



A NEW STABILITY POLICING PARADIGM FOR NATO



A NEW STABILITY POLICING PARADIGM FOR NATO.
POLICING, THE FORGOTTEN TOOL AGAINST
HYBRID/IRREGULAR WARFARE MANEUVERS.



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**A NEW STABILITY POLICING PARADIGM FOR NATO.
POLICING, THE FORGOTTEN TOOL AGAINST
HYBRID/IRREGULAR WARFARE MANEUVERS.**

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN

**NATO STABILITY POLICING
CENTRE of EXCELLENCE**



UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA



**WAR STUDIES
RESEARCH CENTRE**



**MILLI SAVUNMA
ÜNİVERSİTESİ**



HYBRID CENTRE of EXCELLENCE
The European Centre of Excellence
For Countering Hybrid Threats



A new Stability Policing paradigm for NATO.

Policing, the forgotten tool against Hybrid/Irregular Warfare manoeuvres - AA.VV.

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We are equally indebted to **Dr. Andrea Knapp**, whose meticulous harmonization of the diverse contributions ensured the academic rigor and coherence of the volume. Her ability to synthesize complex perspectives and maintain scholarly integrity across chapters was instrumental in elevating the book's quality and credibility. Dr Knapp's editorial precision and intellectual stewardship have left an indelible mark on this publication.

Special thanks are also due to **OR/9 (Italian Carabinieri) Luigi Bruzzese**, whose dedication to the editing process brought clarity, consistency, and professionalism to the final manuscript. His attention to detail and commitment to excellence helped transform a multifaceted draft into a polished and accessible resource for practitioners, scholars, and policymakers alike.

To these individuals, we offer our sincere appreciation. Their contributions reflect the spirit of collaboration and innovation that Stability Policing demands and exemplify the commitment to advancing NATO's strategic capabilities in the face of complex security challenges.

FOREWORDS



Col. t.ISSMI Luigi BRAMATI
NATO SPCoE's Director

In today's complex security environment, the hybrid threat has emerged as one of the most pervasive, persistent and multifaceted challenges to collective defense.

Blending conventional and unconventional tactics, hybrid warfare exploits vulnerabilities across political, economic, informational and societal domains. This complexity, with its cross-domain and multi-disciplinary nature, allows us to consider hybrid maneuvers among the most dangerous and at the same time "evanescent" threats, in particular when it comes to planning potential countermeasures, both from a societal, legal and purely military perspective.

This volume is intended to tackle the phenomenon from an unprecedented point of view, addressing the role of Policing – and of Stability Policing, as the natural interface with NATO doctrine – as an effective tool to counter hybrid threats, at both the tactical and the strategic level.

Yet I believe that the most relevant merit of this research lies in the fact that the supposed “evanescence” of the threat has been substantially debunked in its almost apocalyptic or mythological narrative (“everything is a hybrid threat”, is often repeated, like a bleak sort of mantra), since the core of the research itself is constituted by the collection and analysis of the real experiences of those experts and professionals who actually dealt vis-à-vis with hybrid maneuvers “on the field”. Hybrid threats then become not so indefinite, but real, detectable, and therefore with vulnerabilities that can be exploited and leveraged.

This might look like a minor aspect of this paper, but in reality this approach is the very foundation upon which the research team structured its arguments and its proposals: through the eyes of those who experienced the hybrid threat in their operational environment, this paper reveals unexpected parallelisms between the policing and counter-hybrid worlds, for example highlighting surprising similarities between the hybrid warfare tactics and the modus operandi of another dangerous and subtle phenomenon that is mafia-type organized crime.

These fact-based observations give substance to the findings and proposals that encompass the results of the research, but most of all they reveal the reality of the hybrid threats, that like organized crime are human phenomena, complex and multifaceted, dangerous and often unpredictable, but still operating within a finite landscape, and therefore beatable, as any human phenomenon.

From a Stability Policing perspective, it is clear that the limited understanding of policing as an effective tool against hybrid and irregular maneuvers represents a “*policing gap*” in the security architecture of the Alliance, and in this form the topic is explored: criminal investigations, law enforcement intelligence sharing, and in general the availability of policing skills in the hybrid warfare arena are thoroughly analyzed and assessed in their role in countering the hybrid threat.

Readers are encouraged to engage with this book as a catalyst for institutional innovation and to embrace a multidisciplinary, multi-

domain, and cross-cutting approach to this complex and evolving phenomenon.

When the Alliance and its community of experts will embrace the findings of this research, and transform it into a new understanding of policing as the no-more-forgotten tool in countering the hybrid threat, they will find Stability Policing ready to support, with consolidated and actionable practices and principles, once again faithful to its more-than-decennial mission of being the bridging factor between incontiguous cognitive and operational domains.

The NATO Stability Policing Centre of Excellence extends its sincere gratitude to the Hybrid COE of Helsinki, the University *Alma Mater Studiorum* of Bologna, the National Defence Universities of Türkiye and the Netherlands Defence Academy for their fundamental contribution to this research: their cooperation has deeply shaped this report, broadening the research spectrum with diverse perspectives and essential additional operational insight.



Colonel (GS) Konstantin BELLINI
Director, CoI on Strategy and Defence

The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats

As the security landscape evolves, the convergence of Hybrid Threats - incorporating all kinds of capabilities - presents a complex challenge that demands a unified response. When hybrid threats are aligned and put into a common operational design to support an aggressive strategy, it turns into Hybrid Warfare.

The characteristics of Hybrid Warfare consists of multiple actions taken across several societal domains. These actions are conducted with malign intent and following a long-term strategy. They are conducted by an authoritarian regime targeting democratic statehoods and their societies. As such, hybrid attacks target the underlying foundations of democracies and their inherent vulnerabilities. In exploitation of our “grey zone” between war and peace, these actions may include military means, but mostly happen below the threshold of armed conflict, exploiting this space under the edge of legal, political, and societal reactions.

From turning the tide of war today, to reliable European deterrence tomorrow, we have to connect the key strategic theatres, by limiting the opponent’s ability to maneuver and to seek a “weak link” for an initial strike. Our opponent’s objective is to create a constant threat on multiple fronts, stretching NATO’s resources, sowing indecision, and opening

“windows of opportunity” for rapid, limited aggression. Therefore, we must change the opponent’s strategic calculus, significantly increase the expected costs of aggression and reduce the likelihood of achieving desired benefits.

Restricting an opponent’s freedom of action and ensuring the freedom of action of allies, the management of the subthreshold warfare and deterrence of armed aggression is a key element for strengthening our resilience and opens the way for a credible deterrence.

To address this, a group of dedicated experts ranging from academia to practitioners contributed to set the basis of a common understanding of these threats in relation to stability policing, identifying key areas for a comprehensive counter approach, and finally, based on the results, establishing a foundation contributing to our resilience.

In the light of collective response this comprehensive study provides a baseline to understand the contribution NATO’s stability policing capabilities can provide.

Ministries of Defence, Armed Forces, Ministries of Foreign Affairs, defence technology and innovation bodies, and other entities responsible for the formation and implementation of military-political strategies are encouraged to draw conclusions from this study, which is based on thorough research, to implement what security policing can provide to support our collective defence.

The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats is highly delighted for the possibility to contribute to the effort made by NATO Stability Policing Centre of Excellence, the University of Bologna, the National Defence University of Türkiye and the Netherlands Defence Academy.



Mr. Gabriele Cascone
Head, Counter-terrorism Section Operations Division
NATO Headquarters

The relevance of this study is in the fact that it sits at the intersection between a rapidly changing threat landscape and a crucial, though unfortunately often overlooked, capability. Stability Policing offers complementary, innovative and scalable solutions, which help to optimize the use of the military instrument into the remit of policing and legal operations.

As NATO's competitors expand their activities into other domains and adopt a range of diversified tools to obtain military objectives, the Alliance should make use of readily available capabilities that can counter these adversaries and enemies effectively.

I believe that Stability Policing provides NATO with a capability that it can use to counter hybrid threats emerging in the grey zone, below the threshold of conflict.

In my position, I am particularly looking at terrorism as part of a wide range of asymmetric threats, and how it increasingly relates to hybrid warfare.

There are notable differences between hybrid threats and terrorism, especially regarding such factors as scope, attribution and motivation. Yet, today's security and operational environments require that we pay

closer attention to their interlinkage, at both the strategic and operational levels.

As state and non-state actors use increasingly similar techniques, tactics and procedures, we can only benefit from applying many of the lessons learned and capabilities from the fight against terrorism to countering hybrid, as well as conventional threats.

One overlap lies in the fact that both hybrid and asymmetric threats such as terrorism are extremely difficult to counter with military means alone. They challenge traditional defense paradigms and exploit grey zones and uncertainty.

While military assets are helpful, they may turn out to be insufficient on their own. Therefore, an integrated, whole-of-government approach is crucial to address either of these threats effectively. As a political-military Alliance, this point is especially important for us at NATO to acknowledge.

Although stability policing might be conducted by a wide range of military forces, it requires a civil-oriented mindset, a specific approach to meet the needs and expectations of the civil population, and the experience in policing civilians.

This is why I truly believe that, due to its unique nature and purpose, stability policing should be an essential part of this interagency approach to tackle hybrid warfare.

1. INTRODUCTION

COL. LUIGI BRAMATI, TEN. COL. MICHELE APOLLO

NATO's Stability Policing doctrine enables the Alliance to intervene across the full spectrum of conflicts¹ by temporarily replacing or reinforcing host-nation policing capabilities, as a key factor in the stabilization of the area of interest.

Irregular Warfare is defined as a “*struggle among state and non-state actors to influence population and affect legitimacy. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary power, influence and will*”².

According to the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE), “Hybrid Warfare” can be identified by four main characteristics. First, it involves coordinated actions orchestrated across multiple societal domains (political, economic, cyber, informational, military, diplomatic, etc.). Second, these actions are executed with malign intent and guided by a long-term strategic outlook. Third, they are carried out by an authoritarian regime targeting a democratic state and society; as such, hybrid activities strike at the core of democratic foundations and exploit inherent vulnerabilities, such as freedom of expression or acts to

¹ Stability Policing doctrine is currently under revision, with the aim of aligning its content to the concept of the “*continuum of competition.*” As defined in the Allied Joint Doctrine (AJP-01), the “*continuum of competition*” is a model illustrating how attitudes and behaviors shape international relations. It identifies four types of relationship between states or groups: *cooperation, rivalry, confrontation* and *armed conflict*. Stability Policing is applicable *throughout the whole continuum of competition*, including asymmetric and non-conventional forms of confrontation such as hybrid warfare. Indeed, a crisis generating instability may be provoked/determined by a malign actor—potentially a competitor—through maneuvers designed to achieve objectives consistent with any phase of the continuum. This evolution in the understanding of Stability Policing was mandated by the NATO Military Committee through a dedicated *doctrine tasker* issued on 18 March 2025, #NSO(JOINT)0384(2025)LO/2616.

² IW annex to US National Defense Strategy, 2020

depart societal domains from each other. Fourth, they are implemented in the “grey zones” between war and peace. Although they may include military tools, they remain below the threshold of the armed conflict and leverage on legal, political, and societal ambiguities³.

The Hybrid CoE further notes that *hybrid warfare* can be differentiated from *irregular warfare* by the different scopes of actions classified under each term. The nature of hybrid warfare is broader, as it encapsulates attacks on the decision-making process and utilizes leaders as targets. On the other hand, irregular warfare focuses on population-centered attacks⁴.

In Europe, given the strong traditional divide between internal and external security, the use of “warfare” terminology risks being excluded from descriptions of domestic security challenges, thereby limiting the applicability of counter-hybrid warfare measures if viewed solely through a military lens. For this reason, the term “hybrid threats” is more commonly used within the European Union.

According to Center for Strategic and International Studies, “both [Russian] systems of economic and political capture rely on corruption”⁵, often linked to local and transnational organized crime (see ICIJ, Organized Crime and Corruption Project).

The *Center on Irregular Warfare & Armed Groups* also notes that the wording *Irregular Warfare* encompasses phenomena “historically referred to as “insurgency, terrorism, and counterterrorism”, all relying on

³ For more information on hybrid threats and the Hybrid CoE’s hybrid threat model, see “*Hybrid Threats as a Concept*,” Hybrid CoE. <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/>, or alternatively “*Hybrid Threats: a Comprehensive Resilience Ecosystem*” by Aho A. et al, Hybrid CoE, April 2023.

⁴ “*The conceptualization of Irregular Warfare in Europe*”, by Dr. Sandor Fabian and Gabrielle Kennedy, ed. by the Irregular Warfare Center, ed. 2023, pp. 14-15

⁵ The Kremlin Playbook, CSIS, 2016

“asymmetrical combat approaches used in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and willingness to fight”.

Likewise, extensive literature has highlighted strong connections between terrorist organizations and organized crime at both local and international levels (*ex multis*: UN SC res. 2482/2019).

It therefore emerges that many of the tools and methods associated with Irregular Warfare - considered in this study as a sub-category of Hybrid Warfare - fall squarely within the remit of state internal security institutions. Law enforcement agencies play a major role, particularly in investigative and law-enforcement intelligence domains, though not exclusively.

Stability Policing postulates the relevance of effective policing - assessed through the identification of a “*policing gap*” - as a requirement for stabilizing an area of interest. Under this framework, an internal security system that is sufficiently professionalized and prepared to confront the diverse threats posed by Irregular and Hybrid Warfare constitutes a genuine capability for countering such challenges in a *multi-domain* environment and can also play an *early-warning* role for the entire Alliance.

From this standpoint, it becomes theoretically possible to envisage a NATO Stability Policing mission - even potentially conducted within NATO territory - designed to “reinforce” local security forces through high-level, highly specialized training and education, or, if required, to temporarily “replace” specific local security units with internationally provided investigative and law-enforcement intelligence capabilities. Such assets would be dedicated to detecting and countering ongoing Hybrid or Irregular Warfare activities, possibly operating alongside a conventional multinational military presence (for example, the deployment of a NATO deterrence force) within a *multi-domain* framework.

Adopting such an approach would require a fundamental shift in how the relevance of Stability Policing is understood within NATO operations, as well as a redefinition of its scope of application together with relevant doctrinal developments.

Therefore, this research will try to examine the area of interaction between policing capabilities and hybrid warfare, with a particular focus on the inherently “human-centric” nature of hybrid maneuvers and the equally human-centric logic that underpins the policing approach to security threats.

More specifically, this study investigates the potential effectiveness - below the threshold of Article 5 operations - of international support to local law-enforcement agencies from a counter-hybrid warfare perspective.

The broader research objective is to outline the reasonable boundaries inside which a local internal security system can operate effectively, to constitute a credible factor of *awareness, readiness, and resilience* against hybrid threats. On that basis, this study considers the applicability of NATO Stability Policing definitions and parameters to address a hypothetical “policing gap” (or, more broadly, a “*security gap*”⁶) in the context of hybrid/irregular warfare.

⁶ The “Security Gap” is identified as the absence of adequate security resulting from a gap in the policing performance of Host Nation Law Enforcement Agencies (HNLEAs) and of any International Forces that may be operating in the area. The “*Policing Gap*” is defined as “*the lack of indigenous police capability to provide a Safe and Secure Environment (SASE), public security and the Rule of Law (ROL). [...] Stability policing is intended to close the policing gap*”. NATO Allied Joint Publication AJP-3.22 “*Allied Joint Doctrine for Stability Policing*”.

An interdisciplinary methodology was required to implement this investigation, as no single field of expertise can adequately address the topic and its social, legal, and operational implications.

1.a Theoretical Premise: Selected Definitions of Hybrid and Irregular Warfare

The evolving landscape of contemporary warfare is characterized by multidimensionality and adaptation thus requiring a reassessment of traditional distinctions between war and peace, along with their associated legal frameworks, military doctrines, and strategic concepts. The terms *hybrid warfare* and *irregular warfare* have gained significant relevance in current discussions on international security, particularly in relation to asymmetric conflicts, state-sponsored proxy wars, and the evolving nature of global threats. Yet, despite their frequent use, these concepts often lack precise and universally accepted definitions, resulting in analytical ambiguity. Although interchangeably used in public discourse, the two concepts originate from distinct theoretical traditions and carry different strategic, operational, and tactical implications. Without a shared conceptual foundation, any comparative analysis, doctrinal development, and strategic planning would risk inconsistencies and misalignment. Furthermore, the conceptual landscape surrounding *Hybrid Warfare/Threats* (HW/Ts) and *Irregular Warfare/Threats* (IW/Ts) evolved considerably since 2006. Various definitions emerged over time⁷,

⁷ Mansoor (Mansoor P.R. -2012- *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, p.2) defined HW/Ts as “*a conflict involving a combination of conventional military forces and irregulars (guerrillas, insurgents, and terrorists), which could include both state and non-state actors, aimed at achieving a common political purpose*”, while the USMC/USSOCOM defined the IW/Ts as “*a means to undermine the legitimacy of a political authority [through] indirect approaches and non-conventional means to defeat an enemy by subversion, attrition, or exhaustion rather than direct military confrontation.*” It employs “*the full range of military*

mirroring changes in strategic thinking and the growing complexity of modern conflict environments⁸. Their relevance has also expanded alongside technological developments that position both concepts at the center of the modern multi-domain battlespace. For these reasons, it was essential for the research team to conduct a comprehensive review of existing definitions to clearly distinguish between *hybrid* and *irregular warfare* before advancing further in the study.

NATO's definitions provide an essential starting point for this discussion. Despite differences in terminology, *hybrid* and *irregular warfare* remain conceptually and operationally interlinked⁹. NATO concentrated most of its definitional work on *hybrid warfare*, progressively nuancing its understanding of the concept. The earliest description framed hybrid warfare as a realm where “a range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures are employed in a highly integrated design”¹⁰. An elaboration defined hybrid warfare as a “broad, complex, and adaptive combination of conventional and non-conventional means, and overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures...

and non-military capabilities to gain asymmetric advantages that erode an adversary's power, influence and will until he is neutralized or defeated. IW is the preferred approach of insurgents, terrorists, and others who lack substantial conventional warfare capability as well as of nation-states who must mask their actions or whose national troops use IW in fighting irregular warriors”.

⁸ Hoffman (2007, p.29) defines the HW/T as “*threats that incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder, conducted by both sides and a variety of non-state actors*”.

⁹ Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*.

¹⁰ Wales NATO Summit Declaration, issued by the Head of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, 5 Sept 2014, para.13.

employed in an integrated manner by state and non-state actors to achieve their objectives”¹¹.

In parallel, NATO has characterized *hybrid threats* as “a type of threat that combines conventional, irregular, and asymmetric activities in time and space”¹². The meaning of *conventional, irregular, and asymmetric activities* becomes clear when viewed through their respective NATO-approved definitions reported below:

- *Conventional warfare* refers to “warfare conducted only using conventional weapons”¹³;
- *Irregular warfare* encompasses activities involving “the use of threat or force by irregular forces, groups, or individuals, frequently ideologically or criminally motivated, to effect or prevent change as a challenge to governance and authority”¹⁴;
- *Asymmetric threats* are threats “emanating from the potential use of dissimilar means or methods to circumvent or negate an opponent’s strengths while exploiting his weaknesses to obtain a disproportionate result”¹⁵.

Beyond NATO doctrine, academic and policy literature has also contributed definitions of hybrid and irregular warfare. While this study

¹¹ Warsaw NATO Summit Communiqué, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016, para.72.

¹² NATO-approved definition, 12 April 2018. Allied Administrative Publication AAP-06 “*NATO Glossary of terms and definitions*”, ed. 2020

¹³ NATO-approved definition, December 2015. Allied Administrative Publication AAP-06 “*NATO Glossary of terms and definitions*”, ed. 2020

¹⁴ NATO-approved definition, August 2011. Allied Administrative Publication AAP-06 “*NATO Glossary of terms and definitions*”, ed. 2020

¹⁵ NATO approved definition from October 2013.

does not pursue a systematic comparison of the various definitions, it draws upon their shared conceptual foundations to establish broad working definitions for analytical purposes.

Fundamentally, both forms of warfare involve the coordinated use of conventional and unconventional instruments¹⁶, deployed across multiple domains and employed by state and non-state actors alike.

Their strategic intent is to degrade, disrupt, or ultimately dismantle the political authority and institutional resilience of targeted nations (a process often described as *government erosion*) both below and above the conventional thresholds of armed conflict. Their operational characteristics further complicate the assignment of legal responsibility and the formulation of proportionate institutional responses.

As noted earlier, this research has adopted working definitions grounded in the interpretation proposed by the Hybrid CoE in Helsinki and referenced by the Irregular Warfare Center in Arlington (VA, USA)¹⁷. This perspective differentiates hybrid and irregular warfare primarily according to their targets, rather than by their instruments.

In particular, the Hybrid CoE observed that the nature of hybrid warfare is broader because it encapsulates attacks on decision-making processes and uses leaders as targets.

On the other hand, irregular warfare focuses on population-centered attacks. The incentive to use hybrid warfare stems primarily from an objective to degrade or disturb democratic societies. Because of this asymmetric connotation of hybrid warfare, and thus irregular warfare,

¹⁶ Glenn, “*Thoughts on hybrid warfare*”.

