre was in Besmayah, where the Spanish Army trained regular units, mainly infantry (10.08%) and light armoured vehicles (8.53%). In addition to responding to the host nations' requests, activities were carried out to deal with the threats faced. While activities in Iraq were initially oriented to train forces for combat, they later focused on consolidating a regular military structure. In contrast with Iraq, where Islamic State was defeated, the situation in Mali still involves training forces to combat insurgencies and jihadist groups, so the planning process and training provided are entirely different.

The Spanish contribution to the Operation Inherent Resolve

The military operation in Iraq had two clearly differentiated dimensions. On the one hand, Spain deployed a Special Operations Task Group in Baghdad, with special operators from the Army, Air Force, Navy and Civil Guard. They developed a full assistance cycle, training operators, supporting operations from an advanced post, advising and even mentoring local units in conducting operations. On the other hand, there was a conventional brigade training unit, to develop building partnership capabilities in Besmayah. The Spanish military had to train Iraqis in basic tasks, with it sometimes being necessary to equip them (EP06, EP11, EP13, EP16, EP22). The Unit generation was a complex process under constant review, requiring trainers to show flexibility in teaching a wide range of basic tasks (Spanish Army, 2018).

The comparison of testimonies from the 2015, 2018 and 2020 deployments reveals different approaches to SFA in Iraq. The first deployments from 2015 to 2017 involved different levels of training and advising local forces (EP09). The OIR strategy was mainly focused on preparing local troops to fight against Daesh in operations, as conducted in Mosul. This contrasted with activities performed in 2020, when the jihadists had lost territorial control and the host nation had different demands for the international coalition. As was stated by EP22, later phases of the OIR were focused more on generating stable and self-sufficient Iraqi security forces.

As in other operations, the local and global context affected the OIR deployment. In the local arena, changes in the Iraqi government prompted the decision to reduce the presence of NATO members in the country. In addition, the death of Qassem Soleimani

in January created a situation of insecurity that increased the attacks against the coalition members. At a global level, the Covid-19 pandemic also affected the deployment, both in terms of the number of rotations and the recruits sent to the training camp.

The Iraqi experience between 2015 and 2020 points to the pre-deployment phase as a key stage for conducting SFA. It is particularly important to spend enough time forming the military contingent, including interpreters and communication facilitators to improve communication with local forces (EP09, EP22). During the mission, there was a notable need for constant meetings with high-ranked Iraqi officers to report information about progress or a lack of new recruits (Spanish Army, 2018). As the interviewees stated, communication with trainees (EP11, EP13, EP14, EP18, EP19) was crucial to the training performances. In the same vein, communication with high-ranked officers was required to understand the needs of Iraqi units and the strategic objectives to achieve.

Lessons learned from SFA experience

Some of the lessons learned in SFA are common to other military deployments abroad. The two main dimensions identified from the interviews are the improvement in Force Protection and cultural dimensions. In the case of SFA, both are crucial as they can facilitate or impede military performance. Key elements identified were the personal and professional experience of the military deployed, as well as the organizational culture and cultural awareness.

Force Protection

The previous organizational experience of the Spanish Army in the Balkans, Middle East and Afghanistan contributed to an improvement in its Force Protection procedures. As remarked by EP02, the Spanish have learned a lot from their joint activities with the American troops. Expeditionary operations are important as they provide an opportunity to learn from other armies (Horowitz, 2010). In addition to military bases, convoys and movement protection, the prevention of internal threats is essential in SFA operations. The Spanish follow a similar procedure to counter green-on-blue attacks as the one established in both NATO and US doctrine (NATO, 2016; DoD, 2017). When servicemen were asked about green-on-blue, they claimed that it was much more of an issue in Afghanistan than in Iraq (EP06, EP09, EP11). In Afghanistan, American troops were more affected by internal attacks than other militaries, suffering 99 green-on-blue attacks in the period 2008-2017 (Roggio, 2017). During this time, Spanish forces suffered two casualties in the Civil Guard's Special Operations Corps (EP12, EP18, EP21).

This case helped to improve and redefine Force Protection procedures, as well as to increase security awareness regarding local personnel. Interviewees pointed to a prevention phase consisting of an extensive intelligence compilation about local troops and civi-

lian workers (EP04, EP06, EP07, EP10, EP11, EP12, EP13, EP14, EP15, EP16, EP19, EP20, EP21, EP22, EP24). The host nation is responsible for this phase according to doctrine, but in some cases deployed forces have to check the criminal and terrorist records of local troops (EP22). On a tactical level, it is important to carry out handgun checks to prevent people from entering military bases with guns (EP06, EP07, EP09). In countries such as Afghanistan, Mali or Iraq, agreements and negotiations with local commanders help to reduce tensions in both recruitment processes and control access (EP09, EP22).

“You can take some different measures, but I think the main one is good coordination between the one in charge, maybe the trainer Lieutenant or the trainer Captain, and his counterpart in the Iraqi unit. It is essential to talk to them and ask “Listen, have you got any suspicious ones? Do you have any hunches? What measures have you taken before shooting exercises? Have you checked them?” All these are measures based on trust between heads of trained units. Between officer trainers and trainees (EP09, 2019).”

