Recipient Decision-Making on Military Assistance:
The Expansion of Iraqi Military Power through Security Cooperation, 1968-1990

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In mid-June 2014, Nuri al-Maliki, the Iraqi Prime Minister, asked the United States for air support to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an insurgent group that took over Mosul, the country's second-largest city.[1] In large part the success of the ISIL was the result of the diminutive size of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), which at the end of 2013 possessed about 336 main battle tanks, virtually no combat aircraft, and about two dozen armed helicopters.[2] However, the Iraqi military was not always this small. Between 1968 and 1990, under the then-ruling Baath Party the Iraqi armed forces grew from one of the smallest militaries in the Middle East to, by some estimates, the fourth-largest military in the world.[3] During the late 1960s and mid-1970s, the Iraqi armed forces struggled to maintain internal security.[4] Once that goal was achieved, the goals and ambitions of the Baathist regime expanded. The Iraqi armed forces grew from an estimated 82,000 military personnel, less than 500 main battle tanks, a handful of light armoured fighting vehicles, 215 aircraft, and 20 helicopters in 1968,[5] to about 1,000,000 active military personnel, 5,500 main battle tanks, 1,500 armoured infantry fighting vehicles, 689 combat aircraft, and 489 helicopters by

[1] Hassan Ghazwan and Phil Stewart, "Iraq asks United States for air support to counter rebels," *Reuters* (June 19, 2014) <uk.reuters.com/article/2014/06/18/uk-iraq-security-idUKKBN0EO0LF20140618.>
[2] Anthony Cordesman, Sam Khazai, and Daniel Dewit, *Shaping Iraq's Security Forces* (December 16, 2013), 9.
[3] Lester Brune, *America and the Iraqi crisis, 1990-1992: Origins and Aftermath* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1993), 46.
[4] For a history of the Iraqi armed forces between 1920 and 1968, see Ibrahim al-Marashi and Sammy Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical History* (London: Routledge, 2008), 13-103. For an account of Iraqi defence expenditures and military imports during the same period, see Timothy Hoyt, *Military Industry and Regional Defense Policy: India, Iraq and Israel* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 115-125.
[5] International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Military Balance 1968* (London: Brassey's, 1968), 43-44.

1990.[6] In 1990, Iraq had a larger arsenal of conventional weapons than each of its regional adversaries and competitors, including Egypt, Iran, Israel, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.[7]

The key question of this essay is: to what extent were Baghdad's military suppliers able to impact Iraqi decision-making between 1968 and 1990? I begin this paper by giving a background of my research topic. I then provide an overview of defence dependence theory, the dominant school of thought within present scholarship on foreign military assistance. I present the methodology I used to answer the question above and the findings of my research. I argue that Iraq did not follow the predictions of defence dependence theory: rather than being "manipulated" by foreign suppliers, Baathist leaders were themselves primarily responsible for the expansion of their armed forces in the period. My conclusion provides a short set of recommendations for policymakers looking to gain influence through security cooperation.

I. Research Background

The aforementioned defeat of the ISF to the ISIL in June 2014 stands in marked contrast to the performance of Iraq's armed forces just a few decades earlier. During the late 1980s, the Iraqi military engaged in a series of successful operations that ended the Iran-Iraq War and emerged victorious against Iran, a country over three times its size in terms of population, economic output, and territorial size.[8] Kenneth Pollack, a scholar who is generally critical of Iraqi and Arab military effectiveness, writes that between 1968 and 1990 "the Iraqi armed forces rose from incompetence to become probably the most potent military ever wielded by an Arab government."[9] Pollack also writes that during the late 1980s military forces

[6] IISS, *Military Balance 1990*, 105-106.
[7] IISS, *Military Balance 1990*, 97-122.
[8] Iran's population and GDP were roughly three times the same figure of Iraq in 1988. World Bank Data, *Iran and Iraq*, 1988.
[9] Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 552.

"penetrated Iranian defensive positions quickly and usually with a minimum of casualties... [they] benefited from excellent intelligence [and] moved crisply and efficiently."[10] The expansion of the Iraqi armed forces and their improved performance on the battlefield was paralleled by other demographic and socioeconomic changes happening in Iraqi society: between 1968 and 1988 its population doubled, its economic output grew by over fourteen times, and per capita income increased by nearly eight times.[11]