¹⁷ “*The conceptualization of Irregular Warfare in Europe*”, by Dr. Sandor Fabian and Gabrielle Kennedy, ed. by the Irregular Warfare Center, ed. 2023, pp. 14-15

[...] democracies do not typically use hybrid warfare outside of the scope of an acute conflict”.

The conceptual distinction between hybrid and irregular warfare adopted for this research - selected among several available definitions - is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Conceptual distinction between hybrid and irregular warfare

Dimension	Hybrid Warfare (HW)	Irregular Warfare (IW)
Definition	Coordinated harmful activities conducted with malign intent to weaken a target state or society through diverse instruments, remaining below the threshold of armed conflict.	Employment of military-related tools below the level of open conventional confrontation.
Primary Objective	Strategic disruption, influence and destabilization of a democratic society by attacking its core democratic structures, including key decision-making processes (DMPs).	Undermining of the political, social, and psychological resilience of an adversary by focusing operations on population.
Actors Involved	A mix of state and non-state actors (e.g., media entities, economic players, armed forces, proxy groups, intelligence agencies, and criminal networks).	Predominantly non-state actors (e.g., insurgents, terrorists, guerrilla forces) as well as state-sponsored proxy groups.
Tactics / Methods	Information manipulation, cyberattacks, economic coercion, covert political interference, coercive diplomacy, and calibrated threats of military force.	Guerrilla tactics, insurgent operations, terrorism, psychological actions, and campaigns centered on influencing civilian populations.
Military Component	May integrate both conventional military operations and irregular methods within a coordinated campaign.	Avoid direct conventional confrontation, relying instead on asymmetric methods and subversive activities.

Focus	Multi-domain engagement (political, military, cyber, informational, economic, and societal).	Population-centric efforts aimed at legitimacy, public perception, and influence over civilian environments.
Strategic Integration	High: cross-domain coordination and synchronization of instruments are central features.	Moderate: operations tend to be decentralized, though they may receive support from state actors.
Non-military Tools	Extensive and central to the overall strategy (cyber tools, media influence, lawfare, economic levers).	Secondary but relevant (information operations, psychological warfare, propaganda).
Legal / Normative Challenge	High: exploits gaps in international law and leverages normative ambiguity.	Moderate to high: often violates conflict law, complicating response and legal accountability.
Examples	Russia's operations in Ukraine (2014–2022); Hezbollah in Lebanon; Chinese grey-zone activities; Russian disinformation and disruption campaigns across Europe.	Taliban in Afghanistan; ISIS in Syria; FARC in Colombia; Viet Cong in Vietnam.
Counter-strategy	Whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches with integrated civil–military coordination.	Population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN), psychological operations (PSY-OPS), governance support, and kinetic actions.
Relationship	Incorporates irregular warfare as one of its component tools.	Often functions as an element within broader hybrid strategies in contemporary conflicts.

Hybrid warfare refers to hostile activities deliberately designed and executed with malign intent to weaken a democratic state or institution through a diverse set of instruments. It combines conventional and irregular means with non-military tools - such as cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion - within coordinated campaigns aimed at destabilizing or influencing the target.

Typical manifestations include cyberattacks, manipulation of information, economic pressure, covert political interference, coercive

diplomacy, and calibrated threats of military force¹⁸. Hybrid warfare spans over a broad spectrum of actions serving different strategic purposes and ranging from low-level interference to lethal violence. It frequently targets political leaders and key decision-making processes (DMPs). The concept gained particular prominence in the context of the 2006 Hezbollah–Israel conflict and of Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, where both state and non-state actors combined various capabilities while staying below the threshold of open war¹⁹. At the same time, elements from the hybrid toolkit are also visibly employed during armed conflicts, such as Russia’s misinformation operations in the context of the invasion of Ukraine.

Hybrid warfare frequently blurs the boundaries between peace and conflict, contributing to the erosion of the rule-based international order. Its theoretical foundation lies in the blending of multiple forms of warfare within a single operational space, exploiting legal, ethical, and operational grey zones.

Irregular warfare, which has been clearly defined, is centred on the confrontation between state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over a target population²⁰. Traditionally tied to counter-insurgency theory and guerrilla tactics, irregular warfare relies on

¹⁸ Mumford and Carlucci (2022, on European Journal of International Security, 2023, p.198) defined hybrid warfare as “*the synchronized use of multiple instruments of power tailored to specific vulnerabilities across the full spectrum of societal functions to achieve synergistic effects*”.

¹⁹ Fridman (2018, p.7) described the Russian strategy as “*to avoid the traditional battlefield with the aim of destroying the adversary via a mixture of ideological, informational, financial, political and economic methods, ultimately leading to socio-cultural disintegration and, eventually, social collapse*”.

²⁰ The United States Department of Defense (2016, US DoD Joint Publication 1-02, p.119) defines irregular warfare as “*a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population*”.

asymmetric methods - such as hit-and-run attacks, sabotage, insurgency, and terrorism - intended to offset a state adversary's conventional superiority and *directly target the population* through population-centered actions.

It is fundamentally rooted in the asymmetries of power and resources, typically involving non-state actors challenging state authority. As a result, irregular warfare is primarily asymmetric, population-centric, and legitimacy-focused, aiming to undermine governance structures and win the hearts and minds of populations

Building on these working definitions, it clearly emerges that contemporary conflicts increasingly blur the boundaries between war and peace, due to the expanding range of tactics and strategies now employed. Both hybrid and irregular warfare challenge traditional defense paradigms by undermining broader security environments and exploiting normative grey zones, which frequently render conventional military responses insufficient on their own.

Consequently, countering these threats requires a comprehensive whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach that integrates cross-domain responses and incorporates population-focused strategies.

The selected definition also underscores a critical parameter of hybrid and irregular warfare: the involvement of the civilian population, either as direct targets or as leverage for achieving operational and strategic objectives.

In this regard, people effectively become a conceptual battlespace for hybrid and irregular threats - one that is also shared by the security forces tasked with protecting and defending that same population. From this perspective, and as a premise for formulating the research questions, policing potentially emerges as an essential tool for effectively countering

hybrid and irregular maneuvers and mitigating their impacts²¹. The restoration of a safe and secure environment must therefore be proportional to the nature and intensity of the threat and will necessarily vary according to the specific type of warfare confronted.

1.b Research Questions

After clarifying the theoretical foundations of the conceptual framework guiding this study, the research team formulated a series of questions to investigate how operational mandates, legal frameworks, and socio-geopolitical dynamics are shaping the broader - i.e., not solely strategic - role of law enforcement and internal security agencies within the specific context of *hybrid* and *irregular warfare*:

1. Do law enforcement/internal security agencies function as instruments for enhancing awareness of irregular/hybrid warfare activities, or do they inadvertently impede effective responses? In what ways?
2. Which capabilities are essential for law enforcement/internal security agencies to effectively counter irregular and hybrid warfare maneuvers? Which of these capabilities is most critical from a counter-IW/HW perspective?
3. What legal considerations must law enforcement/internal security agencies take into account when operating in an irregular/hybrid warfare environment?
4. What practical means and methods could enhance the efficiency of law enforcement/internal security agencies in countering irregular/hybrid threats?

²¹ See Chapter 5 on the discussion of the interview findings.

5. Is it feasible to develop a tool capable of measuring the policing capability gap or the broader security gap from a counter-irregular/hybrid warfare perspective?
6. How might the concept of a support/policing capacity-building mission be integrated into NATO's broader efforts to strengthen the Alliance's layered resilience? If viable, under which doctrinal framework should this be situated?

Given the increasingly blurred boundaries between internal and external threats in hybrid environments - where state and non-state actors combine conventional and unconventional methods - it becomes essential to determine whether law enforcement/internal security agencies can operate as strategic assets or create operational constraints. These agencies are positioned at the frontline of state responses, especially in urban environments where hybrid actors may exploit social fragmentation, political instability or institutional weakness.

The research questions were designed to identify the specific capabilities - such as intelligence integration, civil-military coordination, rapid deployment and community engagement - that enable law enforcement bodies to provide effective contrast to non-traditional, asymmetric threats effectively. Accordingly, the survey assessed the legal and regulatory frameworks, including international law, human rights obligations and national emergency legislation, that either empower or restrict the action of these agencies in hybrid and irregular warfare contexts. The study also has provided an empirical foundation for institutional reform and capability development. For this purpose, it examined if the creation analytical tools to measure police or broader security gaps is feasible. Furthermore, the potential evolution of support or police capacity-building missions within NATO's broader layered resilience framework reflects the growing recognition that successful counter-hybrid and counter-irregular strategies require not only military preparedness but

also strong civil-security structures. This aligns the research with NATO's evolving doctrinal emphasis on comprehensive defense and societal resilience²². Taken together, these questions generate multidimensional insights into the role of internal security actors in contemporary conflicts, offering practical guidance for policymakers, defense planners and practitioners operating in an increasingly complex security environment.

Of the six initial questions, two of them provided only partial answers. However, given the complexity of the topic, this survey constituted the groundwork for deeper future analysis, Concerning Question 3 - relating to the legal considerations surrounding the role of law enforcement capabilities in irregular/hybrid warfare - clear conclusions were impeded by the inherent fragmentation of national legislations. This limited the analysis to identifying possible directions for legislative reforms rather than detailing specific legal instruments. Although legal instruments such as international humanitarian law and international human right law attempt to address the "grey zone" between open conflict and hybrid confrontation, law enforcement agencies often operate without clear mandates or legal authority when facing irregular/hybrid threats, unless explicitly covered by national criminal law. Additional factors further complicate the issue: overlapping jurisdictions, outdated national doctrines and legal frameworks, political sensitivities regarding the militarization of policing, and the secrecy about intelligence operations. Consequently, there is an urgent need for interdisciplinary legal scholarship and updated legal doctrines to clarify the role, authorities and capabilities of law enforcement within the irregular and hybrid warfare environment.

Regarding Question 6 - which addresses the potential inclusion of support/police capability missions within the Alliance's broader effort to

²² Ref.: NATO "*Warfighting Capstone Concept*" (2021). Also see NATO Resilience Baseline Requirements.

strengthen layered resilience under NATO's doctrinal framework - it should be noted that NATO's growing emphasis on layered resilience reflects the increasing complexity of contemporary security threats. However, the Alliance currently lacks a defined doctrinal structure for integrating support or police capabilities into this resilience architecture. This identified gap arises from NATO's original design as a military alliance, which assigns responsibility for internal security and broader civilian capacities to the individual Allies.

Although precedents exist - such as the deployment of Gendarmerie-Type Forces (GTF) like the Carabinieri in stabilization missions - these have been executed under *ad hoc* mandates. Since the Layered Resilience Concept is still under development, the answer to Question 6 is likely deemed to remain unanswered in the near term. Nonetheless, the findings of this report suggest that incorporating a police or general support capability would require substantial political consensus, legal clarity and doctrinal innovation, potentially involving mechanisms such as civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) or counter-hybrid support teams. Such integration remains politically sensitive and institutionally underdeveloped.

1.c Research Team Composition

The composition of the research team reflected the complexity of the project itself, bringing together expertise from academia, policing and the military. A core component of the team consisted of subject matter experts from the NATO Stability Policing Centre of Excellence (NATO SP CoE) in Vicenza (Italy), which acted as a promoter for this study. As one of NATO's thirty accredited Centers of Excellence, the NATO SP CoE supports Alliance efforts in the development of Stability Policing Doctrine, combining academic research, doctrinal proposals, training, education and lessons-learned activities. The Centre is led by Italy as the

framework nation, with eight additional Allies - the Czech Republic, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain and Türkiye - as sponsoring nations. The subject matter experts (SMEs) assigned to the research bring extensive police and military operational experience from various crisis theaters, supported by academic and practical expertise in domestic and international law.

The work of the NATO SP CoE was supported by four institutional partners. First, a significant contribution came from academics at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna - a leading academic institution that provided theoretical insights into irregular/hybrid warfare by integrating socio-political analysis of disinformation campaigns with technical innovations on cyber resilience. Second, the Netherlands Defence Academy in The Hague participated, contributing to Dutch and Allied capacity-building against irregular/hybrid threats through advanced officer education, doctrine development based on research, strategy-oriented collaboration and alignment with national resilience policies. Third, the research was co-authored by the Turkish National Defence University, which - together with the wider Turkish defense-academic ecosystem - supported this study of irregular/hybrid threats through academic analysis, structured workshops with public institutions and the integration of irregular/hybrid-threat doctrine into national security strategy. Its affiliated academics usually contribute to officer education, advise government bodies on irregular/hybrid risk mitigation and support the evolution of national resilience. Finally, the study benefited from the involvement of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE).

Among its broader commitments in this field, the Centre operationalizes the EU-NATO hybrid-threat agenda by serving as a strategic hub for

research, capacity-building, policy influence and coordination aimed at safeguarding democratic resilience.

The combined expertise within the research team spanned a wide range of thematic fields, including international and domestic law, rule of law systems, anthropology, history, political science, internal and external security, as well as United Nations doctrine, NATO doctrines and NATO Operational Planning.

Most importantly, the team brought together academic proficiency and extensive practical experience gained in multiple military and civilian stabilization missions conducted in crisis areas covering both conflict and post-conflict contexts.

The added value generated by bringing such diverse expertise to the project outweighed the complexities associated with coordinating a multidisciplinary group. These challenges were mitigated through proactive dialogue and a structured schedule of regular meetings - both in person and via online platforms. Ultimately, the findings of the study were deemed relevant and meaningful from all disciplinary perspectives represented in the team.

1.d Ethical Protocols and Scrutiny

One of the initial challenges faced by the research team was the need to secure ethical clearance for the study, especially considering the intention to conduct primary research involving human participants as key sources of information.

Because the team included members from both academic and non-academic institutions, obtaining a single unified ethical approval posed a substantial obstacle. As a result, the NATO SP CoE became the first

NATO-accredited entity to establish its own Ethical Research Board (ERB).

Issued by the Centre's Director as a permanent advisory working group, the NATO SP CoE ERB consists of independent academic experts not affiliated with the Centre and operates under dedicated terms of reference²³. The ERB reviews research proposals for ethical scrutiny based on the NATO Code of Conduct²⁴, the 2023 Code of Conduct for Research Integrity issued by the European Science Foundation (ESF) and All European Academies (ALLEA)²⁵, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, Regulation 2016/679), and all other applicable research standards²⁶.

In September 2024, the NATO SP CoE ERB was formally requested to evaluate the ethical protocol supporting the study according to its terms of reference. And, in its inaugural session in December 2024, the Board approved the research protocol and authorized the planned activities.

Given the specific legal considerations involved, all researchers retained full autonomy to decide whether to participate in primary data collection (e.g., administering questionnaires) or to contribute through literature review and secondary analysis instead.

This individual decision-making process was to comply with the regulations and guidance of each researcher's home institution,

²³ ERB was established in the Guidance no. 649/2024 NSPCOE – 107/3, issued by the NSPCOE Director on 12 September 2024

²⁴ Agreed by the North Atlantic Council on 18 December 2020.

²⁵ ALLEA (2023) The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity – Revised Edition 2023. Berlin.

²⁶ Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with respect to the processing of personal data and the free movement of such data, repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation).

particularly since ethical approval had been issued by an entity associated with a military organization such as the NATO SP CoE.

This approach effectively reduced the risk of inadvertently breaching internal institutional rules and ensured that each team member could contribute to the study within their respective mandates and constraints.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

COL. LUIGI BRAMATI, DR. ANDREA KNAPP, PROF. EMRAH ÖZDEMİR

2.a History of Stability Policing

The requirement for an enhanced policing capability first emerged during the Stabilization Force in Bosnia-Herzegovina (SFOR, 1996–2004). In 1997, Allied Command Europe (ACE) identified what became known as the “policing gap”²⁷. Following the Dayton Agreement, Bosnia-Herzegovina faced the dual challenge of preventing renewed violence while simultaneously combating organized crime, maintaining public order and providing a secure environment²⁸. The military posture of units deployed by international organizations - including NATO and the United Nations (UN) - combined with the limited capacity of local police forces and the absence of a clear responsibility chain, created a fragile situation in which no agency effectively addressed the Host Nation’s (HN) law enforcement and policing needs²⁹. Such conditions are widely recognized as fertile ground for hybrid and irregular threats³⁰. The policing gap was ultimately addressed through the establishment of the Multinational Specialized Unit (MSU), a regimental-level police unit capable of performing a wide range of policing and military functions across the full operational spectrum³¹.

²⁷ Friesendorf, “Insurgency and civilian policing: Organizational culture and German police assistance in Afghanistan”; Parish, “Paradigms of state-building: Comparing Bosnia and Kosovo”.

²⁸ Özdemir, “Stability Policing operations”.

²⁹ De Magistris and Bergonzini, “Stability Policing”.

³⁰ Miller, “Hybrid Warfare: Preparing for Future Conflict”.

³¹ Arcudi and Smith, “The European Gendarmerie Force: A solution in search of problems”; Friesendorf, “Gendarmeries in multinational operations”; Robinson et al., “Finding the Right Balance”.

The majority of the 300 deployed gendarmerie and military police personnel were Italian Carabinieri³².

Becoming operational in mid-1998, the MSU achieved notable results, including effective crowd management and the arrest of individuals connected to criminal networks³³. Owing to its lighter posture, flexibility and close interaction with civilian populations, the MSU became the SFOR's only dedicated policing asset capable of filling the policing vacuum in a hostile environment. It also supported the mission's military components through police-related activities³⁴.

Comparable units have since been deployed in numerous international missions. An MSU modeled on the Bosnia-Herzegovina experience was established in Kosovo³⁵, and gendarmerie-type formations were deployed under the NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan (NTM-A). The latter was mandated to support the Afghan National Police (ANP) “at the district level and below to increase operational capabilities and survivability”³⁶. Over a four-year period, more than 11,000 Afghan police personnel were trained across roughly 90 courses³⁷. Since then, similar policing concepts have been adopted by other international organizations such as the UN³⁸.

³² Pasqualini, “Tradition of the Italian Carabinieri corps in peace-keeping reconstruction missions from Crete to Sarajevo and Nassyria. Future task: Afghanistan, area of Herat”.

³³ Lyck, “Peace Operations and International Criminal Justice: Building Peace After Mass Atrocities”; Perito, “Where is the Lone Ranger When We Need Him?: America’s Search for a Postconflict Stability Force”.

³⁴ Colvin, “Choices for US contributions to NATO: Stability Policing in the age of multi-domain operations”; Höfer, “Countering hybrid threats through Stability Policing”.

³⁵ Hansen, “Civil-Military cooperation: The military, paramilitaries and civilian police in executive policing”.

³⁶ NATO, “NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan (NTM-A)”.

³⁷ Friesendorf, “Gendarmeries in multinational operations”.

³⁸ Durch et al., “Enhancing United Nations capacity to support post-conflict policing and rule of law”; Perito, “US police in peace and stability operations”; Pingeot, “The

Formed Police Units (FPUs) - cohesive teams tasked with maintaining public security - represented half of all police personnel in UN peacekeeping operations in 2011³⁹. Likewise, the European Gendarmerie Force (EUROGENDFOR) is currently supporting the European Union initiative at the Rafah Crossing Point by deploying a multinational contingent composed of French Gendarmerie, Italian Carabinieri and Spanish Guardia Civil personnel to assist its reopening, which is crucial for transferring injured civilians from Gaza for medical care⁴⁰ until completion of the first phase of the ceasefire. Additionally, EUROGENDFOR has recently been engaged in Ukraine to deliver Stability Policing training to law enforcement officers⁴¹ under the EU Advisory Mission (EUAM) Ukraine through specialized teams from the Portuguese Gendarmerie (Guarda Nacional Republicana) supported by selected experts from the Spanish Guardia Civil, the French Gendarmerie Nationale and the Lithuanian Public Security Service.

With its increasing deployment, the operational model of gendarmerie-type units conducting policing functions in international missions has become known as Stability Policing (SP). Although the deployment of police personnel to operational theaters is not unique to NATO, the terminology is formally defined and legally recognized only within the NATO framework. The 2016 Allied Joint Doctrine for Stability Policing defines SP as *“police-related activities intended to reinforce or temporarily replace the indigenous police in order to contribute to the restoration and/or*

multilateral production of global policing: UN peace operations as hubs for protest policing”.

³⁹ Hansen, “Policing the Peace: The Rise of United Nations Formed Police Units”.

⁴⁰ <https://eurogendfor.org/2025/02/03/eubam-rafah-deployment/>

⁴¹ <https://www.euam-ukraine.eu/news/support-in-action-stability-policing-training-for-ukrainian-law-enforcers/>

upholding of the public order and security, rule of law, and protection of human rights”⁴².

In practical terms, Stability Policing Units (SPUs) fulfill a dual function. First, they support Indigenous Police Forces (IPFs) through training, specialized mentoring and capacity-building activities. Second, where functional IPFs are absent, SPUs can temporarily assume policing duties to maintain public order, establish a safe and secure environment (SASE), enable governance and create the foundations for restoring local policing structures⁴³. This dual approach allows SPUs to adapt to a range of security conditions while keeping the ultimate objective firmly centered on locally led law enforcement. Like civil-military relations, SPUs expand NATO’s military toolkit beyond combat-related instruments by introducing a broader set of civilian-military capabilities designed to re-establish a safe and secure environment for the local population. The doctrine also clarifies that SP is conducted across the entire spectrum of conflict - now properly understood as the *continuum of competition*, encompassing *cooperation, rivalry, confrontation and armed conflict*⁴⁴.