When local recruits are already inside the training base, Spanish servicemen can apply additional strategies. Depending on the threat, trainers can choose a mitigation strategy, based on a rapid reaction to prevent or minimise the threat, or as a last resort, to neutralise the attacker. In both cases, pre-deployment training is core to provide reactive skills ((EP06, EP07, EP10, EP12, EP13, EP14, EP15, EP16, EP19, EP21). This has led to improvements in self-defence, handgun use or disarming techniques (EP19), as well as self-first aid procedures (EP13). The participation in military operations has led to the inclusion of Force Protection Teams—known as “Guardian Angels”—for reactive and deterrence purposes (EP01, EP07, EP11, EP12, EP13, EP14, EP15, EP18, EP19, EP20, EP21, EP22, EP24). Despite their efficacy, interviewees asserted that an over-protective attitude could sometimes cause friction between “Guardian Angels”, Spanish trainers and local forces. To this point, veteran NCOs stated that a balance was needed between a trainer’s personal and professional experience (EP12, EP19). Both of these interviewees considered it key not to interpret random negligence caused by unexperienced trainers as a real threat.

“The first reaction isn’t going to come from the one who was hit. That’s because if we are on a firing line where trainees are shooting, and suddenly one of them shoots a trainer... That one isn’t going to react. He’s been shot, so the other trainer has to counteract. However, as when we are here training new recruits to Spanish Army, we can have a *rookie* who revolve with the rifle... I don’t shoot him directly. Because that can happen in Iraq too. If he is a *rookie*, and there were many there, it doesn’t mean that he is gonna shoot me. It means that he is inexperienced. Of course that maybe he revolves and not even shoot me. But not because he just revolve I have to shoot, I can’t (Laughs). So let’s see why he has revolved. It’s a risk you have to assume. Going to train local forces in Iraq is a risk, and we have to accept it (EP19, 2019).”

As EP19 and EP12 pointed out, personal experience gained through years belonging to a military organisation and participating in operations is key to risk assessment as it improves observation skills (EP12, EP16, EP20). It facilitates suspect identification (EP09, EP12, EP13, EP14, EP15, EP16) and helps manage potential threats which can leak information about deployments to terrorist organisations (EP11, EP12). Some of the interviewees referred directly to the counterinsurgency paradox (EP02, EP14, EP15), whereby excessive security measures are counterproductive as they can generate mistrust from local forces. In these cases, it is especially necessary to build relationships of trust with local forces. According to interviewees, that can be achieved by constant personal relations based on empathy and mutual understanding (EP09, EP11, EP12, EP13, EP14, EP15, EP19, EP20, EP21). Referring to the Spanish deployment in Iraq, some interviewees said that the friendliness between locals and Spaniards may have prevented some internal attacks (EP14, EP18, EP20, EP21). This is a highly subjective claim, but it could open up avenues for future research, given the lack of internal attacks during the deployment in the OIR.

Relevance of cultural dimensions

The main lesson learned from the experience in Iraq is the relevance of cultural dimensions to military operations. Firstly, the organizational culture of military units is key to defining how they learn from the experience (Kober, 2016; Kier, 1997; Murray, 2002). In the Spanish case, the Army has gradually developed an expeditionary culture that allows it to deploy anywhere and interact with other armies and local actors. This organizational culture has also allowed it to learn from the experience, improving procedures, tactics and techniques. This cultural dimension in military organisations not only allows lessons to be learned (Davidson, 2010; Nagl, 2002) and practices to be emulated (Horowitz, 2010), but also enables bottom-up adaptation in operations (Haaland, 2016; Catignani, 2014). The flexibility of an organizational culture shapes the learning process in any military, including the Spanish Army.

In the case of Iraq, the organizational culture of the units deployed facilitated military performance. According to the database, the first units deployed were the Spanish Legion and the Paratrooper Brigade. Both are elite units with a wide range of experience in military operations, which according to theory eases the adaptation to new cultural environments (USMC, 2018). Some of the interviewees had served in the Paratrooper Brigade before being in the Spanish Legion. They claimed that aside from some organizational culture differences, both units were clearly defined by their adaptability, expeditionary ethos and high-level training (EP17, EP20). In addition, the data identified Spanish mechanised and armoured units deployed, which provided specific training to Iraqi light-armoured units. The culture of mechanised units in Spain is defined by

their methodical training in the maintenance of equipment and coordination of unit members (EP22). In the case of Iraq, the deployment of different units made it possible to increase the number of Iraqi units generated by the Building Partnership Capability program.