Neither the growth of the Iraqi armed forces nor its achievements on the battlefield could have been possible without external military assistance. Andrew Feinstein estimates that between 1980 and 1990 alone, Iraq spent roughly $50 billion (in constant 2011 dollars) on the import of conventional weapons and $15 billion on unconventional weapons.[12] Looking at the entire period between 1968 and 1990, only India imported more weapons than did Iraq.[13] Consequently, on a yearly average during the 1980s Iraqi spending on arms imports accounted for about one-half of the state's defence budget, which itself made up between one-quarter and one-half of Iraq's GDP.[14] As Andrew Pierre points out, during the 1970s and 1980s, "practically all of Iraq's arms [and] the technology used to manufacture weapons domestically came from abroad."[15] In addition to importing whole weapon systems, the Baathist leadership greatly expanded Iraq's indigenous weapons production capability by importing the know-how for manufacturing from abroad.[16] Among Arab states, the only country that came close to Iraq's military industry was Egypt. However, with a

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[10] Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 229-230.
[11] In 1968, Iraq's population was roughly 9 million, its GDP was $3.2 billion, and GDP per capita was $344. In 1988, its population, GDP, and per capita income were 17 million, $43 billion, and $2,604, respectively. *World Bank Figures*, 2014.
[12] Andrew Feinstein, *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011), 398.
[13] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *TIV of Arms Imports to the Top 50 Largest Importers, 1968-1990*. Data generated on July 24, 2013. SIPRI provides all of arms imports figures in 1990 constant dollar values.
[14] Hoyt, *Military Industry and Regional Defense Policy*, 130, table 4.5 and author's calculations.
[15] Andrew Pierre (editor), *Cascade of Arms* (Brookings Institution Press: Washington, DC: 1997), 3.
[16] For a good analysis of Iraq's military industry during this period, see aforementioned Hoyt, *Military Industry and Regional Defense Policy*, 115-162.

population roughly one third the size of Egypt, Iraq's military industrialisation relative to the size of its labour force was more impressive. In the Gulf, the only rival was Iran (about three-to-four times the size of Iraq), although the lack of access to foreign military technologies seriously hampered Iran's indigenous military industry during the 1980s.[17]

II. Methodology

Following the 2003 Gulf War, Baathist-era Iraqi government documents were captured by the U.S. military and transferred to the Saddam Hussein Collection (SHC) in Washington, D.C.[18] Today, the SHC houses nearly 60,000 pages of Iraqi government files (close to 1,000 Iraqi state records), all of which are dated between the late 1960s (when the Baath Party came to power) and April 9, 2003.[19] The archive provides an invaluable, first-hand look into how Iraqi leaders made national security decisions, including with regard to foreign military aid. It includes audio recordings of high-level meetings of Iraqi political and military officials, security cooperation agreements for the transfer of military equipment and cooperation in military production, intelligence reports detailing the military strength of Iraq and its adversaries, letters sent to foreign leaders (including on issues related to security cooperation), inter-ministerial correspondences, presidential records, personal correspondences, speeches by senior Iraqi officials, policy memos, and Iraqi military journals. Although some of these documents are available online, most of the captured Baathist documents are only accessible by going to the actual archive in Washington, DC. Over the past three years I have conducted archival research of the SHC, which heretofore

[17] Yazid Sayigh, *Arab Military Industry: Capability, Performance, and Impact* (London; Washington: Brassey's, 1992.)
[18] Michael Gordon, "Papers from Iraqi Archive Reveal Conspiratorial Mind-Set of Hussein," *New York Times.* (October 25, 2011), A12.
[19] For the official website of the archive, see *Conflict Records Research Centre*, National Defense University (NDU), Washington, D.C. < http://crrc.dodlive.mil/collections/sh/.>

have been examined by only a limited number of researchers,[20] in order to answer the key question posed above.

While some archival documents confirm previous suspicions about the Baathist strategy behind its policies, other documents call for a major modification of our previous understanding of Iraqi during this time. For example, in 2013 Ibrahim al-Marashi, a noted scholar of Iraqi military history, published a book chapter on the Iraqi military in which he noted that his analysis of newly "declassified Iraqi documents revealed a dramatically different picture of Iraqi political-military communications and strategy from 1980 to 2003" than the one presented prior to the opening of the SHC.[21] Meanwhile, analysing the SHC, Caitlin Talmadge, an analyst of the Iraqi armed forces, has concluded that the Iraqi military was "quite effective on the battlefield" during the 1980s as a result of the changes undertaken by the Iraqi government "with respect to promotions, training, command arrangements, and information management in the military."[22] In Talmadge's description, the Iraqi armed forces are presented as a much more flexible learning organization than the one described in Pollack's account of the Iraqi military as a largely ineffective and inflexible organisation with a few moments of brilliance.[23] My analysis of the SHC similarly revealed that the previous narrative concerning Iraq's relationship with its supplier is an incomplete one as it does not take into account the strategies and policies the Iraqi government pursued behind-the-scenes.