⁴² NATO, “AJP-3.22 Allied Joint Doctrine for Stability Policing”.

⁴³ Borsari, “Stability Policing: The future of NATO crisis management”; De Magistris and Bergonzini, “Stability Policing”; den Boer, “When peace falls to pieces: Prospects for military policing in turbulent times”; Höfer, “Countering hybrid threats through Stability policing”; Özdemir, “Stability Policing operations”.

⁴⁴ Stability Policing doctrine is currently under revision, with the aim of aligning its content to the concept of the “*continuum of competition*.” As defined in the Allied Joint Doctrine (AJP-01), the “*continuum of competition*” is a model illustrating how attitudes and behaviors shape international relations. It identifies four types of relationship between states or groups: *cooperation, rivalry, confrontation and armed conflict*. Stability Policing is applicable *throughout the whole continuum of competition*, including asymmetric and non-conventional forms of confrontation such as hybrid warfare. Indeed, a crisis generating instability may be provoked/determined by a malign actor—potentially a competitor—through maneuvers designed to achieve objectives consistent with any phase of the continuum. This evolution in the understanding of Stability Policing was mandated by the

Despite these advantages, SP remains underdeveloped within NATO's broader institutional architecture⁴⁵. Drawing on the available literature, it can be argued that much of the existing scholarship on Stability Policing is authored by (former) practitioners who experienced ineffective SP implementation during their deployments⁴⁶.

Structural shortcomings in recognizing the critical role of policing have resulted in SPUs being underused, under-resourced and often integrated into mission structures with delay.

Many commanders lack familiarity with gendarmerie-type forces and therefore employ them as a backup force rather than assigning them proactive roles such as community-oriented policing⁴⁷.

Consequently, these units are seldom utilized to their full operational capacity and are frequently relegated to secondary tasks - such as static security duties - that do not leverage their full potential across the spectrum of the conflict. Inadequate tasking from military headquarters, weak coordination among international actors and limited command-and-control (C2) structures further restrict the effective employment of military police even in theaters where they are deployed⁴⁸.

Beyond these operational challenges, the primary source of insufficient recognition for gendarmerie-type contributions lies at the institutional level. Allies often provide SP contributions for NATO missions without adequate prior preparation, as policing remains undervalued within the

NATO Military Committee through a dedicated *doctrine tasker* issued on 18 March 2025, #NSO(JOINT)0384(2025)LO/2616.

⁴⁵ De Magistris and Bergonzini, "Stability Policing".

⁴⁷ Perito, "Where is the Lone Ranger When We Need Him?: America's Search for a Postconflict Stability Force?".

⁴⁸ Friesendorf, "Gendarmeries in multinational operations".

NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP)⁴⁹. The relatively small pool of gendarmerie-type forces further restricts the number of trained personnel available for international deployments⁵⁰. Moreover, NATO currently lacks the capability to clearly articulate SP requirements across the doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, facilities and interoperability (DOTMLPFI) framework⁵¹. Differences in national regulations and military policing structures also impede interoperability in multinational operations⁵². Finally, the existing literature highlights the need for a systematic reassessment of SP performance and implications in NATO missions, particularly in environments shaped by hybrid/irregular threats.

2.b Stability Policing and Hybrid/Irregular Warfare

NATO Doctrine states that Stability Policing can be conducted *before*, *during* and *after* a crisis⁵³, making it a critical factor for mission success. Assessing the contribution of SP to detecting, preventing and responding to hybrid/irregular threats is, however, complicated by limited data available. As Friesendorf notes, the “exact role [...] in many operations is shrouded in secrecy.”⁵⁴ Nonetheless, its employment in (post-)conflict environments since the 1990s has clearly demonstrated SP essential role in stabilizing fragile environments and enabling the effective execution of combat-related mission components. Gendarmerie-type forces have consistently delivered successful outcomes in Afghanistan, Bosnia-

⁴⁹ NATO, “Political Guidance for Defence Planning”.

⁵⁰ Özdemir, “Stability Policing operations”.

⁵¹ De Magistris and Bergonzini, “Stability Policing”.

⁵² den Boer et al., “The impact of grey zone threats on military policing: Developments within the Netherlands Royal Marechaussee”.

⁵³ NATO, “AJP-3.22 Allied Joint Doctrine for Stability Policing”, para. 0205.

⁵⁴ Friesendorf, “Gendarmeries in multinational operations”, 137.

Herzegovina, East Timor, Iraq, Haiti, Kosovo and Mali, even under hybrid/irregular threat conditions. Although evaluations often rely on individual case studies, the resulting evidence portrays Stability Policing as a positive and effective instrument. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, a Pentagon report recorded that the MSU resolved 261 of 263 incidents “without the use of force through a combination of deterrence, dissuasion and negotiation.”⁵⁵ In Kosovo, the MSU (Multinational Specialized Unit) provided the Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the United Nations Interim Administration Mission (UNMIK) with police-derived intelligence that facilitated the dismantling of spoiler networks⁵⁶. In Iraq, police forces played a key role in mitigating the security vacuum following the 2017 defeat of the Islamic State in Mosul⁵⁷. In Afghanistan, U.S. General David Petraeus commended the Carabinieri for their significant contribution to local police training⁵⁸. In Haiti, the deployment of two Formed Police Units and a SWAT-unit under the European Gendarmerie Force (EGF) proved effective in maintaining public order and conducting close-protection tasks⁵⁹. In Ukraine, the Royal Marechaussee has undertaken battlefield evidence collection and war crime investigations⁶⁰.

Given their institutional design and operational mandate, the literature highlights that Gendarmeries hold a complementary advantage over

⁵⁵ United State Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, “SFOR Lessons Learned in Creating a Secure Environment with Respect for the Rule of Law”, 11-12.

⁵⁶ Ernstsen and Siekiera, “Gendarmerie organisations in Stability Policing: Bridging security and law enforcement”.

⁵⁷ Ciampini and Dziedzic, “Assessing the results of gendarmerie type forces in peace and stability operations”; Dziedzic, “NATO should promptly implement Stability Policing: Why and how”.

⁵⁸ United States Department, “Getting Italy to Do More in Afghanistan”.

⁵⁹ Hovens, “The European gendarmerie force”.

⁶⁰ den Boer et al., “The impact of grey zone threats on military policing: Developments within the Netherlands Royal Marechaussee”.

traditional military approaches in detecting, preventing, and responding to hybrid/irregular threats in fragile post-conflict settings. From this perspective, policing does not compete with military instruments but functions as a critical component in addressing security challenges that extend beyond the operational scope of armed forces. Five key dimensions emerge as central within the context of hybrid/irregular warfare:

1) Non-Kinetic Approach to Security: SP enables tailored strategies that go beyond the conventional kinetic toolkit. In fragile environments affected by hybrid/irregular threats, civilian populations are often exposed to unpredictable security risks.⁶¹ NATO missions must therefore strike a balance between securing their operational mandates and simultaneously preventing and responding to hybrid/irregular threats targeting both their personnel and the HN population.⁶² The 2022 evaluation by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction highlighted the difficulty of simultaneously combating armed insurgents, such as the Taliban, while fostering conditions for local law enforcement to address criminal activity⁶³ - tasks that military units alone cannot fulfill. Weak policing outcomes in Afghanistan were identified as a primary obstacle towards stabilization. While American-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) focused on counterterrorism, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) remained confined to

⁶¹ Field and Perito, “Creating a force for peace operations: Ensuring stability with justice”; Serafino, “Policing in peacekeeping and related stability operations: Problems and proposed solutions”.

⁶² Bachmann and Gunneriusson, “Terrorism and cyber-attacks as hybrid threats: Defining a comprehensive approach for countering 21st century threats to global risk and security”; Fogt, “Legal Challenges or “Gaps” by Countering Hybrid Warfare-Building Resilience in Jus Ante Bellum”; Mattingsdal et al., “Exploring why police and military commanders do what they do: An empirical analysis of decision-making in hybrid warfare”.

⁶³ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Police in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan”.

Kabul until 2003, and the statutory Afghan security forces lacked effectiveness.⁶⁴ This environment created a security gap that eventually empowered the so-called “warlords-turned-police chiefs” to gain influence⁶⁵. SPUs play a critical role in preventing such governance void by operating in low-intensity areas, performing law enforcement, protecting critical infrastructure, engaging with local communities, de-escalating riots, and managing crowds⁶⁶. HN populations often respond positively to non-kinetic approaches, which are perceived as less intrusive on national sovereignty compared with heavily militarized interventions, therefore SPUs are thus regarded as a credible embodiment of the rule of law⁶⁷. Their operational posture emphasizes minimizing the use of force while addressing the security needs of the population,⁶⁸ enhancing both the sustainability of the mission and its legitimacy among key stakeholders⁶⁹.

2) Flexible Posture: SPUs maintain a lighter and more flexible posture than regular military forces. This means they can be deployed more quickly, allowing NATO to react faster to evolving conditions in a multi-domain environment⁷⁰. It also indicates that SPUs can be scaled both horizontally and vertically within NATO’s overall deterrence and defense posture. In situations below the threshold of armed conflict, SP can be employed under Article 3 to support resilience-building against hybrid/irregular threats. According to the NATO-agreed definition,

⁶⁴ Friesendorf, “Gendarmeries in multinational operations”.

⁶⁵ Azami, “Warlords, the United States, and the state of anarchy in Afghanistan”.

⁶⁶ NATO, “AJP-3.22 Allied Joint Doctrine for Stability Policing”.

⁶⁷ De Magistris and Bergonzini, “Stability Policing”.

⁶⁸ Höfer, “Countering hybrid threats through Stability Policing”.

⁶⁹ De Magistris and Bergonzini, “Stability Policing”.

⁷⁰ Colvin, “Choices for US Contributions to NATO: Stability Policing in the Age of Multi-Domain Operations”; den Boer et al., “The impact of grey zone threats on military policing: Developments within the Netherlands Royal Marechaussee”.

resilience refers to an “individual and collective capacity to prepare for, resist, respond to and quickly recover from shocks and disruptions.”⁷¹ The concept has recently become increasingly prominent within NATO, where it is viewed as the first line of defense against emerging security threats. At the 2016 Washington Summit, NATO Allies endorsed seven Baseline Requirements for resilience: continuity of government, resilient energy supplies, ability to deal with the uncontrolled movement of people, resilient food and water resources, ability to deal with disruptive health crises, resilient communication and resilient transport.⁷² Through their operational mandates, SPUs contribute strategically to a layered approach that helps ensure local communities, national authorities, and international missions maintain adequate resilience to hybrid and irregular threats⁷³. When Article 5 is triggered, SPUs can instead be directly deployed to assume law enforcement duties from local police forces. Because of their dual posture combining civilian and military capabilities, SP provides a critical enabling function across the full spectrum of conflict⁷⁴ in both domains⁷⁵.

3) Integration with the Local Population: Police forces, by their very nature, operate in close contact with civilians. Through community-oriented policing, SPUs cultivate the ability to build trust, collect intelligence and maintain social cohesion in complex operational

⁷¹ NATO, “Resilience, Civilian Preparedness and Article 3”.

⁷² NATO, “Washington Summit Declaration”.

⁷³ Bonomi and Bergonzini, “What role can Stability Policing play in total defence and building resilience?”.

⁷⁴ About the evolution of the concept of *Spectrum of Conflict* towards the *Continuum of Competition*, see footnote #1.

environments ⁷⁶ . This integration is reinforced by context-specific preparation of personnel. Before deployment, SPUs receive training on the HN's legal system, historical traditions and relations between local police and population, and on the existence of national planning documents for police operations⁷⁷. Such background knowledge provides missions with a level of cultural and situational understanding unmatched by any other Allied force component. SPUs further invests in direct interaction with local communities - engaging dialogue with local leaders and establishing liaison programs.

Their proximity to civilians enables SPUs to collect granular, ground-level insights that traditional military intelligence methods often overlook⁷⁸. By fostering relationships built on mutual trust, SPUs gain access to information on threats, community sentiment and emerging social dynamics⁷⁹. This approach aligns with the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept, which notes that mission success in fragile environments hinges on the ability to anticipate threats and address them through integrated, cross-domain capabilities⁸⁰. The efforts of SPUs help create sustainable security conditions in challenging operational contexts, bridging the gap between external interventions and local community needs. Beyond supporting immediate operational outcomes, this engagement

⁷⁶ Özdemir, “Stability Policing operations”.

⁷⁷ Jayamaha, “Lessons Learned from US Government Law Enforcement in International Operations”.

⁷⁸ Gill et al., “Community-oriented Policing to reduce crime, disorder and fear and increase satisfaction and legitimacy among citizens: A systematic review”.

⁷⁹ Castillo, “Exploring Community-Oriented Policing as an Anti-Terrorism Approach Post 9/11: A Case Study”; Kerley and Benson, “Does community-oriented policing help build stronger communities?”; Pelfrey Jr., “Parallels between community-oriented policing and the war on terrorism: Lessons learned”.

⁸⁰ NATO, “Warfighting Capstone Concept”.

contributes to long-term resilience, helping shift local populations from passive security recipients to active stakeholders.

4) Counter-Information Tool: SP serves as a key instrument for Strategic Communication (STRATCOM), as it shapes the behaviors and perceptions that underpin the wider political and military objectives of international missions. When SPUs maintain the trust of local communities, they are well positioned to counter the “war of narratives,” which is becoming an increasingly central feature of hybrid/irregular warfare⁸¹. Through genuine, ground-level communication and sustained proximity to the population, gendarmerie-type forces can challenge misleading narratives, provide fact-based explanations of events and visibly demonstrate their commitment to community welfare⁸².

Policing skills are particularly valuable in an environment where hybrid/irregular threats increasingly blur the boundaries between the online and offline spheres - for example, cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure or interference in political elections via social media⁸³.

5) Focus on Criminal Violence: SPUs address forms of criminality that conventional military forces are not designed to manage, ensuring public order and security amid complex threat environments. These specialized units combine military readiness with expertise in human rights, crime prevention, judicial procedures and socio-cultural dynamics⁸⁴.

⁸¹ Bonomi and Bergonzini, “What role can Stability Policing play in total defence and building resilience?”.

⁸² Bisognin, “Contribution de la gendarmerie nationale à un conflit de haute intensité”.

⁸³ Laruelle and Limonier, “Beyond “hybrid warfare”: A digital exploration of Russia’s entrepreneurs of influence”; Svetoka, “Social Media as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare”.

⁸⁴ Özdemir, “Stability Policing Operations”.

This comprehensive approach is crucial as hostile actors frequently exploit criminal activity to create governance voids and expand their influence through hybrid/irregular warfare methods⁸⁵.

By serving as a proactive legal instrument, SPUs apply the “blue lens” of law enforcement to identify criminal accountability, improve the understanding of operating environment and disseminate intelligence⁸⁶. Moreover, police officers were trained in highly technical subjects - such as forensic analysis - that constitute strategic capabilities not fully available within military units⁸⁷.

2.c Research Gap and Contribution of this Report

Despite the significance of the topic, there is still no systematic or comprehensive evaluation of SP performance against hybrid/irregular threats⁸⁸. Existing analyses are largely limited to individual case studies and do not integrate broader reflections on the role of SP within the wider NATO architecture.

Given its clear advantages, police expertise is set to become increasingly important as Allies continue to institutionalize counter-hybrid and counter-irregular warfare as a key enabler in advancing national security objectives across the full spectrum of competition.

⁸⁵ Voeten, “Mexican Drug Violence: Hybrid Warfare, Predatory Capitalism and the Logic of Cruelty”.

⁸⁶ Bonomi and Bergonzini, “What role can Stability Policing play in total defence and building resilience?”.

⁸⁷ Colvin, “Choices for US Contributions to NATO: Stability Policing in the Age of Multi-Domain Operations”.

⁸⁸ Friesendorf, “Gendarmeries in multinational operations”.

Drawing on insights from the literature review, the empirical sections of this report pursue two primary objectives.

First, they examine how the presence of hybrid/irregular warfare affects the performance of Stability Policing forces in the NATO context by assessing the resilience of SP tools in achieving law enforcement and governance objectives both below and beyond Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. How resilient is SP in contexts characterized by hybrid/irregular tactics? How do such threats shape the activities of forces dedicated to this mission?

Second, the report provides a systematic analysis of the effectiveness of SPUs in countering hybrid/irregular warfare. Which strategies do they employ to detect, prevent, and respond to hybrid/irregular warfare? How is their success measured? In what ways does SP help strengthen the resilience of local, regional, or national authorities? How does it influence the conduct and outcomes of NATO missions?

By addressing these issues, the report tries to clarify the strategic role of SPUs within the broader framework of NATO's security objectives, underscoring their current strengths while also identifying areas where further integration or support would improve resilience against hybrid/irregular threats.

3. METHODOLOGY

TEN. COL. MICHELE APOLLO

3.a Main Research Question

Do law enforcement/internal security agencies function as instruments for increasing awareness of irregular/hybrid warfare, or do they hinder effective responses - and in what ways? To address Question 1, it was first necessary to clarify what is meant by law enforcement agencies (LEAs) within a given geographical context, including an assessment of their organizational structure, training, and engagement within the national security architecture.

The underlying assumption was that LEAs and other internal security agencies may serve as tools for raising awareness, depending on their institutional mindset, their role, their preventive capabilities, their institutional culture, the flexibility of their mandate and their ability to integrate effectively with other actors.

When these conditions are met, they can function as enablers in countering hybrid/irregular threats, particularly through their capability to adapt to specific environments and through their strategic inclusion within the broader security architecture.

LEAs potentially embody a dual role. As instruments for raising awareness, they provide critical insights into local conditions and social dynamics.

Their embedded presence within communities and their capabilities - such as investigative functions, information-gathering and community engagement - position them to detect early signs of irregular/hybrid threats, including subversion, disinformation or proxy influence.

It is precisely within these grey zones that Stability Policing (SP) units are often deployed, becoming key players in countering irregular/hybrid threats where state fragility overlaps with the disruptive behavior of non-state actors.

Conversely, LEAs can also represent an obstacle. They may prove ineffective against hybrid/irregular threat in terms of both awareness and response when they are poorly integrated into national defense strategies, constrained by rigid legal frameworks or lack training on the evolving nature of modern hybrid/irregular threats. Slow bureaucratic process, jurisdictional disputes or an excessive focus on traditional crime-fighting models can all limit the recognition of irregular/hybrid activities - sometimes misclassifying them as routine security issues - or delay the institutional response of the wider international community.

To integrate this research within the broader Alliance framework, it was mandatory to begin with existing NATO definitions. These ones regard law enforcement agencies not merely as auxiliary entities, but as a fundamental component in re-establishing the rule of law and restoring a safe and secure environment (SASE).⁸⁹ However, their actions can either reinforce the legitimacy of international interventions or undermine them through resistance, manipulation of public perceptions or collusion with non-state actors - thereby contributing to a fragile environment.

It is therefore critical to identify both formal and informal centers of power that planners of any NATO-led mission, operation or activity must consider⁹⁰.

⁸⁹ NATO, “Allied Joint doctrine for Stability Policing” (AJP 3.22), para. 0210.

⁹⁰ The identification of a complex set of indicators aimed to detect informal centers of power, which are employed to assess the informal security architecture, is at the center of another research project directed by the NATO SP CoE.

This requirement calls for a structured analysis of the local environment from a policing perspective, grounded in standardized indicators that constitute a valuable asset for military commanders.

Accurate identification and mapping of local policing actors - together with an understanding of their institutional affiliations and functions within the security framework - must be complemented by a qualitative assessment of their capacity, legitimacy and interaction with the civilian population. Such analysis enables planners to anticipate the extent to which these actors may act as enablers or disrupters. This approach supports the design of tailored strategies, early threat anticipation to the operational mandate and the implementation of preventive measures aligned with NATO's objectives in restoring public order, assisting host-nation police development and upholding international human rights standards.

Ultimately, integrating a Stability Policing perspective from the outset enhances coherence between military and police functions, contributing to comprehensive crisis management and reinforcing long-term security objectives. A detailed evaluation of the research findings is presented in Chapter 5 (Discussion).

3.b Questionnaire Method of Administration

The methods used to administer questionnaires must be tailored to the specific context and objectives of the study, considering factors such as the intended audience, budget, time constraints and the type of data required. For this research, the team needed to accommodate limitations in both funding and mobility. Consequently, a hybrid approach was adopted, whereby all interviews were conducted exclusively via video conference - face-to-face discussions facilitated through a digital platform. Particular consideration was given to the personal, emotional and ethical sensitivity of the subject matter. By allowing respondents to answer freely

and without pressure, the team succeeded in creating a positive atmosphere that minimized external influence and reduced potential biases that might affect the quality of the output. Interviews were therefore conducted in a flexible format to accommodate the respondents' needs.

The interview process was structured around six areas of interest⁹¹. To ease the interviewing phase, each session began with introductory questions and an informal conversation serving as an ice-breaker, a practice which proved beneficial for the overall conduct of the activity.