Secondly, cultural awareness is a core aspect of expeditionary military operations. Spain has an extensive background in interacting with other cultures that dates back to its earliest military operations (Durán et al., 2016; Martínez et al., 2013). From its experience in Lebanon and Afghanistan, the Spanish Army has improved its cultural awareness, enabling it to interact in fragmented societies (Durán and Ávalos, 2013). The key aspect of this dimension is the value of cultural awareness when it comes to understanding the needs and demands of local actors. This has also been an issue in SFA, where a local military dimension can be identified while also taking into account the political needs of the local government (EP22). While cultural awareness was relevant in the Balkans for the interaction with local populations (Durán, 2009; 2010), and in Afghanistan and Lebanon for carrying out civil-military cooperation and providing humanitarian aid (Durán and Ávalos, 2013), in SFA it is directly related with the quality of training (EP13, EP14, EP22).

This research points to some cultural challenges in SFA that should be addressed, as happened in stabilisation and humanitarian operations (Durán and Ávalos, 2013). A recent research about Spanish Army deployment in Iraq has defined communicative and comprehension dimensions as the most relevant to military performance. The same qualitative dataset as the one used in this research revealed the use of interpreters and communication facilitators as the most efficient means to engage in complex conversations with local forces (EP06, EP07, EP09, EP11, EP13, EP14, EP21, EP22). Interviewees identified that working with interpreters was the most efficient way to communicate; with communication facilitators being limited to providing basic instructions. This was explained by differences in their knowledge of Arabic (EP22, EP09), as most of them spoke the Moroccan dialect instead of Iraqi Arabic.

The information provided by the interviewees underscored the small number of interpreters per trainer. In some cases, Spaniards had to communicate directly with local recruits. This was possible due to the pre-deployment training, which involved some basic Arabic vocabulary (EP13, EP14, EP21), as well as non-verbal communication skills. The first deployments in Iraq also had to constantly adapt and improvise, as happened with the Spanish Legion in 2015. As EP12 asserted when talking about his international experience, the most difficult operational phase is the first deployment. This is due to a lack of organizational knowledge about the full cycle of the mission, thus initially requiring constant readjustments from the military organisation.

Conclusions

This study shows the relevance of practical experience to organizational learning. As in a previous research about military change in the Spanish Army, international missions are found to be an essential source of learning and transformation. Like other missions, SFA operations offer a space for exchanging best practices, adapting procedures and improving the professional skills of the military deployed. In contrast with previous experiences in the Balkans or Middle East, this research provides an understanding of the key dimensions for improving the organizational knowledge of the Spanish Army.

International experience has taught the Spanish Army valuable lessons following its deployment in SFA operations. By training and advising, Spain is helping to improve local security standards in conflict areas such as Mali and Iraq. Quantitative data shows that one third of all missions conducted by the Spanish Army since 1991 are related to SFA activities. Operations have been conducted mainly in Afghanistan, Iraq and Africa, with the first ones being deployed under NATO mandates and those in Africa under EU command. Training activities have been focused on infantry, light armoured vehicles, artillery and special operations. The multifaceted nature of Spanish units has allowed them to develop a different kind of training, focusing on the specific needs of the host nation. The diversity of activities in SFA allows the deployment of different military units that would not otherwise be able to perform their specific tasks, as happened to the artillery units in counterinsurgency or stabilisation operations.

Lessons learned from the Spanish experience in Iraq also apply to other deployments abroad, such as in the Balkans or Middle East (Durán et al., 2016; Martínez et al., 2013). The two main dimensions identified by the interviews are the improvement of Force Protection, both by learning from allied countries such as the US or the UK and by the modification of procedures by the Spanish servicemen. It is vital to have experienced officers and NCOs deployed abroad, as their personal experience can help to improve the risk assessment in the interaction with local personnel. Related to the interaction with locals, communication has been identified as one relevant dimension that is successfully addressed through the organizational culture of the units deployed, but also thanks to pre-deployment training. This research shows similar results to previous studies about cultural interactions in international deployments in Lebanon and Afghanistan (Durán and Ávalos, 2013; Durán, 2010).

This case study points to relevant future research about cultural awareness in SFA in Iraq. An analysis is currently being conducted on how cultural training helps to overcome cultural frictions in training activities. It has been identified as one of the main lessons learned from the participation in the OIR, along with other cultural elements

related to the organizational ethos of the military units deployed. Another worthwhile future study would be an analysis of SFA deployments in Africa, for example Mali or the Central African Republic, to compare the main lessons learned from those experiences. Conclusions from this study can be extrapolated to other military contingents deployed in Iraq, such as Portuguese, Norwegian or American units, in order to determine their level of organizational learning from their participation in the Operation Inherent Resolve.

From a political science perspective, it would be interesting to analyse both the relevance and the scope of SFA operations. Data should be collected through interviews in order to understand political decision-makers' perceptions regarding the deployment of military trainers in Iraq or Africa. This future research would offer an understanding of the host nations' needs, the political outcomes from the cooperation, and any differences in criteria between the political parties in power. In terms of the legislative dimension, it would be worth analysing the different political positions in national governments regarding training missions, as well as the different criteria for SFA or other humanitarian or stabilisation operations. This specific case study pinpoints several lines of research that would be interesting to develop in the future, in an effort to understand national defence policies within the framework of international military operations.

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