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[20] For examples of works based on the SHC, see Kevin Woods, David Palkki, Mark Stout, *The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant's Regime, 1978-2001* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Hal Brands and David Palkki, "'Conspiring Bastards': Saddam Hussein's Strategic View of the United States," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 36, Issue 3 (June 2012), 625-659; and Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Baath Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.) None of these works have focused on Iraq's military build-up.

[21] Ibrahim al-Marashi, "Lessons Learned: Civil-military relations during the Iran-Iraq War and their influence on the 1991 Gulf War and 2003 Iraq War," 17, in Nigel Ashton and Bryan Gibson (editors), *The Iran-Iraq War: New International Perspectives* (Routledge, Oxon: 2013.)

[22] Caitlin Talmadge, "The Puzzle of Personalist Performance: Iraqi Battlefield Effectiveness in the Iran-Iraq War," *Security Studies*, Volume 22, Issue 2, 2013, 180-221.

[23] For example, Pollack writes that "the Iraqis simply did not learn from one battle to the next. Each time they committed the same errors they had the last time." See Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 202. Pollack's book was published prior to the opening of the SHC.

III. Defence Dependence Theory

The concept of "power" holds a central place in international relations.[24] Hans Morgenthau argues that "international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power."[25] John Mearsheimer, a contemporary international relations theorist who argues that "power lies at the heart of international politics,"[26] provides the following definition: "A state's effective power is ultimately *a function of its military forces and how they compare with the military forces of rival states*."[27] Most states in the international system lack an indigenous military-industrial capability to generate their own military power. Consequently, in order to meet their demand for military power, they rely on importing arms and related services (training, maintenance, spare-parts, and so on) from abroad. As Ian Anthony points out, "All countries import some weapon systems, subsystems and components, a loss of access to which would be disruptive."[28]

Despite the important role it plays in international relations, the global trade in arms has only produced one comprehensive school of thought: defence dependence theory.[29] In essence, the theory argues that arms transfers "carry the potential for creating, or increasing, [a recipient's] dependence on its suppliers of arms."[30] Because of the recipient's dependence on military imports from the supplier, the theory predicts that weak recipient states are likely to become "clients" or "satellites" of their "patrons," serving the interests of their dominant military suppliers.[31] Although defence dependence theory remains the most comprehensive

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[24] Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz (editors), *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.)
[25] Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Thompson, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace [Brief Edition]* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 29.
[26] John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 12.
[27] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 55. Emphasis added.
[28] Ian Anthony, "The Conventional Arms Trade," in Pierre (editor), *Cascade of Arms*, 17. Emphasis added.
[29] For the most detailed analysis of defence dependence theory, see Christian Catrina, *Arms Transfers and Dependence* (Geneva: UNIDIR; New York: Taylor & Francis, 1988.)
[30] Catrina, *Arms Transfers and Dependence*, 1.
[31] Catrina, *Arms Transfers and Dependence*, 295-296. See also: Klaus Knorr, "Military Strength: Economic and Non-Economic Bases," in Klaus Knorr and Frank Trager (editors), *Economic Issues and National Security*

school of thought on military cooperation between states, it misses a crucial piece of the puzzle: the recipient state's perspective on arms transfers. In arguably the most comprehensive work on the subject, *Arms Transfers and Dependence*, Catrina writes that:

> A discussion of arms import policies is not possible in this report. Not only would too many states' arms imports have to be discussed, but no evidence exists that there are arms import policies comparable to the arms exports policies of the main suppliers. This is not to deny that many recipient governments devote close attention to aspects like reliability of the supply relationship, diversification, and acquisition of technology… but rarely are these considerations formulated in a consistent and comprehensive policy.[32]

IV. Selected Research Findings

During the Cold War many Western scholars and policymakers viewed Iraq through the lens of defence dependence theory. For example, throughout the early 1970s, in various memoranda written to U.S. President Richard Nixon, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger referred to Iraq as "the principal Soviet client in the Middle East."[33] Meanwhile, a 1973 telegram from the U.S. Embassy in Iran to the State Department noted that the Shah of Iran told American diplomats that Iraq is "a satellite country of the Soviet Union."[34] Amongst Western scholars Anne Kelly argued that arms transfers allowed the Soviet Union to exercise some political leverage over Iraqi foreign policy during the 1970s, most notably in pressuring Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait in 1973.[35] Similarly, Dennis Ross wrote that not only has Soviet military assistance provided Moscow "access to the Persian Gulf," but it also enabled the Kremlin "to manipulate local regimes [e.g. Iraq] with threats. In this sense, arms transfers

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(Lawrence, KS: National Security Education Program by the Regents Press of Kansas, 1977), 187, and Erik Pages, *Responding to Defense Dependence* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 8.