Given that most interviewees were non-native English speakers, the research team decided to send the questionnaire to respondents in advance. This measure helped avoid misunderstandings that could distort the outcomes and ensured alignment between the respondents' answers and the intended meaning of the questions. Providing the questions beforehand gave interviewees sufficient time to reflect on their responses and enabled the interviewer to establish a constructive initial approach, which contributed to a more comfortable virtual environment. During the online interviews, the questions were reviewed together, and the respondents provided their answers. Subsequently, these responses were discussed in greater depth: ambiguities were clarified and their content was explored further. In some instances, this interactive process generated more comprehensive and detailed answers as the interviewees were prompted to add supplementary details or further explore their thoughts.

NATO SP CoE staff were responsible for administering the interviews in accordance with the selected method, ensuring the integrity and consistency of the process. Findings were reported using a standardized reporting format. Anonymity was preserved throughout; the reports

⁹¹ See subsection 3.c.

were then shared within the research team for collective analysis and ultimately synthesized in a dedicated chapter, summarizing the most relevant results⁹². Interviewers always maintained a neutral stance to avoid influencing participants' responses and adhered to aseptic terminology to prevent any form of bias.

The positive environment created during the interviews encouraged respondents to elaborate extensively, which enhanced the overall quality of the research. Although interviews were originally planned for 90 minutes, they frequently exceeded this timeframe. Participants were consistently reminded of their right to remain anonymous unless they explicitly requested to issue their identity. For respondents who had not provided beforehand written answers to the questionnaire, explicit consent was obtained to record the interview solely for transcription purposes⁹³. The resulting transcripts were stored in a dedicated secure NATO SP CoE database.

3.c Selection of Questions

The selection of interview questions is directly connected to the reliability and quality of data collected. By approaching interviewees in a culturally sensitive manner and formulating questions in clear and accessible language, the research team ensured that all items were easily understood and adaptable to different contexts. When drafting the questionnaire, the questions were organized into six macro-areas:

- (1) The interviewees' background;
- (2) Their level of awareness regarding irregular/hybrid threats;
- (3) Their direct experience with irregular/hybrid threats during their careers;

⁹² See Chapter 4.

⁹³ The recordings were later deleted.

- (4) The measures adopted by the interviewees and their organizations to counter irregular/hybrid threats;
- (5) The effectiveness of those measures; and
- (6) Strategic and future considerations.

To capture the full range of insights from individuals with direct Stability Policing experience and deployments in irregular/hybrid threat environments, the interviews followed a semi-structured format composed of open-ended questions.

The complete list of interview questions is reported in Table 2.

For each macro-topic, the research team formulated an overarching research question to ensure alignment between the questions and the broader aims of the study. Additional sub-questions were drafted for each area to clarify, expand or refine the content of the primary questions.

During the interviews, participants were encouraged to personalize their responses and to address different perspectives, including the exploration of related themes, provided they were connected to the topic of irregular/hybrid warfare.

When necessary, the research team formulated additional questions during the discussion to guide the conversation or to obtain further detail.

As the interview questions proved to be both valid and effective after the initial round of interviews, the team decided not to refine them further and proceeded with the same interview structure for all subsequent participants.

Table 2. Overview of the standardized interview questionnaire

Background
Please describe your professional development.

- What is your current role/position?
- Where have you been deployed throughout your career?
- For how long have you engaged in fields related to security law enforcement?

Awareness

In your role and based on your responsibilities, when and where do you engage with the topic of irregular/hybrid warfare?

- In your own words, how do you define irregular/hybrid warfare in the context of your work?
- What distinguishes irregular/hybrid warfare from criminal violence, in your opinion?
- What training or educational background do you have regarding irregular/hybrid threats?
- Which resources have been most helpful in enhancing your understanding of irregular/hybrid warfare?

Experience

Can you provide concrete examples of irregular/hybrid threats that you have encountered during your service?

- Please describe the nature of these threats (e.g., cyber, terrorism, misinformation).
- Who were the main perpetrators of these threats (e.g., local government, non-state actors)?
- Can you share any examples of when identifying irregular/hybrid threats was critical to your mission?
- How did irregular/hybrid threats impact your work? Were you able to achieve your objectives effectively?
- In your own words, how would you describe the law enforcement system of the Host Nation? Was it resilient against irregular and hybrid warfare?
- How was your interaction with local police forces and law enforcement? Did you observe any shortcomings in their work?
- How was your interaction with international police officers and trainers? Did you observe any shortcomings in their work?

Measures

Which measures did you/your organization employ to prevent, mitigate or respond to irregular/hybrid threats?

- How are irregular/hybrid threats usually detected? What tools or protocols do you use?
- What role do you think that law enforcement plays in detecting or addressing these threats?
- What role does Stability Policing play in addressing irregular/hybrid threats? What benefits do these missions have compared to more militarized approaches?

Effectiveness

In your personal assessment, which of the employed measures were particularly effective? Were any of them ineffective?

- Do you have standard procedures to evaluate effectiveness against irregular/hybrid threats?
- Have the employed measures ultimately strengthened the resilience of local communities and authorities?
- Have the employed measures ultimately benefited to wider NATO mission?
- Can you share any examples in which feedback led to significant changes in strategy and tactics?

Strategic and future considerations

Based on your experience, what additional skills or capacities would enhance readiness and resilience against irregular/hybrid threats?

- Are there any specific areas of training or knowledge production that must be improved?
- How could inter-agency cooperation be improved?
- How do you see the landscape of irregular/hybrid warfare evolving over the next 5-10 years? How can we be prepared against these future threats?
- How can the role of Stability Policing be further elevated?

3.d Convenience Sample

The selection of interview participants was a crucial step in collecting relevant information from respondents with diverse backgrounds and experiences to ensure that the data reflected a broad range of perspectives across internal security frameworks within the Alliance's areas of interest. The research team began by drafting a list of candidates - drawn from existing professional networks - who could provide insights directly aligned with the study's objectives (purposive sampling method).

The aim was to ensure a diversity of experience to gather expert views on irregular/hybrid threats and the interaction between these threats and different actors. A general overview of each candidate's background served as the essential starting point, as every potential interviewee

needed to be relevant to the research and capable of providing insights connected to the core research questions (i.e., based on professional experience and expertise pertinent to the study's aims).

The final sample offered sufficient variation to represent multiple perspectives, contributed a wide range of relevant knowledge, and provided the depth necessary for meaningful data collection. A key issue considered was the distinction between theoretical knowledge (obtained through courses and training) and practical knowledge (gained through executive positions in missions). This distinction effectively represented two levels of expertise regarding irregular and hybrid threats.

However, this variation did not compromise the research because all interviewees were selected based on previous involvement in missions abroad. Consequently, each participant could draw on direct, personal experience with irregular/hybrid threats encountered in the field.

To ensure a structured and focused selection process aligned with the main research question, the researchers established the following criteria for identifying suitable candidates:

- **Experience:** Professional roles, expertise and responsibilities linked to irregular/hybrid warfare. Priority was given to individuals with more than 20 years of first-hand experience in security management, policy development or law enforcement;
- **Knowledge:** The ability to provide nuanced understanding of irregular/hybrid warfare across multiple levels (e.g., tactical, operational and strategic);
- **Affiliation:** Professional backgrounds across different organizations and sectors (e.g., police, civilian institutions or armed forces) to enhance diversity and breadth of perspectives;

- **Deployment Contexts:** Geographical diversity in deployment history to ensure data collection across various NATO areas of interest and to capture insights from diverse contexts.

Once the potential candidates had been identified in accordance with the established criteria, and the list was agreed upon by the research team, individuals were contacted through various channels (e.g., professional networks, academic institutions, e-mail or telephone) to assess their availability to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary, involved no financial incentives and respondents retained the right to withdraw their consent at any time. This ensured that the study upheld ethical standards and respected the autonomy of all participants.

To enhance the credibility of the research and ensure participants felt confident in their involvement, all interviewees were engaged through official NATO channels. Formal requests from the NATO SP CoE were submitted to the chain of command of everyone who agreed to take part, following official authorization from their respective authorities. This process ensured full compliance with NATO standards for research and data collection.

Although most organizations responded promptly, challenges were encountered when attempting to engage personnel from Africa, the Middle East and Ukraine. Apart from Somalia, no responses were received from local personnel in these regions. While this limited the geographical diversity of the sample, alternative suitable candidates were proposed by other organizations - such as from Türkiye - and subsequently included in the study. All selected interviewees were international experts from law enforcement and internal security institutions at various levels (local, regional, national and international) across NATO and partner nations. Each possessed direct experience with irregular/hybrid warfare in conflict zones. The geographical areas of interest were identified as Sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan and

Ukraine. These cases provided meaningful geopolitical and intervention-related diversity, facilitated both temporal and cross-sectional comparison and prevented unnecessary expansion of the research scope.

Table 3 summarizes the background profiles of the interviewees. The left column assigns each respondent a unique ID for cross-referencing purposes while preserving anonymity. The table also includes key information on deployment locations, gender, professional fields, levels of experience and educational background.

To ensure participants fully understood and agreed to the scope of the study, informed consent was obtained from all respondents at the outset of the interviews.

This clarified the voluntary nature of their participation and assured them that their contributions would remain anonymized to protect their privacy.

Table 3. Background information on interviewees

ID	Interviewees background	Knowledgeability
#1	Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Balkans, Niger, Lebanon Field/professional experience: gendarmerie-type force, substantial executive experience in stabilization operations as trainer/staff officer/liason officer with local law enforcement Education/Managerial Level: College/Quadre	4.0

#2	<p>Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Iraq, Balkans, Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Mauritania Field/professional experience: gendarmerie-type force, substantial executive experience in stabilization operations as trainer/staff officer/liaison officer with local law enforcement Education/Managerial Level: College/Quadre</p>	4.1
#3	<p>Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Balkans, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan Field/professional experience: gendarmerie-type force, substantial executive experience in stabilization operations as trainer/staff officer/liaison officer with local law enforcement Education/Managerial Level: College/Quadre</p>	4.2
#4	<p>Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Balkans, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq Field/professional experience: gendarmerie-type force, executive and managerial experience in stabilization operations as trainer/planner/advisor or liaison officer in the police capacity-building remit Education/Managerial Level: College/Quadre</p>	4.7
#5	<p>Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Afghanistan, Kosovo, Djibouti, Somalia Field/professional experience: gendarmerie-type force, executive experience in stabilization operations as trainer/advisor/liaison Officer with local law enforcement Education/Managerial Level: College/Quadre</p>	4.2
#6	<p>Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Sub Sahara Africa, Senegal, Mali, Chad, Niger Field/professional experience: gendarmerie-type force, quadre experience in stabilization operations as trainer/advisor with local Law Enforcement Education/Managerial Level: College/Quadre</p>	4.7

<p>#7</p>	<p>Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Ukraine Field/professional experience: armed services, executive/technical experience, institution-building in crisis areas including local law enforcement Education/Managerial Level: College/Quadre</p>	<p>4.0</p>
<p>#8</p>	<p>Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq Field/professional experience: gendarmerie-type force, executive police experience, stabilization operations as trainer/advisor Education/Managerial Level: College/Quadre</p>	<p>4.8</p>
<p>#9</p>	<p>Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria Field/professional experience: gendarmerie-type force, executive/mid-managerial experience in crisis areas Education/Managerial Level: Post-graduate/High Management</p>	<p>3.8</p>
<p>#10</p>	<p>Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Afghanistan, Syria Field/professional experience: gendarmerie-type force, executive/mid-managerial experience in crisis areas Education/Managerial Level: Post-graduate/High Management</p>	<p>3.8</p>
<p>#11</p>	<p>Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Afghanistan, Ukraine Field/professional experience: gendarmerie-type force, executive experience in crisis areas Education/Managerial Level: College/Quadre</p>	<p>3.8</p>

#12	Category: International Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Haiti, Kenya, Iraq Field/professional experience: gendarmerie-type force, executive experience as trainer/advisor/liaison/institution-building of local law enforcement in crisis areas Education/Managerial Level: College/Quadre	4.5
#13	Category: Local Staff Gender: Male Deployment: Somalia Field/professional experience: local law enforcement, mid-managerial experience Education/Managerial Level: College/Quadre	4.2

3.e Interviewees’ Knowledgeability Rating

Because the study required specialized knowledge and experience, the research team decided to implement a knowledgeability rating for the interviewees in order to assess their level of familiarity with the research topic and evaluate the informed perspectives provided by the experts. In line with the two-tier model of knowledge acquisition on irregular/hybrid warfare outlined in the previous section, both academic credentials and practical hands-on experience in environments affected by irregular/hybrid threats needed to be considered. The research team therefore opted to include educational background and operational experience within the knowledgeability rating, recognizing the value of the real-world experience that law enforcement officers could contribute to the study. To assess the expertise of the interviewees systematically, the team developed a rating framework based on seven key indicators designed to measure the respondents’ qualifications and professional experience. These indicators are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Interviewees’ knowledgeability rating

	1	2	3	4	5
Education	N/A	N/A	Secondary school	College graduate	Postgraduate
Managerial experience and leadership	None	Quadre low	Quadre high	Executive manager	Manager
Level of engagement with local stakeholders	Trooper	Trainer instructor	Master trainer	Executive advisor	Advisor
Scope of expertise	N/A	N/A	1-2	3-4	>5
Law enforcement expertise	N/A	N/A	<10 years	10-20 years	>20 years
Hybrid/irregular warfare expertise and background	N/A	N/A	Episodical	Prolonged	Substantial (expert)
Deployments	N/A	N/A	<1	2-4	>5

Building on the successful methodology applied in a previous study conducted by the NATO SP CoE⁹⁴, the research team chose not to prioritize or differentiate interviewees according to their qualifications. Instead, participants representing all levels of experience and organizational hierarchy were included. This inclusive approach enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the internal security framework by capturing perspectives from both strategic and tactical standpoints. The following indicators were employed:

⁹⁴ The same evaluation method was applied in the study titled “The policing gap in modern NATO Operations. A better understanding of the Internal Security Architecture of a State as a means to allow NATO planners and commanders to address future threats to peace and security”. The only distinction is that, in the present project, no indicator related to irregular/hybrid warfare expertise or background was included.

- **Educational Level** (*secondary school, college graduate, postgraduate*): a higher education qualification may correspond to a more advanced theoretical understanding of irregular/hybrid threats. In line with the curriculum of the selected interviewees, any qualification below secondary school level was classified as “not applicable” (N/A);
- **Managerial Experience / Leadership** (*none, low-level cadre, high-level cadre, executive manager, manager*): this indicator relates to the degree of responsibility held by interviewees in their respective roles. Leadership experience often reflects a broader understanding of how security systems operate at various levels and the individual’s direct involvement in the decision-making process;
- **Engagement with Local Stakeholders** (*trooper, trainer/instructor, master trainer, executive advisor, advisor*): this feature measures the extent of interviewees’ interaction with local stakeholders such as law enforcement agencies, governmental representatives, and community leaders. Individuals with greater engagement in these roles tend to provide more practical insights into local dynamics, including exposure to hybrid/irregular warfare maneuvers;
- **Scope of Experience** (*1–2 fields/areas, 3–4 fields/areas, more than 5 fields/areas*): this refers to the breadth of the interviewees’ knowledge across multiple subjects/field⁹⁵ relevant to the research topic. A wider scope of experience suggests an ability to link different aspects of internal security, ultimately contributing to more comprehensive insights. Any expertise covering fewer than 1–2 topics was marked as

⁹⁵ For example, this may include disciplines within the same scientific or professional field, as well as entirely different areas of expertise - such as International Humanitarian Law - for those qualified as Legal Advisors, or specialization as Subject Matter Experts in Strategic Communication (STRATCOM) or Psychological Operations (PSYOPS). These are distinct subjects within the broader military environment and doctrine, yet each represents a significant domain of highly specialized expertise.

“not applicable” (N/A), as police officers without expertise in the irregular/hybrid sphere were excluded from the sample;

- **Law Enforcement Experience** (*less than 10 years, 10–20 years, more than 20 years*): this criterion evaluates the tenure as officer within law enforcement structures. Longer professional experience is generally associated with a deeper understanding of the evolution of security architectures, policies, and strategies. Experience below 10 years was considered as “not applicable” (N/A);
- **Deployment Experience** (*1–2 missions, 3–4 missions, more than 5 missions*): extensive deployment history often translates into firsthand familiarity with the practical challenges of internal security, offering valuable insights into the operational realities of irregular/hybrid warfare. Candidates with no international deployment experience were classified as “not applicable” (N/A).
- **Hybrid Warfare Expertise/Background** (*episodic, prolonged, or substantial experience*): this indicator assessed the level of experience in hybrid/irregular warfare as episodic (e.g. isolated training courses), prolonged (e.g. participation in research projects or repeated missions) or substantial (e.g. academic degrees, publications, or senior command positions in contexts of irregular/hybrid threats).

The rating system described above proved useful in determining the relative weight of statements provided by interviewees - particularly in cases of contradictory responses, where the views of higher-rated individuals were given greater consideration.

It also enabled the research team to monitor potential biases linked to personal experience, professional background, or organizational affiliation.

Recognizing and acknowledging bias was considered a valuable analytical outcome.

During the interviews, the influence of education and professional expertise on respondents' perceptions of hybrid/irregular warfare became evident. Rather than discarding biased responses, the team integrated them into a broader analytical framework, using them to identify conceptual gaps and systematic issues that required further investigation.

3.f Limitations

From the planning stage, the research team sought to capitalize on the diverse expertise of interviewees in irregular/hybrid warfare by diversifying the sample in terms of deployment regions, gender, hierarchy level, and operational role - whether in supporting functions (as members of international missions or missions) or as supported actors (local representatives of host nations). This diversification was achieved successfully in two main areas.

Firstly, in terms of geographical representation. Most interviewees had acquired operational experience in multiple theaters, including Sub-Saharan Africa, the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, Libya, Lebanon, Iraq, the Balkans, Haiti, and Ukraine. This diversity added significant depth to the study. Secondly, the range of hierarchy was assessed as completely satisfactory.

However, complete representativeness was not achieved in two dimensions.

The first concerns gender balance. Despite deliberate efforts to promote gender inclusivity, all participants in the final sample were male. Nonetheless, this outcome mirrors the prevailing gender patterns within hiring structures of international policing operations, where male officers

constitute the overwhelming majority⁹⁶. According to a 2023 survey by the European Organization of Military Associations (EUROMIL), women account for approximately 13% of personnel in European armed forces⁹⁷. Similarly, data from the European Parliament’s Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM), as reported in its annual Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) report, indicate that only 5% only of participants in military missions are female⁹⁸. From this perspective, the research team regarded the all-male composition of the sample as acceptable.

The second limitation concerned the limited representation of local law enforcement officers from host nations, who formed only a minority of the final sample - specifically, a single respondent from the Somali Police Forces. Although candidates from the Iraqi Police Forces, Mali Police Forces, and the Ukrainian National Police were suggested as potential participants, their respective chains of command did not grant the required authorization.

Nevertheless, as the interviews progressed, it became evident that the research primarily sought to address a doctrinal rather than executive gap. Accordingly, the insights provided by international experts were assessed as sufficient to validate the results of this investigation.

Future research could build upon this work by incorporating a broader representation of local police officers

⁹⁶ Harris and Goldsmith, “Gendering transnational policing: Experiences of Australian women in international policing operations”.

⁹⁷ EUROMIL, “Gender Equality/Women in the Armed Forces”.

⁹⁸ Ibi.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

DR. ANDREA KNAPP

This chapter provides a comprehensive synthesis of the interview results, organized according to the key dimensions outlined in the interview methodology: (a) awareness, (b) experience, (c) measures, (d) effectiveness, and (e) strategic future considerations. By examining these dimensions both independently and in context, the analysis aims to identify operational patterns and uncover strategic gaps within current stability policing tools. The analytical approach combines two complementary methods. A quantitative synthesis highlights recurring trends among respondents, while a qualitative review captures the depth and nuance of individual experiences. Together, these methods form the empirical foundation for the interpretative discussion that follows in Chapter 5 (Discussion).

The analysis begins by assessing law enforcement officers' awareness of hybrid/irregular warfare, as well as the formal training they have received in this field. This section situates their responses and highlights disparities in knowledge distribution across ranks and areas of specialization. The second dimension explores firsthand experiences of respondents who have operated in environments characterized by hybrid/irregular threats. This analysis serves to map out relevant actors, operational environment, and tools employed in such contexts. The third dimension focuses on the tactical and strategic measures adopted by different agencies to detect, prevent, and counter hybrid/irregular threats. This is followed by an assessment of the perceived effectiveness of these approaches, which reveals inconsistencies between objective performance indicators and the subjective assessment criteria used by gendarmerie-type forces - variations that help explain the differing success rates across operational theaters. Finally, the chapter concludes

with a forward-looking perspective on future strategic priorities considering evolving threats and required adaptations. It identifies consensus regarding three domains for improvement and consolidates law enforcement officers' recommendations for the necessary shift.

4.a Awareness

The theoretical findings reveal a general lack of definitional clarity regarding the concepts of hybrid/irregular warfare among the interviewees. Only three respondents (23.08%) were able to accurately define these terms in alignment with current military doctrine or academic literature. Even among these, definitions varied, underscoring the absence of a common conceptual framework. Interviewee #8 distinguished between the two concepts based on their target, whereas Interviewees #3 and #12 differentiated them according to employed strategies. This inconsistency indicates a broader theoretical gap that transcends individual understanding. While such divergence partly reflects the absence of universally standardized definitions in policy and scientific literature, it also suggests that these theoretical dimensions are insufficiently addressed in the tactical-level training courses most respondents have completed. Indeed, 53.85% of interviewees identified field experience as their principal source of knowledge concerning hybrid/irregular warfare (Interviewees #2, #3, #4, #5, #9, #12, and #13). This predominant reliance on operational exposure reflects a "learning-by-doing" approach, in which understanding develops through context-specific and often informal experiences rather than through a structured educational framework. While such experiential learning fosters valuable situational awareness, it exposes a critical vulnerability: the absence of a coherent theoretical foundation risks fragmenting comprehension and undermining the strategic coherence of response mechanisms.

Respondents reported exposure to various relevant training formats, including cultural and situational awareness courses (Interviewee #3),

deployment-specific induction programs (Interviewees #2, #3, #4, #8, and #11), and specific topic-related courses such as PSY-Ops and counterterrorism (Interviewees #1, #2, #3, #4, #11, and #12). However, these courses typically address specific aspects of hybrid/irregular warfare only, rather than providing an integrated understanding of the full spectrum of threats. Only two respondents (15.38%) reported having received advanced formal training explicitly dedicated to hybrid or irregular warfare. This gap in specialized education - combined with its fragmented training content - likely contributes to the observed definitional inconsistencies and scattered theoretical understanding across the respondent group. The findings therefore underscore the need for comprehensive and conceptually grounded training programs to ensure that gendarmerie-type forces can effectively recognize, interpret, and respond to the complex spectrum of hybrid/irregular threats shaping the 21st century.

A key finding emerging from the interviews was the identification of a binary distinction between criminal violence and hybrid/irregular warfare (Interviewees #1, #2, #3, #4, #9, #11, and #12). According to respondents, criminal violence is primarily driven by economic motivations such as the pursuit of profit through illicit means, whereas hybrid/irregular warfare is fundamentally political in nature, aiming to achieve political goals that extend beyond pure financial gain.

Although most interviewees recognized this conceptual separation, several also recognized systematic interconnections between the two phenomena, which can be organized across three distinct yet interrelated levels. First, Interviewee #1 described a relationship in which criminal actors exploit governance vacuum created by hybrid/irregular warfare. This dynamic produces a vicious circle, where hybrid/irregular activities generate enforcement gaps subsequently exploited as an opportunity by criminal enterprises (e.g., corruption within law enforcement agencies

facilitating smuggling or human trafficking). This complementary relationship suggests that hybrid/irregular warfare can inadvertently create favorable conditions for criminal activity, even when the two operate with different underlying motives. Second, three respondents (Interviewees #1, #2, and #10) identified direct operational linkages, noting that criminal groups may be *instrumentalized* within broader hybrid/irregular warfare campaigns (e.g., such as being financed to erode governance). Furthermore, some criminal organizations were observed to *autonomously adopt tactics traditionally associated with hybrid/irregular warfare*, suggesting that, in practice, *the boundary between these domains is often blurred*. Third, Interviewee #1 specifically noted *tactical parallels between criminal violence and hybrid/irregular warfare, regarding their focus on local populations* - whether through intimidation or service provision. **This observation led him to argue that similar policing competencies may be required to effectively counter both types of threats.**

While these identified connections may partly reflect the respondents' professional backgrounds, they emphasize the need for integrated security approaches that recognize both the distinctions and the interdependencies between the two phenomena. Maintaining a rigid conceptual separation risks to be counterproductive to developing effective countermeasures as these threats increasingly operate across traditional conceptual boundaries.

The *Discussion* chapter will further deep dive into this apparent contradiction in the interviewees' reports, demonstrating that despite claims of a sharp conceptual divide between criminal and hybrid phenomena, the countermeasures and skill sets described by experts for detecting and fighting hybrid threats largely mirror established practices long employed in the fight against organized crime.

4.b Experience

The interviewees reported extensive first-hand experience with a wide range of hybrid/irregular threats across diverse operational theaters. The most frequently cited among these were misinformation campaigns (Interviewees #1, #2, #4, #6, #7, #8, #9, and #12), which involved the exploitation use of propaganda and fake news to manipulate public perception and erode trust in legitimate governance structures. Closely related were cyber-attacks (Interviewees #3, #4, #7, #8, #11, #12, and #13). Although information warfare has become increasingly prominent, respondents emphasized that physical violence continues to play a central role within the hybrid/irregular spectrum. Examples included guerrilla-style hit-and-run assaults (Interviewees #3, #12, and #13) and terrorist attacks (Interviewees #2, #4, #8, #9, #12, and #13). The persistence of tactics traditionally associated with irregular warfare demonstrates that, despite the expansion of the threat landscape into new domains, physical violence remains an integral component of hybrid conflict. Drawing on their policing experience, two respondents (Interviewees #1 and #3) described the manipulation of political decision-makers through corruption, infiltration, or coercive pressure. They noted that such tactics are particularly common in fragile post-conflict environments where weak governance structures are especially vulnerable to external interference. Respondents also identified additional manifestations of hybrid/irregular warfare, including the use of weaponized migration to influence the activities of international organizations (Interviewee #1), attacks on critical infrastructure designed to generate public discontent towards the government (Interviewees #7 and #10), the orchestration of protests (Interviewee #11), the deliberate disruption of peace and democratization processes (Interviewees #3, #4, and #7), and chemical attacks (Interviewee #8).

A key insight emerging from the interviews is that hybrid/irregular tactics vary according to their intended targets. Respondents reported that hybrid maneuvers were directed both against international actors (for example, the European Union or French military forces) and against local entities such as national authorities in Ukraine. This differentiation of targets illustrates the adaptability of threat actors and their capability to calibrate their tactics to existing vulnerabilities as well as to specific operational objectives. The range of experiences described by the interviewees underscores the comprehensive nature of contemporary hybrid/irregular threats, as well as the corresponding need for flexible and adaptive response mechanisms. The interviews further showed that hybrid/irregular threats have been observed across an exceptionally wide range of geographical contexts. Respondents cited direct experience in Afghanistan, the Balkans, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Niger, Somalia, and Ukraine. This broad distribution is particularly significant because it includes both well-documented cases frequently discussed in the literature on hybrid/irregular warfare, such as Lebanon, and less-studied emerging theaters, such as Niger, where international deployments remain ongoing. These findings collectively demonstrated that hybrid/irregular warfare represent a truly global phenomenon - one that transcends regional boundaries and conventional conflict classifications.

When asked to identify the primary sources of hybrid/irregular threats, most respondents pointed to violent extremist organizations such as Hezbollah and Da'esh. A total of 61.54% of interviewees identified these groups as the most important perpetrators of hybrid/irregular warfare. By contrast, one respondent only (Interviewee #10) *overtly* mentioned organized crime groups as users of similar tactics. This discrepancy indicates that, while criminal organizations can adopt hybrid methods, their involvement is generally *perceived* as less systemic or widespread

than that of ideologically driven terrorist entities⁹⁹. At the same time, several state actors were also identified as significant sources of hybrid/irregular threats. Russia was the most frequently cited (Interviewees #1, #4, #7, and #11), followed by China (Interviewees #1 and #4) and Iran (Interviewees #4 and #8). Respondents attributed distinct approaches to each of these states. Russia was described as employing the most direct and overt hybrid tactics, including the use of proxy forces such as the Wagner Group PMC and the Africa Corps, the orchestration of protests to pressure local governments, the deployment of Russian national symbols such as flags during demonstrations, and a strong focus on achieving immediate political effects.

The Ukrainian case was particularly emphasized. Although Russia's hybrid/irregular activities were widely acknowledged, respondents highlighted the persistent difficulty of mounting effective countermeasures. This gap demonstrates an operational disconnect between the ability to identify threats and the capacity to respond effectively. By contrast, China's approach was described as different from that of Russia. It operates predominantly through indirect methods such as financial and economic instruments. These include the use of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and the acquisition of strategic resource rights in critical infrastructures especially, which serve to cultivate long-term influence.

Such an approach is especially difficult to counter through traditional military means, as it fosters dependency rather than achieving immediate political disruption.

Finally, Iran's strategy was identified as a third distinct model of state-sponsored hybrid/irregular warfare. It is characterized by the financing

⁹⁹ As already noted, Chapter 5 (*Discussion*) will show that, in practice, the modus operandi of the two types of formations/threats are similar in many respects.

of proxy militias, the cultivation of ideologically aligned non-state actors - such as Hezbollah - and the direction of operations against adversaries through intermediaries.

The diversity of targets, strategies, operational environments, and tactical approaches identified by the interviewees illustrates a hybrid/irregular threat landscape characterized by inherent unpredictability and strategic adaptability. This diversity - spanning both state and non-state actors, physical and digital domains, and immediate and long-term objectives - poses considerable challenges to conventional military doctrines and to the broader international security architecture. As a result, organizations such as NATO must continue to develop adaptive and integrated response frameworks capable of addressing the full spectrum of hybrid/irregular threats, rather than focusing narrowly on specific manifestations.

4.c Measures

This section examines the measures employed by the interviewees' organizations to detect, prevent, and respond to hybrid/irregular threats. Notably, all interviewees approached the topic from a tactical rather than from operational or strategic perspectives. This approach mirrors their operational roles during active field deployments, a dimension that will be further analysed in the *Discussion* chapter.

Despite this tactical focus, the respondents underscored the importance of developing holistic approaches that extend beyond conventional battlefield dynamics and can be applied across the entire spectrum of (post-) conflict scenarios. This view aligns with the inherently multidimensional nature of hybrid/irregular threats.

A recurring theme emerging from the interviews was the need to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of the operational, situational, and

cultural environment as a prerequisite for effective countermeasures. As Interviewee #4 explicitly stated, “knowledge about the hybrid and irregular domain is the first necessary step to counter it.” Such environmental awareness was pursued through various methods, including multi-source information collection, surveillance, patrolling to maintain a visible security presence, and community engagement to build trust with local populations and enhance intelligence flows (Interviewees #1, #2, #3, #4, #11, and #12). This approach also encompassed efforts to address civilian needs - such as restoring basic security, providing essential services (e.g., water, food, and electricity), and meeting immediate population requirements - to reduce communities’ susceptibility to exploitation by hostile actors (Interviewees #4, #9, and #12). Particularly noteworthy was the emphasis on developing a sensitivity to what Interviewee #2 described as the “atmosphere of an area”: an almost intuitive situational awareness that enables the early detection of anomalies and emerging threats before they manifest into direct security challenges. This form of environmental awareness represents an advanced and sophisticated preventive approach to threat prevention that transcends traditional security metrics and **can only be effectively implemented by law enforcement personnel operating in close contact with local populations.**

A second major theme concerns strategic-level security practices adapted to hybrid/irregular contexts. These include contributing to physical security of international actors, protecting critical infrastructure that delivers essential services, and dismantling threat networks (Interviewees #2 and #12). These traditional security measures were typically implemented alongside efforts to deepen environmental understanding, thereby creating a layered system to address not only immediate security needs but also their underlying conditions. This approach requires an integrated security model that recognizes the interdependence of physical security, information operations, and population-centric policing. The

emphasis on holistic approaches reflects a **growing recognition among law enforcement professionals that hybrid/irregular threats cannot be effectively countered through compartmentalized security responses treating each threat vector in isolation**. Instead, operational effectiveness in conflict environments requires a **comprehensive security framework** capable of adapting across the full spectrum of hybrid/irregular threats.

The interviewees also emphasized the importance of training local police forces as a critical step toward enhancing resilience against hybrid/irregular threats, thereby directly addressing a recurrent “policing gap” (Interviewees #3, #4, #9, #10, and #12). One notable case was the successful training of the Afghan National Police in forensic investigation and crowd control. However, respondents pointed out significant disparities in the capacity of local law enforcement across differing operational and organizational contexts (Interviewees #1 and #2). While some countries - such as Lebanon - had established specialized task forces designed to counter hybrid/irregular threats, others - such as Niger - lacked any comparable institutional agency. A recurring difficulty across multiple contexts was ineffective management of information. Even when data collection mechanisms existed, information often remained centralized and insufficiently disseminated across units (Interviewee #2). Somalia was cited as a prime example, where various agencies were tasked with countering hybrid/irregular threats, but no formal institutional interagency information exchange had been established (Interviewee #31). Disparities in training quality and availability further hampered operational effectiveness (Interviewees #1, #2, #9, and #10). Two countries - namely Iraq and Ukraine - emerged as positive exceptions, where law enforcement systems proved their resilience against hybrid/irregular threats (Interviewees #4, #9, and #11). In Iraq, this success was primarily attributed to sustained training provided by international forces over an extended period. In contrast, numerous structural challenges continued to undermine the effectiveness

of local law enforcement in other contexts. These ones included the infiltration of security services by malign actors, resource limitations (e.g., equipment shortages), historical legacies of colonial or authoritarian governance, institutional factionalism, interference with international assistance programs, procedural inconsistencies (e.g., absence of standardized threat-response protocols), and concerns about human rights violations (Interviewees #1, #3, #4, #9, #10, and #11).

Despite persistent challenges, several respondents reported evidence that training provided by international police officers had demonstrably enhanced the efficiency of local law enforcement and improved existing procedures (Interviewees #1, #4, and #11). One illustrative example was Niger, where external advisors successfully encouraged a transition from a static checkpoint-based model to a more dynamic, community-oriented patrolling system - marking a doctrinal evolution toward effective and context-responsive policing practices. However, respondents also identified an emerging challenge related to the presence of alternative security assistance providers. Specifically, third-party actors like Russia and China were reported to be offering their own police training programs (Interviewee #1). This development introduces a competitive dimension to international capacity-building efforts, requiring Western actors not only to maintain the highest technical standards in their training modules but also to manage perceptions, build trust, and demonstrate the strategic value of their engagement to local authorities and civilian populations.

The interviewees further emphasized the added value of embedding police units within international missions, particularly in enhancing the detection, prevention, and mitigation of hybrid/irregular threats. While they did not necessarily advocate for the superiority of the “blue” (policing) approach over the “green” (military) paradigm, respondents underscored the strategic importance of integrating policing capabilities

within a comprehensive, multidimensional security framework. From this perspective, policing should not be seen as opposed to military operations but as a complementary and vital component for addressing threat vectors that extend beyond the scope of conventional armed force. The interviewees identified five key dimensions in which incorporating a policing perspective into NATO operations provides distinctive advantages:

- **Specialized Security Expertise:** Police units are inherently tasked with maintaining public order - a function directly relevant to countering hybrid/irregular threats. As first responders in a contact of a crisis (Interviewees #5 and #7), law enforcement officers bring a specialized skill set that complements traditional military capabilities. These include advanced technological competencies in forensics and battlefield evidence collection, training and resources designed for engaging with hybrid/irregular threats, and rapid response capabilities tailored to evolving security challenges (Interviewees #3, #10, #11, and #12). Such expertise is critical in operational contexts where accurate threat identification, legal attribution, and evidentiary documentation are essential to developing robust countermeasures. In this regard, policing expertise provides a vital bridge between security enforcement and judicial accountability, reinforcing the rule of law even in volatile environments.
- **Population-Centric Operations:** One of the most widely recognized advantages of police units is their close connection with local communities (Interviewees #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, #9, #11, #12, and #13). This feature enables law enforcement officers to establish trust-based relationships with citizens, positioning them as visible and accessible symbols of governance. Their presence next to local communities allows them to engage in effective counter-narratives to address grievances before they escalate, and “connect the dots”

between seemingly isolated incidents to identify emerging threat patterns. This proximity also allows them to detect subtle shifts in the social atmosphere that may signal developing security challenges. As Interviewee #9 noted, maintaining close ties with civilians enables police officers to address immediate security concerns while simultaneously targeting the root causes to prevent hybrid/irregular threats. The policing approach, therefore, reframes local populations not as passive recipients of security but as active partners and stakeholders within a broader security ecosystem. This model enhances both resilience and intelligence-gathering capacities, thus becoming a foundational pillar of sustainable security governance.

- **Non-Kinetic Security Approach:** Unlike conventional military tools, policing relies on non-kinetic and measured forms of engagement. This approach provides several strategic advantages, including cost-effectiveness in resource-constrained environments, a reduced perception of intrusion among host communities, lower risk of backlash, and greater accessibility for civilians (Interviewees #3, #4, #9, #10, and #12). This low-profile presence enhances both legitimacy and acceptance, enabling security actors to operate with the consent - or at least the acceptance - of civilian populations. As Interviewee #10 observed, “successful policing becomes an everyday element in the lives of civilians.” In this sense, policing integrates security provision into the fabric of daily life rather than imposing it from above, as is often the case with conventional military deployments. Such normalization of security presence is critical to fostering long-term stability and mitigating the alienation that hybrid/irregular actors often exploit. Interviewee #4 offered a compelling example from Iraq comparing different governance approaches. Areas under army jurisdiction - where remnants of Da’esh influence persisted - maintained a conservative and defense-oriented security posture. In contrast, regions overseen by the MOI and the Iraqi Federal Police

adopted a community-oriented and intelligence-led approach. This contrast highlights the operational and philosophical differences between military and police paradigms. It also reinforces the argument that effective contrast to hybrid/irregular threats requires an integrated approach. Such an approach must leverage the combined strengths of military and law enforcement capabilities while recognizing the unique advantages that professional police forces contribute to complex and evolving security environments.

- **Operational Adaptability:** Police units demonstrate a high degree of flexibility across a broad spectrum of operational contexts, ranging from capacity-building and institutional reform to stabilization and peace-building efforts. Their dual civil-military nature enables them to operate effectively at the intersection of hard and soft security domains. Interviewee #12 specifically emphasized that this adaptability facilitates the integration of both military and civilian approaches, allowing for tailored responses to hybrid/irregular threats that defy conventional categorization. In a time of crisis, police units have also demonstrated the ability to assume roles traditionally performed by military forces. For example, Interviewee #7 noted that six police brigades are currently deployed along the Ukrainian frontlines to maintain public order in territories liberated from Russian occupation. Furthermore, deployed police units often serve as vital conduits of information between local actors and international organizations like NATO (Interviewee #10). As Interviewee #4 noted, their ability to “collaborate with other agencies and adopt to the evolving threats [...] makes them indispensable in the broader strategy to counter hybrid warfare.” This operational adaptability not only enhances mission responsiveness but also ensures the continuity and relevance of policing contributions across the shifting dynamics of contemporary conflict environments.

- **Sustainable Institution-Building:** Policing provides a sustainable and locally grounded solution for strengthening institutions, promoting governance, and supporting political reforms essential for lasting peace - while maintaining a focus on the rule of law, human rights, and cultural sensitivity (Interviewees #3, #4, #10, and #12). Although policing remains relevant throughout all phases of conflict, it acquires valuable importance during the transition from military-led operations to post-conflict stabilization. As Interviewee #5 observed, police units serve as a vital bridge during the drawdown of international military forces, mitigating the risk of a security vacuum that could be exploited by hybrid/irregular actors.

4.d Effectiveness

This section examines the interviewees' assessments of the effectiveness of measures employed to detect, prevent, and counter hybrid/irregular threats. Notably, some participants (e.g., Interviewee #1) were unable to provide a substantive evaluation. Three principal challenges emerged as obstacles to conducting meaningful assessments of effectiveness. First, the frequent turnover of law enforcement officers in international missions disrupts the continuity of institutional knowledge (Interviewee #9). These short deployment cycles often impede longitudinal assessment process, constrain the build-up of context-specific expertise, and produce knowledge gaps between successive deployments. Second, resilience against hybrid/irregular threats frequently develops through informal mechanisms - such as personal networks, trust-based relationships, and adaptive on-the-ground practices - rather than formalized institutional structures (Interviewee #10). While these informal mechanisms may prove effective under an operational standpoint, they are inherently difficult to quantify or standardize, thereby complicating the creation of robust performance metrics. Moreover, reliance on unofficial channels for knowledge diffusion can obscure institutional learning and hinder

systematic evaluation. Third, the most commonly cited obstacle was the absence of standardized national or international evaluation frameworks (Interviewees #2, #3, #4, #5, and #11). This procedural gap results in the application of inconsistent metrics across units, making comparative analysis across missions or operational contexts difficult. Consequently, criteria for success ultimately remain dependent on context. Only one respondent (Interviewee #11) identified specific instances in which the detection of hybrid/irregular threats directly led to formal changes in operational protocols - suggesting that even when threats are successfully identified, this seldom translates into systematic procedural adaptation.

Three additional respondents (Interviewees #2, #6, and #9) emphasized that learning and feedback mechanisms remain predominantly tactical and are slow to inform broader operational approaches. Bureaucracy featuring international actors acts as a counterproductive factor that delays timely responses to hybrid/irregular threats. This institutional inertia has led to situations where critical information about hybrid/irregular threats was neither effectively shared across units nor adequately operationalized within the system (Interviewee #5). As a result, this gave rise to dangerous knowledge silos that undermined the development of integrated security responses. The lack of procedures may partially stem from a need for adaptability, since standardization can limit the operational flexibility required to counter hybrid/irregular threats (Interviewee #10). Over-standardization also risks creating predictable behavioral patterns that adversaries could exploit. However, in the absence of standardized evaluation criteria, interviewees applied differing metrics to measure success. For instance, Interviewee #4 defined resilience against hybrid/irregular threats as the ability to conduct high-profile political events without security incidents, whereas Interviewee #9 associated success with gaining the trust of local populations. These diverging interpretations reveal how varying conceptual frameworks can

influence how population perceives police units 'effectiveness in countering hybrid and irregular threats.