[32] Catrina, *Arms Transfers and Dependence*, 77. Emphasis added.

[33] See, for example, U.S. State Department Document 207, "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon," March 29, 1973, and Document 233, "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon," September 6, 1973.

[34] U.S. State Department Document 218, "Telegram From the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State," June 25, 1973.

[35] Kelly, "The Soviet Naval Presence," 11.

are an integral part of a general Soviet strategy of coercion designed to increase Soviet leverage over regional states,"[36] such as Iraq.

This narrative seemed to be partially vindicated as a result of some public statements released by the Baathist leadership. For example, in April 1976 Iraq's President Hasan al-Bakr published in Iraqi press a statement address to Soviet leaders which read,

> The Iraqi-Soviet friendship and cooperation treaty [of 1972] has played an important role in lifting the relations between Iraq and the Soviet Union to a higher level in the political, economic, cultural and social fields. *This has been of the utmost effect for the mutual benefit of the Iraqi and Soviet peoples and the further developing of their joint military relations*.[37]

Despite this rhetoric, documents at the SHC also illustrate that, privately, the Baathists' unofficial attitude towards Moscow was very different from the press statements it released. For example, the SHC contains a letter written in the same month (April 1976), from President al-Bakr to Saddam Hussein, Iraq's then-Vice President, relaying to Hussein that he had chastised the Soviet Ambassador in Baghdad for Moscow's inability to deliver the weapons and spare parts that it had promised to Iraq. In his account, al-Bakr bluntly told the Soviet Ambassador: "We had an arms deal with you - which we thank you for - but what is your excuse for not securing the spare parts? … [Why would you] withhold weapons from Iraq and supply Kuwait and Libya with the latest weapons? *What is the strategic intention of this policy? Is it intended to offend Iraq?*"[38] The SHC also contains a private letter from al-Bakr addressed to Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the USSR, sent in April 1976, which read that "among the critical points [i.e. difficulties] in the bilateral relations is the issue of armament… A vital aspect in our armament remains: the acquisition of main battle tanks... There is also another issue we have explained to your ambassador, and it has become

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[36] Dennis Ross, "Considering Soviet Threats to the Persian Gulf," International Security, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Fall, 1981), 172.

[37] The letter was signed by Iraq's President Hasan al-Bakr. FBIS-MEA-76-071, "Al-Bakr, Soviet Leaders Mark Treaty Anniversary," *Baghdad Domestic Service* (April 12, 1976.)

[38] SH-SPPC-D-000-705, "Al-Bakr's account of meeting with Soviet Ambassador as relayed to Saddam Hussein," April 1976. There is no evidence that Al-Bakr actually used that language in his meeting with the Soviet Ambassador.

an unusual problem for us, which is the issue of weapons spare parts."[39] Clearly, despite the image of close Iraqi-Soviet security cooperation which Baathist leaders cultivated in public, there were considerable strains in the relationship between the two countries.

More importantly, the letter above illustrates that Iraq was not simply a "pliable client state" that blindly followed its supplier. Rather than publicly criticising its supplier for failing to deliver arms on time (which would have risked hurting Iraq's relationship with its primary military supplier at the time), the Iraqi government took a proactive approach via private channels to securing timely deliveries of weapons and spare parts. Furthermore, the Soviet Union, which during the early 1970s accounted for over 95% of all Iraqi military imports, accounted for less than two-thirds of Baghdad's arms imports;[40] by the mid-1980s, the Soviet share dropped to less-than-half.[41] By diversifying the number of arms suppliers that it had and by building an indigenous military production program, the Baathist government was able to insulate itself from Moscow's attempt to influence Iraqi foreign, security, and domestic policies.

Between 1970 and 1974 the Baath Party acquiesced to the Kremlin's pressure to share power with the Soviet-backed Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).[42] However, once the Iraqi government had begun to diversify in the mid-1970s (particularly beginning in 1974-1975 when Baghdad signed numerous arms and nuclear cooperation deals with Paris),[43] it felt sufficiently comfortable to follow more independent policies. During the late 1970s, when Soviet support was no longer needed as much in quelling the largely defeated Kurdish insurgency, the Baathist regime increased its purging of

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[39] SH-SPPC-D-000-705, 1976. Emphasis added.
[40] Timmerman, *The Death Lobby*, 74.
[41] SIPRI, *Iraqi Military Imports*, 1980-1990.
[42] During the late 1960s Moscow provided military aid to Kurdish insurgents in northern Iraq. The insurgency nearly toppled the Iraqi government. Moscow agreed to stop their support of these parties only if the Baath Party allowed the ICP and KDP to join the Baath Party in ruling Iraq. After the Baath Party agreed to this power-sharing arrangement, Moscow ceased its support of Kurdish rebels and the insurgency stopped. See Timmerman, *The Death Lobby*, 34-35.
[43] See for example FBIS-MEA-75-013, "Arms Deal Concluded With Soviet Union, France," *Beirut An-Nahar* (January 19, 1975.)