Importantly, 46.15% of interviewees explicitly stated that they were able to fulfill their original mission mandates despite the persistence of hybrid/irregular threats (Interviewees #1, #2, #3, #4, #9, and #10). This success was largely attributed to the adaptability of their strategic and operational approaches, although some respondents noted delays in implementation timelines. These findings suggest that while hybrid/irregular threats pose significant challenges, they do not necessarily preclude mission success - if police forces are able to innovate quickly and depart from rigid standard operating procedures when flexibility is actually required.

The interviewees further reported that the effectiveness of countermeasures to hybrid/irregular threats depends on the degree to which they are embedded within a coherent operational framework. Interviewee #9 observed that although awareness of hybrid/irregular threats has grown across the contemporary security landscape, this better awareness does not automatically translate into improved operational outcomes. Similarly, Interviewee #12 noted that the success of countermeasures varies considerably depending on the domain and the extent to which measures are contextually embedded and strategically aligned. Among the most effective practices identified were capacity-building of host-nation police forces - particularly mentorship programs and the transfer of operational skills - combined with community-oriented policing strategies. These approaches leveraged trust-based relationship between international organizations and local populations to enable early warning. Intelligence-driven operations also proved successful, as they enabled precision targeting, minimized collateral damage, and strengthened operational legitimacy. Conversely, measures countering disinformation campaigns yielded more limited results, partly

due to resource constraints, fragmented coordination with local media, and delayed response time. Similarly, efforts to restore public order were hampered by a lack of sustained engagement, while inter-agency cooperation remained inconsistent due to divergent communication frameworks, divergence between civilian and military approach, conflicting goals among international partners, and the absence of a unified command structure.

A domain-specific analysis thus reveals that, while policing provides relevant advantages to international missions confronting hybrid/irregular threats, the degree of success remains uneven across different operational areas. This unevenness indicates the need for targeted improvements in certain sectors while maintaining best practices in others. A limitation identified by several interviewees was the predominantly reactive posture of measures (e.g., Interviewee #11). This last places police forces in a position of strategic disadvantage. Interviewee #6 vividly illustrated this asymmetry, describing hybrid/irregular warfare as “a chess game where my camp played with the black pawns, without ever having the initiative - at worst in a pigeon shot that I was the target of”. This analogy captures the broad concern that police forces often have when finding out they are called to respond to threats after they have materialized, rather than proactively shaping security environment. This situation stems from several interrelated factors: the inherently covert and ambiguous nature of hybrid/irregular tools, the constantly evolving toolkit employed by threat agents, and the transnational dimensions that frequently extend beyond a single jurisdiction. Moreover, adversaries retain a fundamental asymmetrical advantage by being able to choose the time and place of operations. While this reactive posture is partly attributable to the inherent nature of hybrid/irregular threats, it nevertheless exposes limitations in existing approaches to be addressed by using strategic innovation, enhanced intelligence capabilities and more agile operational frameworks.

Developing more effective countermeasures shall require not only technical improvements but also a shift toward preventative and anticipatory security models that can better predict or pre-empt hybrid/irregular threats before they materialize.

The final section outlines a set of policing-centered recommendations to support this transition and to build resilience against hybrid/irregular warfare.

The interviewees were asked to assess how their detection of hybrid/irregular threats contributed to the overall success of international missions. Notably, some participants (e.g., Interviewee #9) were unable to provide an assessment. This suggests that professionals directly engaged in policing activities often lack a comprehensive understanding of how their tactical functions feed into broader strategic outcomes in countering hybrid/irregular threats. Nevertheless, Interviewee #4 stressed that identifying hybrid/irregular strategies was essential for developing adaptive strategies capable of addressing the “full spectrum of awareness.”

This perspective positions threat detection not merely as a tactical task but as a core element of strategic planning. It supports the anticipation of emerging security challenges, the calibration of resources to address priority threats, the development of appropriate countermeasures tailored to threat vectors and continuous adaptation. Interviewee #3 highlighted that **the “police mindset” was crucial in countering hybrid/irregular threats before, during and after NATO missions.**

The value of this perspective can be illustrated through the example of Kosovo, where international police units coordinated interactions between local authorities and international actors. This integrated approach ultimately contributed to long-term stability in the region by strengthening local capacities, establishing consistent security standards

during transitional phases and ensuring effective information-sharing across the main stakeholders. Another compelling example came from Mali. Interviewee #6 recounted how French forces became the target of rebel-driven disinformation campaigns accusing them of war crimes. In response, provost gendarmes conducted a professional and independent investigation that disproved the allegations. Their findings, communicated to the United Nations, determined that the accusations were unfounded and effectively countered a misinformation campaign that could otherwise have polarized the international forces operating in the region. This case demonstrates how the successful detection and response to hybrid/irregular threats can enhance mission effectiveness not only through immediate security improvements but also by preserving operational legitimacy, maintaining cohesion among international deployments and establishing foundations for sustainable security solutions beyond the duration of a single mission. These examples illustrate how policing capabilities provide unique and complementary tools to counter hybrid/irregular threats alongside conventional military approaches.

4.e Future Considerations

In the final section, the interviewees shifted their focus toward anticipating the evolution of hybrid/irregular warfare and identifying the strategic adaptations required to meet emerging challenges. Collectively, their assessment outlines an increasingly volatile and unpredictable security environment. Under these conditions, significant innovation in both operational and institutional practice is required. Interviewees #1, #2, #3, #4, #9 and #11 predicted substantial transformations in the character of hybrid/irregular warfare to converge onto three overarching trajectories likely to shape the future threat landscape:

- **Increased Kinetic Dimension:** Several interviewees argued that future hybrid/irregular warfare is expected to integrate greater physical violence alongside information and cyber operations. This anticipated shift suggests an increasing convergence between so-called “gray-zone” activities and conventional warfare, thereby blurring traditional boundaries between these categories.
- **Deepening Integration into Civilian Life:** Hybrid/irregular threats are expected to infiltrate even more profoundly into civilian daily life. Adversaries will increasingly exploit *vulnerabilities in the social sphere*, critical services and civilian infrastructures, treating these domains as strategic battlegrounds rather than collateral damage. This trend reflects a growing emphasis on leveraging access to healthcare, education or utilities as strategic levers to destabilize governance and erode societal resilience from within.
- **Technology-Enabled Threats:** Emerging technologies were widely identified as critical enablers of new hybrid/irregular threats. Innovation in artificial intelligence (AI), unmanned systems, deepfake technology and cyber capabilities are expected to significantly expand the operational toolkit available to both state and non-state actors. The accelerating pace of technological breakthrough was viewed as a primary driver of unpredictability, complicating threat prediction, attribution and response across the security landscape.

Beyond this crucial transformation, respondents also anticipated an increase in proxy conflicts driven by shifting global political balances (Interviewee #4) and an ongoing blurring of boundaries between criminal violence and hybrid/irregular warfare (Interviewee #3). This anticipated evolution underscores the importance of developing and adaptive security approach capable of addressing threat vectors that may not be yet fully conceptualized.

Considering these challenges, the respondents identified three domains requiring immediate improvement to more effectively counter hybrid/irregular threats. First, they emphasized the need to develop more specialized units with expertise in the non-kinetic domains of hybrid/irregular warfare (Interviewees #1, #2 and #7). This correlates with reported shortcomings in training opportunities (e.g., Interviewees #2 and #5). As Interviewee #9 observed, limitations in policing effectiveness against hybrid/irregular threats often stem from human factors rather than technological or resource constraints. Enhanced professional development must therefore be treated as a priority investment. Second, the interviewees stressed that their limited engagement with the operational environment weakened overall security effectiveness. Insufficient contextual understanding not only hampers the ability of police units to “connect the dots” through civilian networks but also directly jeopardizes the safety of international personnel (Interviewee #1). Pre-deployment training must thus be regarded as a mission-critical capability rather than a supplementary component. Third, the respondents identified gaps in interagency cooperation. Data and protocols frequently remain confined within individual agencies rather than being shared across the broader system. Interviewee #11 pointed to the example of different organizations supporting civilian-sector reform in Ukraine. Some activities were duplicated across agencies, while others remained unaddressed. Similarly, Ukrainian forces trained separately by the United States and European Union member states adopted diverging best practices, which undermined interoperability. To mitigate these challenges, the respondents advocated for more standardized protocols, joint planning and shared operational frameworks (Interviewees #2 and #3). The European Union Hybrid Fusion Cell was cited as a positive example of effective coordination as it centralized intelligence to inform EU institutions and member states about hybrid/irregular threats (Interviewee #8). Taken together, these findings suggest that while tactical capabilities remain essential, the most

decisive improvements required may lie at the institutional and strategic levels.

Considering the substantial contributions policing makes in preventing and addressing a wide spectrum of hybrid/irregular threats, the respondents emphasized the need to **elevate Stability Policing within NATO's operational framework**. Interviewee #3 noted persistent difficulties in convincing military counterparts from different nations of the strategic value that policing brings to international missions. This resistance appears rooted in traditional military cultures that undervalue the non-kinetic security approach and regard policing as a secondary function rather than a core capability. Such cultural barriers later manifest in operational environments, where policing perspectives often remain marginalized in the planning or decision-making process regarding resource allocation, thereby limiting the potential impact of these specialized capabilities. The interviewees identified several critical lines of action for strengthening the role of policing within NATO operations:

- **Educational Integration:** Interviewee #9 advocated for the incorporation of a policing approach into traditional military education. Exposing military officers to policing perspectives early in their professional development fosters the creation of shared military-police frameworks and cultivates a greater appreciation for the complementary capabilities that police forces contribute to complex operations.
- **Inclusion in Operational Decision-Making:** Interviewee #6 called for a systematic integration of gendarmerie-type officers into operational decision-making rationale. Policing perspectives are needed at all levels where tactical decisions and planning are made, and resources are allocated. Incorporating law enforcement expertise within the command structures ensures that hybrid/irregular threats
 - particularly those requiring non-kinetic, investigative or

population-centric responses - are addressed with appropriate professional expertise.

- **Strategic Communication Enhancement:** Respondents highlighted the need for an effective dissemination of successful policing operations to demonstrate their value within NATO missions. Showcasing law enforcement capabilities such as community engagement, investigative expertise and non-kinetic threat management helps challenge entrenched perceptions that often marginalize policing in favor of traditional military approaches. By emphasizing **complementarity of policing rather than competition with the military** (Interviewee #2) positions the civil-military nature of gendarmerie-type forces as an asset across international missions (Interviewees #3 and #11).
- **Doctrinal Reform:** At the institutional level, Interviewee #4 identified the need to revise and integrate NATO doctrine on Stability Policing. This includes the setup of guidelines for employing policing capabilities, developing a framework for consistent implementation across operational context, institutionalizing policing as a core component of NATO mission, and creating formal mechanisms to embed policing perspectives into the planning process. Elevating Stability Policing within the NATO context therefore represents more than an organizational adjustment. It reflects broader recognition that contemporary security challenges - especially hybrid/irregular threats - require a multidimensional approach that integrate military and policing capabilities into a complementary and consistent framework.

5. DISCUSSION

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The interview analysis clearly underscored the relationship between core elements of policing expertise and distinctive features of irregular/hybrid warfare, particularly from the perspective of countering such threats. This connection becomes especially evident when examining both the modus operandi of hybrid/irregular actors and the potential countermeasures implemented, and it is even more pronounced when threats manifest in ways that directly involve civilian populations - whether through acts of violence or through the manipulation of civil society as a vector for malign interference. These observations point to the centrality of the human factor for both policing activities and the objectives pursued in irregular/hybrid warfare. On this basis, policing may prove crucial not only in anti-irregular warfare roles but also in broader anti-hybrid capacity. In exploring how policing intersects with responses to irregular/hybrid threats, one key determinant is the extent to which these attacks implicate civilian populations. This factor significantly elevates the relevance of police capabilities in detecting, investigating and understanding irregular/hybrid warfare incidents. To address the question regarding Stability Policing potential effectiveness as a critical counter-irregular/hybrid instrument, the following discussion draws on the insights of the experts interviewed in this study - supplemented with additional analytical and speculative reasoning - to illustrate the multiple points of interaction between policing expertise and the mechanisms characteristic of irregular/hybrid warfare.

5.a Irregular/Hybrid Warfare and Organized Crime

Numerous parallels can be identified between organized crime and irregular/hybrid warfare. As with hybrid/irregular threats, there is no

universally accepted definition of organized crime. Following von Lampe, “there are at least three different notions of the core nature of organized crime: one centered on criminal activity, one centered on criminal organization, and one centered on illegal governance”.¹⁰⁰ As noted in the introduction, irregular/hybrid warfare aims to exploit or target civilian populations to achieve tactical, operational and strategic objectives. Organized crime, by contrast, seeks to consolidate power within segments of society that are most accessible or most vulnerable.¹⁰¹ Despite differing motivations, the operational execution of both organized crime and contemporary forms of irregular/hybrid warfare inevitably involves civil society.

This section will delve into two critical similarities - namely, the penetration of the human environment and the substitution of legitimate institutions - before identifying key divergences in their respective modus operandi.

Penetration of the Human Environment

The first major commonality between irregular/hybrid warfare and organized crime (OC) lies in their shared penetration of the human environment. Existing doctrine widely recognizes that OC infiltrates and gradually corrupts the social fabric, embedding its power - whether through financial resources, coercive power or strategic access to key assets - within communities that conceal and sustain its operations. As noted by Nicola Gratteri, the Public Prosecutor of Naples (Italy) and one of the most prominent Italian magistrates combating the Calabrian mafia, the *Ndrangheta* demonstrated a sophisticated ability to infiltrate the economic fabric of society, creating a dangerous symbiosis between illicit

¹⁰⁰ Von Lampe, “*Organized Crime: Analyzing illegal activities, criminal structures and extra-legal governance*”, 27-30.

¹⁰¹ Neuman M., Elsenbroich C. (2016). Introduction: the societal dimension of organized crime. Springer Science+Business Media. New York, 2016, p. 7-8.

and licit activities.¹⁰² Concurrently, corruption plays a crucial role in this process as it enables criminal organizations to expand their influence.¹⁰³ Crucially, such infiltration is neither random nor solely attributable to historical or geographical contingencies. Rather, OC strategically exploits moments of social crises to their advantage. This report issued by the Italian Parliament's Permanent Commission on Mafia-Type Organized Crime on 22 June 2021 reiterated this point by stating that criminal groups “are born and thrive on the basis of social poverty and inequalities, and over them strengthen their power and their wealth”.¹⁰⁴ Echoing this assessment, one interviewee introduced the concept of a *governance gap* or *governance void*, highlighting that “the primary objective of [...] organized crime [is] that, filling the void present in the governance, [it] penetrates and erodes the institutions to grant the ongoing of its illegal activities” (Interviewee #3).

Historically, mafia-type organizations have consolidated power by stepping into the vacuum left by governmental institutions that were structurally weak or temporarily unable to meet the needs of local populations, for instance, following the unification of the Italian Kingdom in the 19th century or in the aftermath of the World Wars.¹⁰⁵ The centrality of corruption in empowering criminal organizations underscores that structural weakness in public governance functions as a powerful pull factor for criminal interference into civil governance. This logic was

¹⁰² Gratteri and Nicasio, “Una cosa sola”.

¹⁰³ Gratteri and Nicasio, “Padrini e padroni – Come la ‘ndrangheta è diventata classe dirigente”.

¹⁰⁴ Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the phenomenon of mafias and other criminal associations, including foreign ones. “Relazione Intermedia XX Comitato per la prevenzione e la repressione delle attività predatorie della criminalità organizzata durante l'emergenza sanitaria”, 197.

¹⁰⁵ Acemoglu D., De Feo G., De Luca G.D. (2020). Weak States: Causes and Consequences of the Sicilian Mafia. *The Review of Economic Studies*, Volume 87, Issue 2, March 2020, Pages 538, 542 <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdz009>.

explicitly echoed by one interviewee, who observed that “there is one aspect that [...] can assimilate hybrid warfare with organized crime is that – as I could observe in my experience – opponent actors, that are known to utilize hybrid warfare maneuvers, tend to pivot their activities around local population, gaining their trust through an effective replacement of governmental/official institutions, particularly where these institutions are ineffective, corrupted or in general non reliable. In this way, the opponent/malign actors can find the support of considerable masses of people, that they use to put pressure/influence the governmental stakeholders or to oppose legitimate actions/operations of their opponents” (Interviewee #1). This statement highlights a core insight: according to the respondents ‘practical experience, irregular/hybrid maneuvers rely on leveraging populations and are successful only as far as that the existing level of governance is insufficient or weakened. A second respondent noted that “irregular and hybrid warfare has the final objective to destabilize the governance to increase the authority (and the power) of a power center which fill gaps in the governance with its own actors” (Interview #2) thus reinforcing this notion of governance gaps that influence irregular/hybrid manoeuvres.

From a policing standpoint, the similarities between irregular/hybrid warfare and the infiltration of public institutions by organized crime are striking.¹⁰⁶ Despite their differing strategic objectives, both phenomena depend on strategic maneuvering within societal structures. A major challenge in detection and contrast to these threats is that their tactics do not always constitute standalone crimes. For instance, large-scale economic investments designed to destabilize a region may outwardly resemble legitimate financial transactions. This illustrates the “dangerous symbiosis” described by Mr. Gratteri,¹⁰⁷ where legal and non-legal

¹⁰⁶ The same applies to terrorism, which NATO doctrine classifies as a form of irregular warfare.

¹⁰⁷ Gratteri and Nicasio, “Una cosa sola”.

transactions intertwine, allowing criminals to expand their footprint within society while remaining obscured from detection. Such “symbiosis” complicates identification and legal intervention. However, law enforcement agencies with extensive experience in combating OC developed specialized investigative tools, strategies and tactics designed to navigate structural barriers. These capabilities may hold significant applicability for countering irregular/hybrid threats as well.

Regarding infiltration strategies targeting institutional vulnerabilities, one interviewee noted, “it is necessary to keep in mind the inherent institutional weakness and corruption that undermines the effectiveness of [country in the Middle East] law enforcement. This is also true considering hybrid/irregular threats, where these issues tend to undermine confidence towards institutions/governance” (Interviewee #4). In other words, this might be termed as a systemic vulnerability paradigm: wherever governance is depleted by corruption or other misconduct, the environment becomes vulnerable to irregular/hybrid interference. Another respondent reinforced this parallel between OC and irregular/hybrid maneuvers, explaining that “factions [non-state entities engaged in irregular/hybrid activities] are also using their local power base to engage in activities like drug trafficking, land grabs, or extortion. This either serves self-enrichment of its leaders, to pay for social services to loyal groups, or to pay for a political platform of its leaders” (Interviewee #8). In this sense, actors employing irregular/hybrid warfare consolidate their consensus through dual logic: they simultaneously assume quasi-welfare functions within local communities while not disdaining traditional criminal activities. Conversely, one interviewee argued that countering irregular/hybrid threats means “not only [...] move to a place and stop the disorders, it is necessary to be also aware of the hybrid threats. If in the places in which we are posted the return of the state and its institutions is needed, someone must support the people to trust the institutions again” (Interviewee #7). From this

perspective, the effective contrast to irregular/hybrid threats calls for the eradication of the structural root causes and enablers entrenched in the poor governance. A tactical illustration of this dynamic was offered by Interviewee #9, who described how even basic humanitarian relief efforts can expose vulnerabilities if mismanaged: “My responsibilities extended beyond security to include addressing the basic needs of the local population such as food, shelter, and healthcare. [...] If I could not safeguard the food supply or health facilities, it would create vulnerabilities that could be exploited by those sympathetic to terrorists. Any lapse in our duty can be used as propaganda to sway neutral individuals to support the terrorists”.

Replacement of Legitimate Institutions

Attempts to penetrate the social environment at its most prominent levels are rarely confined to cultivating networks of influence capable of steering community dynamics. Reports indicate that criminal organizations infiltrate official institutions not only through corruption and blackmail, but also by systematically installing their own affiliates in key positions of authority.¹⁰⁸ The progressive occupation of influential roles within public administration ensures both protection from law enforcement scrutiny and privileged access to state resources. This process enables criminal groups to take control over population by monopolizing public and administrative services, as well as shape public narratives at the same time to expand their power and assets. Multiple respondents drew parallels between these strategies in relation to irregular/hybrid maneuvers. One interviewee emphasized that “in post conflict situations in which the governance was instable, thanks to my experience as policeman and investigator I had the opportunity to notice

¹⁰⁸ Council of the European Union, General Secretariat, Analysis and Research Team (July 2025). Organised Crime: A growing threat to democracy. Published by the General Secretariat of the EU. Page 7

how the criminal organizations that we can call centers of power or terrorist groups were able at immediately replacing the sits left empty by the official institutional actors” (Interviewee #3). As previously noted, irregular/hybrid warfare frequently engages civilian populations as active leverage rather than passive bystanders. Securing control over communities grants irregular/hybrid actors advantages like those sought by OC: concealment together with direct access to a mobilized civilian base. Social control translates directly into political legitimacy, operational cover and resources to entrench supremacy. One interviewee reiterated this point, observing that “I could observe [...] opponent actors, that are known to utilize hybrid warfare maneuvers, tend to pivot their activities around local population, gaining their trust through an effective replacement of governmental/official institutions, particularly where these institutions are ineffective, corrupted or in general non reliable. [...] The malign actors find support of the masses of people, which they can use to pressure governmental stakeholders and to oppose legitimate actions by their opponents” (Interviewee #3).

When shifting focus from the specific mechanisms through which irregular/hybrid actors replace official institutions to their broader *modus operandi*, a striking parallel emerges with legitimate political strategies based on consensus-building based on a given narrative. This dynamic mirrors dilemmas seen in domestic governance contexts, where individuals known to be affiliated with criminal organizations nevertheless secure legitimate electoral victories.¹⁰⁹ One interviewee highlighted the convergence of strategies across different irregular/hybrid actors, noting that “in both cases [the cases of two

¹⁰⁹ In 1977, in Quindici (Italy), Pasquale Raffaele Graziano was elected mayor while serving a prison sentence and despite being a leading figure in the Camorra criminal organization. Contemporary reports describe a sweeping victory, with crowds of local supporters gathering outside the Avellino prison to celebrate his election. Mentioned by Brancaccio L., Castellano C. (2015). *Affari di camorra. Famiglie, imprenditori e gruppi criminali*. Donzelli editore. Page 165.

terrorist organizations, operating respectively in the Middle East and Central Asia], the non-state actors leveraged hybrid tactics not only to resist but to expand their influence and create zones of control. This approach allowed them to operate with a degree of fluidity, shifting between irregular combat, terrorism, and psychological operations to exploit weaknesses in conventional military operations” (Interviewee #12). In these cases, civilian populations are not merely a means of concealment but a deliberate force multiplier and a direct source of power. This reliance on people’s support is typical of mafia-type criminal organizations, while other types of OC groups do not really leverage on broad societal backing.

Below, further sections will explore how police expertise becomes relevant for detecting and countering these threats. However, the fundamental challenge in combating organized crime arises from distinguishing legitimate democratic expression from illicit coercion through manipulation. For instance, Italian legislation allows the central government to dissolve municipal administrations - even those elected through formal democratic procedures - when compelling evidence shows that criminal organizations is compromising democracy.¹¹⁰ To justify such extreme measures, investigators must produce evidence admissible in court proving that what appeared to be a free and democratic choice was, in reality, distorted by criminal interference. This type of judicially robust evidence requires highly specialized investigative capabilities.¹¹¹ Authorities must simultaneously analyze

¹¹⁰ Specifically, the dissolution of locally elected bodies due to infiltration by mafia-type organized crime is governed by Articles 143–146 of the Italian Code of Local Administrations (Testo Unico degli Enti Locali), Legislative Decree No. 267 of 18 August 2000.

¹¹¹ The administrative procedure allowing for the dissolution of local elected bodies due to infiltration or undue influence by organized crime in the Italian system—initiated by the President of the Republic upon government recommendation—is subject to review by the

criminal behavior from both individuals and their networks and analyze the broader social and administrative environment that could reveal evidence of undue influence. It is therefore unsurprising that the parallels between irregular/hybrid warfare and OC were most clearly articulated by the interviewees with extensive law enforcement experience.

Other Similarities (and Apparent Differences) between OC and Irregular/Hybrid Modus Operandi

Before examining further similarities, it is essential to clarify the differences between organized crime and irregular/hybrid warfare. All interviewees concurred that the primary distinction lies in the ultimate objective driving their activities. As one interviewee observed, “the difference between crime and hybrid war lies in the reasons of the criminal behavior” (Interviewee #1). A second law enforcement officer expanded on this by explaining that “criminal violence could be related just to the private interests of a person or of a criminal organization and it aims to increase the own authority and the own power - which is the typical organized crime modus operandi” (Interviewee #2). Similarly, Interviewee #4 argued that “irregular and hybrid warfare are forms of conflict often linked to political or ideological objectives, criminal warfare is driven by economic gain”. Taken together, these viewpoints emphasize a core distinction: organized crime generally pursues individualistic, economically quantifiable benefits (such as financial profit or influence), whereas irregular/hybrid actors primarily seek political outcomes. This traditional differentiation between the two threat categories is further discussed in Section 4.a.

Beyond this dichotomous relationship, several interviewees noted a potential overlap between the two domains. One respondent referred to OC and irregular/hybrid warfare as “different but potentially connected

administrative judiciary, to which representatives of the dissolved administration may appeal.

phenomena” (Interviewee #2). Another underscored the risks of overly narrow definitions, noting: “I believe that the difference between crime and hybrid war lies in the reasons (objectives) of the criminal behavior. Hypothetically, even the presence of criminals on the territory, especially those linked to organized crime, if they received subsidies for specific criminal acts, should be considered part of hybrid maneuvering aimed at destabilizing the country and its government. Always hypothetically, a foreign state or a terrorist organization, can finance criminal organizations to carry out certain crimes in a nation, to destabilize it and push the population to ask something from the legitimate government” (Interviewee #1). This contribution provides two key insights. First, OC can inherently undermine governance and function as a form of irregular/hybrid warfare in its own right. Second, actors conducting irregular/hybrid operations - including third states - may deliberately exploit organized crime networks as a tool to further their strategic aims. These points further intertwine phenomena that are traditionally viewed as distinct. Moreover, the objectives of irregular/hybrid actors and organized crime groups may converge. State-driven irregular/hybrid maneuvers, for instance, may be motivated by economic interests such as the appropriation of the natural resources or the facilitation of criminal enterprise like human trafficking. When viewed through this lens, economic motives alone cannot serve as a definitive criterion for distinguishing between these two threat categories. Instead, the blurred boundary between political, economic, and criminal objectives represents a strategic advantage for both OC and irregular/hybrid actors.¹¹²

At a more tactical level, the experts identified additional parallels in the modus operandi of organized crime and irregular/hybrid actors. As one

¹¹² Criminal organizations may also develop motivational narratives that extend beyond simple profit from illicit activities, encompassing broader objectives such as rebellion against societal norms, fight against perceived injustice, or actions driven by religious motivations.

interviewee explained, both rely on “intimidation and the systematic elimination of opponents” to establish “the safe and supportive environment that is the base for their operations” (Interviewee #1). The same interviewee - one of the most knowledgeable specialists consulted - added that “this infiltration [into local society] happened almost exclusively - at least from my point of view and according to the information I had access to - through financial-economical maneuvers, such as investments or acquisitions of royalties/contracts” (Interviewee #1). He further recalled observing more conventional criminal activities conducted by hybrid actors alongside organized crime groups in the Sahel region, where he “could also observe activities typical of organized crime conducted by the [local] tribes in the North, mainly involved into the trafficking of human beings. [...] Although these criminal activities were conducted for economical gain and therefore cannot be considered a form of hybrid maneuvers, they were to some extent facilitated by the governing authorities also thanks to the pressure put exercised political representatives of the groups. They had managed, as example, to not establish robust patrolling patterns in these geographical areas” (Interviewee #1). As a result, he concluded further that “this form of criminality involving political means and tools might well be exploited for political-operational reasons, as a tool in the availability of the hybrid warfare actor and therefore could be considered as a significant modus operandi in the hybrid warfare maneuvering” (Interviewee #1). This statement reinforces the fluid boundaries between organized crime and irregular/hybrid activities as perceived by the interviewed experts.

A particular emphasis must also be placed on strategic communication and media operations, which constitute some of the most prominent instruments in the irregular/hybrid warfare toolkit. At first glance, these appear unrelated to organized crime, which typically seeks concealment and covert operations rather than public visibility or overt campaigns.

Nonetheless, some instances suggest that criminal groups may also exploit media spaces when it serves their interests.

There is at least one example of organized crime attempting to use media for strategic purposes.

A relevant example concerns the so-called “*harsh detention*” laws, which impose stricter confinement measures on convicted members of criminal or terrorist organizations.¹¹³ Judicial history shows that mafia leaders strongly feared the introduction of the *41-bis* prison regime in the early 1990s¹¹⁴ - a fear that, according to some interpretations, contributed to the escalation of terrorist attacks carried out by the Sicilian mafia in Rome, Florence and Milan in 1993.¹¹⁵ Their resistance stemmed not only from the severity of the new confinement conditions but also from the accompanying legislative measures that incentivized collaboration of imprisoned criminals with authorities. These provisions offered substantial sentence reductions and the possibility of new identities to those who cooperated with law enforcement. For mafia organizations,

¹¹³ The so-called *carcere duro* (strict imprisonment regime) was introduced into Italian law through Article 41-bis of the Penitentiary Organization Law (Law 354 of 26 July 1975, “Norme sull’ordinamento penitenziario e sulla esecuzione delle misure privative e limitative della libertà”) in January 1993. The most recent update was made through Decree 48, dated 11 April 2025. This regime establishes more stringent imprisonment conditions for individuals convicted of offenses related to organized crime or terrorism, aiming to prevent any form of contact with members of their criminal networks.

¹¹⁴ On 1 March 1993, a delegation of relatives of individuals convicted of mafia-related crimes and detained under the newly introduced restrictive regime submitted a communication to the President of the Italian Republic and other national authorities.

¹¹⁵ The stricter detention measures for individuals convicted or accused of crimes linked to mafia-type organized crime were introduced in the penitentiary regulations in January 1993. Between May and July 1993, terrorist attacks attributed to the Sicilian mafia organization *Cosa Nostra* took place. No direct evidence has been established linking the introduction of Article 41-bis of the penitentiary law to these attacks. Regarding the 1993 terrorist incidents - six car-bombs, five of which detonated, resulting in 10 deaths and over 80 injuries - the Italian Supreme Court *Corte di Cassazione* confirmed 19 life sentences against those responsible, all members of the Sicilian mafia *Cosa Nostra*.

this dual mechanism was perceived as an existential threat. For this reason, it is widely believed - although no direct judicial proof has been established¹¹⁶ - that the introduction of the *41-bis* regime was a trigger for the subsequent terrorist escalation.

Beyond the potential resort to violence, another noteworthy reaction emerged. On 1 March 1993, a letter was sent to the President of the Italian Republic and other national authorities by a group of self-proclaimed relatives of individuals convicted for mafia-related crimes and detained under the newly introduced regulations. The signatories denounced the alleged inhumanity of the detention conditions and appealed to the Christian values attributed to the Head of State. The letter was also circulated to a regional newspaper, two well-known journalists, and several representatives of the Roman Catholic Church - including the Pope.

Assuming the letter was authentic, it clearly functioned not merely as an institutional appeal but as a communication tool designed for public dissemination. Its likely aim was to generate social and moral criticism of the *41-bis* regime within civil society.

The exploitation of media was also observed by the interviewees, noting: "I have encountered hybrid/irregular threats such as the use of media and social networks disseminating fake news (disinformation and misinformation) and the use of terroristic suicide attacks (explosive) against local law enforcement agencies" (Interviewee #2). Judicial records similarly provide numerous examples of criminal organizations directly

¹¹⁶ Specifically, the "repentant" Salvatore Cancemi, who was the right-hand man of *Cosa Nostra* boss Salvatore Riina, testified on 9 November 1993 before the Public Prosecutor of Palermo, confirming the organization's intent to do "everything" to achieve a revision of both the Article 41-bis imprisonment regime and the law concerning "repentants." This is documented in the *Relazione Conclusiva* of the Italian Parliament's 16th Legislature, *Commissione Parlamentare di Inchiesta sul fenomeno della mafia e sulle altre associazioni criminali*, including foreign criminal organizations, page 357.

targeting law enforcement officers and magistrates - an integral and tragic chapter in Italy's contemporary struggle against the mafia.¹¹⁷ Beyond isolated attacks, a noteworthy episode was the failed bombing attempt against a bus carrying Carabinieri officers in January 1993, executed through a car bomb triggered after a soccer match. The attack ultimately failed due to a malfunction in the remote detonation control.¹¹⁸ When revisiting Interviewee #8's observations about irregular/hybrid actors he encountered during international missions - where "factions are using their local power base to engage in activities like drug trafficking, land grabs or extortion. This either serves self-enrichment of its leaders, to pay for social services to its loyal groups or to pay for a political platform of its leaders" - a substantial alignment can be identified with the traditional operational patterns of OC.

A less conventional - though evenly powerful - tactic of irregular/hybrid warfare is the deliberate spread of fake news to slander or delegitimize opponents. One interviewee recounted "a specific instance where someone in a position of power used misinformation to maintain his role and discredit another person [...] he was using this tactic [...] to undermine the mission's progress and credibility" (Interviewee #8). This strategy mirrors long-standing organized criminal techniques: OC groups have historically relied on intimidation, or disinformation campaigns to discredit investigators, disrupt judicial processes, or erode public trust in law enforcement institutions. Further statement from one interviewee with experience in Ukraine listed irregular/hybrid tactics including

¹¹⁷ Among numerous victims, two Carabinieri Captains were killed by the Mafia in 1980 and 1983, respectively. In 1982, Carabinieri General Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa was assassinated after being appointed Prefetto (i.e., the government's provincial representative) of Palermo. In 1992, Public Prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, along with their police security escorts, were killed in Palermo. Judge Falcone had been one of the main proponents of the Article 41-bis detention regime.

¹¹⁸ This attack, carried out by Cosa Nostra in 1993, was allegedly intended to pressure the government into lifting the Article 41-bis imprisonment regime. See footnote no. 113.

“disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, support for protest and public unrest, combined with subversive actions, sabotage and espionage” (Interviewee #11). These actions present multiple similarities with OC operations: subversive mechanisms such as espionage are often employed by criminal networks to infiltrate law enforcement and judicial bodies and often combined with intentional damage against competing business controlled by rival groups. Likewise, criminal organizations have a history of mobilizing civilian protests to obstruct police operations in territories where they are heavily infiltrated, effectively leveraging crowds to shield against or delay law enforcement activities.¹¹⁹ Their exploitation of cyber technologies - including money laundering, blackmail and financial fraud - likewise parallels the digital toolkit increasingly used for their objectives.¹²⁰

Taken together, this analysis shows that organized crime groups and actors employing irregular/hybrid tools rely on strikingly similar strategies. The convergence of their tactics underscores the essential role of law enforcement not only in combating criminal enterprises but also in countering irregular and hybrid threats more broadly.

¹¹⁹ To name a few: - In March 1994, following the arrest of a local mobster, Sebastiano “Iano” Ferrara, in Messina (Sicily), a group of mob affiliates gathered in the streets and near the local Tribunal to intimidate law enforcement and to pay homage to the arrested criminal. The event was widely reported by national media at the time (see, among others, Fanpage, 4 Aug 2018); - In January 2025, in Spanish Town (Jamaica) multiple street incidents and protests followed the police shooting of a prominent gang leader, Othneil “Thickman” Lobban (reported by The Guardian, 23 Jan 2025).

¹²⁰ Nicasio A., Rauti W. (2024). Cyber Organized crime. Le mafie nel cyberspace. Analisi e strumenti di policy. Pubblicato da Fondazione Magna Grecia, Roma. Pag.46-70.

5.b Countering Irregular/Hybrid Threats: The Advantage of the Police Perspective

Building on the connection between criminal violence and irregular/hybrid threats discussed in Section 5.a, the findings underscore that police expertise plays a pivotal role not only in countering criminal activity but also in addressing the maneuvering strategies characteristic of the irregular/hybrid domain. This places particular emphasis on Stability Policing, which remains NATO's only expeditionary civil police capability to date. In this section, the research team examined three core areas through which policing expertise can contribute to countering irregular/hybrid threats: (1) police as a criminal investigative capability, (2) community-oriented policing, and (3) ethical policing.

Police as a Criminal Investigative Capability in Countering Irregular/Hybrid Threats

The fight against organized crime - regardless of the underlying legal framework - requires highly specialized investigative skills that combine managerial capability, awareness of the historical evolution, group-specific insights (including membership and territorial dynamics), operational intelligence, and familiarity with legal procedures across jurisdictions. OC often is transnational which further complicates legal proceedings across jurisdictions. In other words, successful investigations hinge on an ability to navigate complexity across multiple dimensions, integrating technical expertise with first-hand experience experiential insights that reveal concealed dynamics. This unique policing capability emerged in the transcripts of Interviewee #1, currently the head of an investigative police unit. This one had previously served in the army and had been deployed in several stabilization missions in crisis areas. In reflecting on his professional journey, he recalled: I experienced deployments in theatres of operation in three different phases of my professional life: as an infantry officer - at the beginning of my career -

then as a police officer [...] and finally as a police officer specialized in the specific sector connected to hybrid warfare-psyops [psychological operations]. I can say that in the first part of my career I experienced a tactical and task-oriented mindset, as an infantryman, while as police officer my approach to the operations on the field was considerably wider, focused not only on the task assigned, but also on the constant research of information, typical of the law enforcement mindset, aiming to detect possible future threats or even the mere evolution of the area of operations - an upcoming public demonstration or a protest. While as infantryman my approach was only oriented and concentrated on the tactical tasks I was assigned to (Interviewee #1).

While this does not imply that other military branches lack such capabilities, this excerpt highlights how police training equips personnel to analyze complex social phenomena through a distinct analytical lens.

A similar perspective was expressed by another interviewee, who described the professional skills that enhanced his understanding of irregular/hybrid threats: "the more experience is developed, the easier it becomes to detect the indicators. Professional experience as investigator in my own country has been helpful, considering that it provided very useful tools to detect and define this peculiar warfare. A police approach is completely different from the military one. Because, for a policeman, to dig deeper and analyze what does not appear immediately clear is a *forma mentis*. Without stopping at the first visible appearance of an issue." (Interviewee #2). This distinction between military and police methodologies was further emphasized by Interviewee #3, who declared: "the most peculiar attitude of the policeman who does not limit the duty to the mere patrolling but are trained to observe and look behind the appearance, so being able at understanding the environment through a quick and deep analysis of it." (Interviewee #3)

In investigating complex phenomena, understanding and monitoring the operational context - particularly gathering subtle details and fragments of information that may unlock an investigation - always constitutes the starting point. For police officers, including those engaged in countering irregular/hybrid threats, situational awareness is therefore fundamental. According to the interviewed experts, this skill set represents a standard practice for well-trained police officers. One interviewee emphasized this foundational step by summarizing that “police forces are to be considered an added value [...] due to the specific functions with reference to the investigative profile - starting from the information gathering to the wide range of activities that could be performed to prevent a crime – thanks to their professional baggage of specialized personnel” (Interviewee #2), which enables them to evaluate relevant indicators. Another expert expanded on the added value of police expertise by recalling his experience in mission environments in which “there was a lot of information coming from my activity on the ground and directly gathered from local police [a region of a Middle Eastern country] and from other international actors, but nobody was putting them in a common system that could be useful to provide a complete situational awareness to the decision-makers. It was complicate to explain to the international colleagues belonging to [two Western countries who were leading the mission] that our police background and the related peculiar mindset should have been considered an added value to the mission” (Interviewee #3). In other words, effective police information analysis strengthens a mission’s ability to detect irregular/hybrid threats effectively.

Drawing from experience in multiple operational theatres, the same respondent further observed that “despite the huge number of relevant data gathered, [...] a lot of useful information was wasted because it was not appropriately analyzed and elaborated in a dedicated system” (Interviewee #3). These reflections underscore the centrality of investigative capacities - particularly the ability to manage and organize

large volumes of data - which form the cornerstone of police investigative practice. Another interviewee shared his experience in police capacity-building efforts in the Middle East, detailing the effectiveness of police forces when countering irregular/hybrid threats: "I have experienced how an efficient and performing police service can be effective against the hybrid threat. I can mention the significant difference between a province under the security responsibility of Army, that was the case of the provinces not yet officially cleared by the presence of [terrorist organization] and those whose security was put under the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior [MoI] with the deployment of a [national police force]. As soon as the provinces passed under the responsibility of the MoI, it was possible to sense the different approach to the security issues - including hybrid threats, by terrorist attacks or misinformation campaigns - that focused on information gathering and police intelligence by maintaining stronger attention towards different forms of threat. An army approach was instead more conservative and defense-oriented" (Interviewee #4). These observations highlight how policing capabilities offer distinct advantages - particularly when detecting and analyzing irregular/hybrid threats - through a specialized security approach that differs significantly from traditional military methods.