Communist and Soviet-backed military officers and political officials.[44] By the late 1970s the Baath Party emerged as the ultimate arbiter of political and military decision-making in Iraq.

During the late 1970s Baghdad had begun to openly differ with Moscow on policies affecting Arab or Muslim countries, including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, and Yemen.[45] For example, Iraq gave "weapons, money, and support"[46] to Eritrean rebels who were fighting Soviet-backed Ethiopian forces. In addition, the Iraqi government took a different stance than Moscow regarding the political situation in North and South Yemen,[47] where Iraqi officials were covertly promoting Baathism.[48] Meanwhile, when Moscow imposed an arms embargo during the early 1980s to try to convince the Baathist regime to stop the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi government simply refused following the Kremlin'[49], finding other suppliers to import weapons and training from. Similarly, the United States, which was an indirect supporter of the Iraqi military during this period, tried to apply pressure on Baghdad to stop its weapons-of-mass-destruction program, sponsorship of international terrorism, and use of chemical weapons on Kurdish and Iranian targets. To all of these the Iraqi government objected.[50]

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[44] FBIS-MEA-78-112, "Al-Anba: Pro-Soviet Iraqi Army Officers Dismissed," *Doha QNA* (June 8, 1978.)
[45] Smolansky, *The USSR and Iraq*, 26.
[46] SH-SHTP-A-000-851, 1979.
[47] Smolansky, *The USSR and Iraq*, 27.
[48] SH-SPPC-D-000-795, "Two letters from Nizar Hamdun to Saddam Hussein regarding enemy plans against the regime and continued support to Yemen," August 1976; SH-SPPC-D-000-796, "Letter from Qasim Salam to Saddam Hussein regarding events in Yemen, including the Saudi-Yemeni conspiracy to kill Ba'ath Party members," October 19, 1978.
[49] See Timmerman, *Death Lobby*; Evan Resnick, "Strange Bedfellows: U.S Bargaining Behaviour with Allies of Convenience," *International Security*, Volume 35, Number 3 (MIT Press: Winter 2010/11) and Bruce Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982-1990* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1994).
[50] Resnick, "Strange Bedfellows" and Jentleson, *With Friends Like These*.

V. Conclusions

Given the fact that Iraq was the second-largest military importer in the world between 1968 and 1990, one would expect that suppliers had a high degree of influence over its policies, as defence dependence would predict. Nevertheless, by diversifying its military suppliers, investing in building an indigenous military industry, and convincing its suppliers that it was in their interest to support Baghdad militarily, Baathist leaders were able to follow largely independent external, security, and internal policies. Today security cooperation (which encompasses military equipping, advising, and training) continues to play an important role in international politics.[51] However, policymakers in supplier states who are hoping to gain influence over recipient decision-making in recipient states (e.g. Iraq, Egypt) through military aid must build more realistic expectations of what they can achieve.

The Iraqi case demonstrates that while in the short-term a recipient state may alter its policies to gain military aid, in the long-term it will adopt a number of counter-dependence strategies to minimise the influence of its suppliers. The latter policy may negate the supplier's original intent of exercising influence over a recipient vis-à-vis security cooperation. Consequently, American, British, and French policymakers must take into account that abstract visions, such as the promotion of Western-style democracy, cannot be accomplished without regard for domestic idiosyncrasies. In deciding whether to give military aid to Baghdad today, the stress must not be so much on whether the Maliki government can continue to be a truly democratic leader, but on whether he can stop the tide of Sunni extremist violence (in the form of ISIL), which poses a greater threat to stability in the Middle East than the lack of democratic regimes in the region.

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[51] For examples, see Paul Lewis and Spencer Ackerman, "Obama to send up to 300 'military advisers' to help Iraqi army repel Isis," *The Guardian* <www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/19/obama-100-special-forces-iraq> and Peter Baker, "A Coup? Or Something Else? $1.5 Billion in U.S. Aid is on the Line," *The New York Times* (July 4, 2013), A11.