A slightly different perspective emerged from another interviewee, who drew on his experience in the Sahel to highlight the critical role of professional investigators in debunking false allegations against government forces or international stabilization missions. After describing cases in which gendarmerie-type forces embedded within the stabilization contingent exposed fabricated accusations by rebel groups, he noted that was allowed "twice to personally observe a success thanks to the employment of provost gendarmes, first in [country of Sahel] in 2022 and then in the scene of war crimes in January 2021. In operations to restore the legitimacy of the African authorities - the fight against impunity of African security and defense forces was one of our priorities

- it could not be done other than immediately using legal tools, such as provosts or the EU [European Union] police experts, to legally dismantle charges against our forces. Otherwise, we tried to conduct war against enemies camouflaged within the population without referring to the lessons of the past in counterinsurgency” (Interviewee #6). Why did police intervention succeed where military efforts did not? The expert’s account suggests that professional law enforcement officers - trained to conduct complex investigations involving organized crime - are particularly adept at producing findings that stand up to legal scrutiny. In the case described by Interviewee #6, such expertise proved decisive in convincing both authorities and public opinion of the falsehood of the allegations. As previously discussed, delegitimizing adversaries through disinformation is a well-established irregular/hybrid warfare tactic. The respondent argued that “military commanders should associate gendarmerie-type officers in the decision-making process more systematically, especially against irregular and hybrid threats, because they get used to deal with civil population issues and can better understand their preoccupations and their ways of thinking” (Interviewee #6).

Another interviewee, who had served in numerous crisis areas marked by the presence of terrorist organizations, observed that “in irregular warfare, the target may be defined as a criminal rather than an enemy, and the objective may be to apprehend the target for justice rather than to destroy them. From this perspective, it can be argued that gendarmerie units, which are capable of achieving the same effect as the army with the heavy weapons in their inventory and have the ability to utilize the resources at their disposal in accordance with the law enforcement training, they have received, will be more effective in addressing such threats” (Interviewee #10). This insight directly supports the report’s conclusions: Stability Policing - rooted in the capabilities of gendarmerie-type forces - is exceptionally well suited to countering complex, multi-

layered phenomena such as irregular/hybrid warfare. One respondent also outlined potential measures for countering irregular/hybrid maneuvers that are intrinsically linked to policing, including the ability to “integrate military and police intelligence to identify and dismantle hybrid threat networks” and “coordinate intelligence-sharing with international and host-nation partners” (Interviewee #12). This demonstrates that the strength of police expertise lies not only in technical proficiency but also in its operational mindset - characterized by population engagement, strategic thinking, and nuanced observation.

A crucial insight from the interviews also concerned the connection between criminal investigations and financial tracking, particularly when targeting terrorist organizations. This link directly echoes Interviewee #10's emphasis on prioritizing the investigative approach over conventional military tools. Tracing financial activity within criminal networks is indispensable for assigning responsibility for crimes. Judge Giovanni Falcone, assassinated by the Sicilian mafia in 1992, famously advised investigators to “follow the money and you will find the mafia.”¹²¹ Falcone's team pioneered investigative techniques focused on uncovering the financial relationship surrounding criminal activity. Once revealed, these links enabled authorities not only to dismantle such organizations but also to identify the broader networks supporting them. This approach proved instrumental in securing major convictions during the Palermo “*maxiprocesso*” (1986–1992), which targeted key factions of the Sicilian mafia.¹²² The financial dynamics of hybrid actors - like those of

¹²¹ This sentence has been attributed to the Italian magistrate Giovanni Falcone. A similar wording is reported found in the book *Cose di Cosa Nostra* by Giovanni Falcone and Mareshelle Padovani, chapter V, “Profitti e Perdite,” 1991, BUR.

¹²² The “Maxiprocesso” of Palermo is the name given by journalists to the landmark criminal trial conducted by the Tribunal of Palermo against Cosa Nostra, active in Western Sicily. Defendants faced multiple charges, including murder, drug trafficking, extortion, and mafia-type criminal association - this last being a distinct offense under Italian law. The

organized crime - present considerable legal and technical complexity. Ultimately, effective investigative capabilities do more than identifying individuals responsible for irregular/hybrid warfare actions; they also deter future maneuvers by making them more complex, time-consuming, and cost-prohibitive.

Community-Oriented Policing and Irregular/Hybrid threats

As previously highlighted, policing fundamentally relies on understanding the operational environment by interpreting the societal structures in which police forces operate. Grasping a human environment requires living within it, being embedded in it, and ultimately building cooperative relations. In recent years, this approach has been described as *community policing* or *community-oriented policing*. While no universally accepted definition exists - since police forces implement the concept differently - the most authoritative description appears in United Nations Security Council Resolution 2185 (2014). It defines community-oriented policing as “a strategy for encouraging the public to act as partners with the police in preventing and managing crime as well as other aspects of security and order based on the needs of the community”.¹²³ In essence, it refers to a collaborative effort between law enforcement and the population, rooted in mutual trust.¹²⁴ Some scholars frame this broader dynamic under the term “cooperative security.”¹²⁵

trial earned its nickname due to its unprecedented scale, involving 475 defendants. It concluded with 19 life sentences and a total of 2,665 years of imprisonment for various individuals. Initiated in 1986, the trial proceeded through appeals and a ruling by the Italian Supreme Court - *Corte di Cassazione* - before officially ending in 1992. It is widely regarded as the largest criminal trial in history.

¹²³ United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 2185”.

¹²⁴ United Nations, “Specialized Training Material for UN Police”.

¹²⁵ “Community policing must evolve beyond neighborhood patrols and into frameworks of cooperative security, where law enforcement becomes a facilitator of multi-stakeholder

Why is community-oriented policing effective in countering irregular/hybrid threats? A key finding of this research is the police capability to interpret the operational environment - specifically, their ability to detect subtle indicators that may otherwise remain unnoticed. Working closely with civilians acts as a force multiplier for this capability, creating an early-warning mechanism against threats emerging from irregular/hybrid maneuvers. Such a nuanced understanding of societal dynamics can only be achieved by being embedded within communities and relying on trust-based relations. Once established, this trust enhances community resilience when confronted with irregular/hybrid manoeuvres. One interviewee underlined this point by noting that “law enforcement mainly operates among the population so that they have the perception of feelings among civilians. This peculiarity could intercept the developments of some hybrid warfare activities” (Interviewee #1). He further distinguished the police-civilian relationship from that of military forces by arguing that the “very nature of the mental approach with civilians could be a determining factor in understanding the presence of hybrid operations on the field” (Interviewee #1). Although civilian sentiment may appear intangible, understanding the mood of a community is a core element of policing. This capability provides an early-warning function against threats, particularly because irregular/hybrid warfare deliberately targets populations.

Other experts offered further perspectives on this relationship. One interviewee described his experience in Sub-Saharan and West Africa, noting that “there were not official protocols or tools to be adopted, so I was employing autonomous measures to prevent, mitigate or respond to potential irregular and hybrid threats in accordance with my previous

safety networks”. Mukherjee B.N., Udwerage-Perera R., Meera M., Tripathi S.K. (2025). Rethinking the Police for a Better Future. Navigating Policing Challenges with Accountability and Trust. Springer Nature. Chapter “Building Trust and Collaboration: Community Policing Initiatives”.

professional experiences. [...] I was focusing my attention on information coming from open sources and talking, when there was opportunity, to local population to have a realistic perception of the situation and consequently to modify my behavior if needed. This activity is ordinary for a policeman: only having a direct relation with the population and communicating with people it is possible to have a real perception of the situation on the ground. This is what each [gendarmerie-type officer] does on daily basis when patrolling: community policing” (Interviewee #2). In this case, the local population’s sentiment played a decisive role in identifying irregular/hybrid threats and guiding appropriate tactical adjustments. Reinforcing this point, he added that “the role that law enforcement plays in detecting or addressing the hybrid and irregular threats is crucial since considering that any law enforcement mainly operates among the people, it is easier to have a perception of their personal feelings interacting with them, listening to their problems and answering their questions. The contact that LE [law enforcement] establishes within the territory of competence and with the people living there, is the added value to the work of any military actor deployed in the same place that is different in its essence. The information gathered by LE, when adequately exploited in a proper analysis system by specialized personnel, would help detecting and defeating activities [...] connected to a possible hybrid threat” (Interviewee #2). This underscores that community engagement not only reflects local sentiment but also generates valuable intelligence that can be systematically assessed by trained police analysts.

Another interviewee further highlighted the value of a police approach to intelligence gathering, stressing that - unlike military methodologies - “the police forces capability to communicate with the civilian population is different than the military. Talking, listening and answering to the people is the key to having a complete, realistic and updated frame of the situation. This is one of the most peculiar attitudes of the policeman who

does not limit the duty to the mere patrolling but is trained to observe and look behind the appearance, so being able at understanding the environment through a quick and deep analysis. This SP personnel attitude must be considered a determining factor also in understanding the possible presence of hybrid/irregular operations on the field” (Interviewee #2). Interviewee #3 reinforced the concept that trust-building with local communities strengthens early-warning capabilities against irregular/hybrid threats, noting that “the most important strategy employed community engagement and trust building, building the relationships with local communities to gain trust, which can lead to the early warning of threats. Irregular and hybrid threats are typically detected through a combination of information gathering, surveillance, monitoring of communications or community engagement. One of the most important instruments consists in building relationships with local communities to gather information on potential threats to encourage reporting of suspicious activities and behaviors” (Interviewee #3).

The expert provided a practical explanation for the superior effectiveness of police entities in gathering field intelligence, noting that policing is “benefits from community relationships and local knowledge, facilitating the effective intelligence gathering and early warning systems against irregular and hybrid threats” (Interviewee #3). This highlights the importance of a non-aggressive posture toward local communities, ensuring that police activity centers on cooperation with local communities. ¹²⁶ Stability Policing “benefits from community relationships and local knowledge, facilitating effective intelligence gathering and early-warning systems against irregular and hybrid threats” (Interviewee #3). From this standpoint, community relationships and local insight constitute essential pillars in preventing and countering

¹²⁶ This point is particularly relevant when evaluating critiques regarding the increasing *militarization* of police forces in certain countries, such as the United States.

irregular/hybrid warfare maneuvers. Another interviewee broadened this point by emphasizing that law enforcement contributes well beyond intelligence gathering: “Through intelligence gathering, cyber-security efforts, surveillance and misinformation countering, the law enforcement agencies play a key role in identifying and responding to a complex and multifaceted nature of these threats. Their ability to operate at community levels, collaborate with other agencies and adapt to evolving threats makes them indispensable in the broader strategy to counter hybrid warfare” (Interviewee #4). A particularly valuable insight here is that trusted law enforcement can act as an institutional communication instrument to counter irregular/hybrid threats. When police have established credibility within a community, they are well positioned to disseminate reliable information and undermine malign misinformation campaigns.

Another interviewee further distinguished engagement with local populations from conventional military approach, stating that “compared to militarized approaches, Stability Policing build relationships with local communities, making it more effective in winning hearts and minds compared to purely military approaches” (Interviewee #4). Drawing on his experience in crisis areas, he added that “according to many surveys issued by governmental authorities, people’s trust of the [a nation-level police force, at that time trained by a multinational mission] is growing and along with it the trust on the governmental authorities. This in my opinion decreased significantly the vulnerability of [a country of Middle East] to hybrid warfare maneuvers” (Interviewee #4). The overall discussion clearly shows that trust represents the foundation of community policing, and its positive effects greatly enhance resilience against irregular/hybrid threats.

Building trust requires deliberate investment and careful planning, guided by community-oriented policing principles. When successful, this

approach becomes a powerful tool against one of the most insidious hybrid warfare tactics: misinformation and manipulative strategic narratives. Once a false message spreads, it cannot be fully reversed; responses are limited to damage control aimed at mitigating further repercussions. For this reason, a credible mechanism to prevent civilian polarization is essential to minimize the impact of such attacks. Community policing offers the most viable solution, as police serve as the primary interface between a community and its governing institutions. When law enforcement fosters cooperative relationships through community-oriented policing, it reduces the polarizing effects of misinformation designed to erode public trust in governance. From this perspective, policing fulfills a dual function. First, it acts as an unparalleled observer, capable of detecting early warning signs and gathering intelligence on irregular/hybrid warfare manoeuvrers. Second, it operates as a messenger able to disseminate counter-narratives, leverage community trust to reinforce credibility in public communication. One interviewee illustrated law enforcement's effectiveness in de-escalating unrest through their deep understanding of local dynamics and established community ties: "[The police] engage with parties involved in a crisis and explore peaceful solutions before situations escalate, contrasting it with a purely militarized approach. Stability Policing, with its community engagement and ability to prevent disorder, is better suited for managing public order and irregular threats than a strict military approach. [...] Living within and understanding the dynamics of the community, law enforcement gathers firsthand information and shares it with relevant authorities if needed: a police officer, living in a small or big town, knows the reality and understands the people and their needs" (Interviewee #5). Trust therefore enables effective communication between law enforcement and civilians, enhancing police intelligence-gathering capabilities while also supporting the dissemination of critical messages to counter irregular/hybrid warfare.

One interviewee reflected on his law enforcement experience in the Horn of Africa, underscoring the importance of local engagement in countering terrorism and insurgency. He noted that “the resources that were relevant to enhance my understanding about the hybrid and irregular warfare were related to the public and community engagement such elders, leaders of religious groups and young generations” (Interviewee #13). The significance of counter-messaging in responding to irregular/hybrid threats was further highlighted by Interviewee #6, drawing on his experience in the Sahel region: “Neither the [European country] nor [regional organization] put in place measures to effectively combat disinformation. [...] The result today is the closure of the European EUTM missions in Mali, EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUMPM in Niger, the withdrawal of European and American military contingents from Niger. It became a Western failure, not only a [country of belonging of the interviewee] one” (Interviewee #6). Reporting from the Russia-Ukraine war, Interviewee #7 emphasized the critical need to rebuild public trust in liberated territories: “If [...] the return of the state and its institutions is required, someone must support the people to trust again their institutions. In this field, Stability Policing is a big component because it can deliver the required security and safety feeling to the people” (Interviewee #7). By identifying Stability Policing as the appropriate tool in fragile environments, he stressed its unique ability to succeed where force alone falls short. Its people-centered approach fosters trust and cooperation - essential conditions in irregular/hybrid warfare settings.

Moreover, law enforcement agencies fundamentally serve the population. In irregular/hybrid warfare, threats often emerge from within communities rather than from an external enemy. One interviewee illustrated this with practical examples of how police address daily security concerns: “Traffic accidents will happen in these territories and the police officer that is there must deal with providing immediate and professional answers to the persons involved in the accident. But not only

to them. The real problems for the population are not only related to the booby traps left by Russians or the minefields, but they are connected to their need of security. Only the police can provide it to them. It is necessary to take control of the security in this place, in all dimensions. It is necessary to be trained and prepared” (Interviewee #7). From this perspective, Stability Policing operates as a dual-purpose tool against irregular/hybrid maneuvers. On one hand, it acts as an intelligence-gathering mechanism capable of detecting early warning indicators. On the other, it functions as a counter-messaging force that reinforces governance legitimacy and strengthens resilience against misinformation. One interviewee further emphasized the link between terrorism and misinformation, explaining that “Terrorism and misinformation often reinforce each other. Terrorist groups use violence to instill fear and destabilize the society. Misinformation amplifies such fear, spreads confusion and undermines trust in institutions. By distorting the narrative around terrorist acts or portraying governments as ineffective, misinformation magnifies the psychological impact of terrorism. The combination can erode public morale, disrupt decision-making and even generate sympathy for the terrorist cause by shaping perceptions in their favor. [...] Seeing these two threats work hand in hand likely underscored how irregular warfare extends beyond physical violence into the realm of perception and influence, where controlling the narrative becomes just as crucial as controlling the battlefield” (Interviewee #9).

To counter this threat, one interviewee identified Stability Policing as an effective tool: “Stability Policing units can address the narratives disseminated by irregular forces. If the units are perceived as genuinely working for the well-being of the community, they can challenge any misinformation or negative portrayals spread by adversaries. The legitimacy and positive engagement of Stability Policing can counteract the efforts of irregular groups to sway public opinion and help cultivate a more resilient community that is less susceptible to manipulation”

(Interviewee #9). Such a benefit must be earned through public trust, as he further explained: “Stability Policing plays a pivotal role in addressing irregular and hybrid threats by prioritizing the establishment of trust and nurturing of constructive relationships with local communities. One of the key advantages of Stability Policing units is their more approachable and community-friendly image compared to conventional military forces. This more conciliatory approach can significantly enhance their ability to connect with locals, making it easier to gain trust and support. When communities view Stability Policing units as allies rather than occupying forces, they are more likely to cooperate, share information and engage in collaborative efforts to enhance security. It is therefore essential that this trust is established to facilitate the gathering of intelligence, the early detection of potential threats and the fostering of an environment of stability” (Interviewee #9). As previously noted by Interviewee #3, this friendlier image - distinct from that of traditional military forces - is central to building trust.

This view was reinforced by a counter-terrorism expert who underscored the importance of public relations: “It is of the utmost importance to prioritize public relations activities with the objective of preventing the perception of Stability Policing as occupying forces against different ideological segments in the local population. This is a fundamental aspect that must be emphasized to ensure the success of community policing practices, [...] A lack of community buy-in can lead to resistance and distrust, which in turn hampers cooperation between local authorities and NATO forces. Therefore, fostering a strong sense of legitimacy and ownership within the community is essential for the success of our mission” (Interviewee #10). He added that “it is essential to communicate to the community that they can rely on the support of the relevant authorities and to persuade them that they are there to provide assistance when needed” (Interviewee #10). In line with community-oriented policing principles, this perspective underscores that effective policing is

inherently people-centered. The role of community-oriented policing as a counter-irregular/hybrid warfare tool was summarized by Interviewee #12 as “deploying [gendarmerie-type force] to engage with the local communities, build trust and gather actionable intelligence” and “addressing grievances and mediating conflicts to reduce local support for irregular actors” (Interviewee #12). He referred to a successful example in the Middle East, where gendarmerie-type forces used community engagement strategies to curb insurgent influence and foster stability in volatile areas.

Ethical Policing as a Counter-Irregular/Hybrid Tool

This report has already emphasized the central role of community-oriented policing in countering irregular/hybrid warfare, as well as the importance of human-centric activities in building trust between law enforcement and local populations. Equally important, however, is distinguishing policing from occupation or authoritarian control. For the associations described above to hold, police officers must be perceived as protectors of rights rather than mere enforcers of authority. This brings the discussion directly to the issue of *ethical* policing. The 2016 report of the United Nations Secretary-General defines policing as “a function of governance responsible for the prevention, detection and investigation of crime; the protection of persons and property; and the maintenance of public order and safety”.¹²⁷ This definition positions policing as a protective activity that upholds human rights and provides security. Although policing is undeniably a function of governance, it must avoid being perceived solely as an instrument of state authority; it must instead be understood as a service delivered for the benefit of the population. The ethical foundation of policing is therefore essential to sustaining its effectiveness against irregular/hybrid threats. This conclusion is

¹²⁷ United Nations Secretary-General, “Report of the Secretary-General on United Nations policing”.

reinforced by the insights shared by experts interviewed for this study. Two interviewees explicitly described the relationship between community-oriented policing and local populations in terms of “allies”. For example, Interviewee #8 noted that “when communities view Stability Policing units as allies rather than occupying forces, they are more likely to cooperate, share information and engage in collaborative efforts” (Interviewee #8) Similarly, Interviewee #3 observed that “[gendarmerie-type force] had to invest in community engagement, ensuring local populations were allies in identifying and countering threats” (Interviewee #3).

To be regarded as an ally requires a strong commitment to cooperation. Trust must arise not only from institutional roles but also from the ethical conduct of individual officers. One interviewee stressed that the criticality of maintaining police effectiveness against irregular/hybrid threats required “addressing issues of corruption and misconduct within local police forces [as well as ensuring] compliance with legal and human rights standards” (Interviewee #3). Another respondent provided a first-hand example of how ethical policing enhances counter-irregular/hybrid capabilities, citing the growing effectiveness of a national police force in a Middle Eastern country affected by terrorist infiltration: “The [national police] is coming up as a solid, reliable and significant force in the fight against these kinds of threats. They show very good potential. Thanks overall to a nation-wide structure, strong ethics and a history of incredible success against the threat posed by insurgency before and [terrorist organization] more recently. [...] Institutional weakness and corruption [...] undermine the effectiveness of [...] law enforcement. It is also true considering hybrid threats, where these issues tend to undermine confidence towards institutions” (Interviewee #4). He further emphasized that “efforts to combat corruption, improve governance and build stronger institutional frameworks in law enforcement agencies enhanced the effectiveness in addressing irregular and hybrid threats.

[...] According to many surveys issued by governmental authorities, people's trust of the [national police] in particular is growing and along with it the trust of the governmental authorities. This decreased significantly the vulnerability of [country] against hybrid warfare maneuvers. At the base of the trust, there is the ethical attitudes of [national police]. In particular, the [national police] have found strength and at the same time consensus in its ethical principles. [...] People seem to recognize this and trust this corps" (Interviewee #4).

From this discussion, it becomes clear that for policing to be viewed as fair and impartial, it must provide human-centric security to all segments of society. One interviewee highlighted factionalism and favoritism as major weakness within local law enforcement that undermined relations with the population and reduced its effectiveness against irregular/hybrid threats: "During my interactions with the local police, several key shortcomings stood out. [...] Factionalism was another pervasive problem. Many officers were more loyal to local power structures, tribal affiliations or their political factions than to the state itself. It often led to biased enforcement of laws, favoritism and, in some cases, to outright corruption. Instead of working for the collective good or pursuing justice, their actions were influenced by their factional interests. It undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of law enforcement. These factors have limited the capacity of local forces to respond cohesively to threats" (Interviewee #9). Another expert raised a similar concern, describing bribery within local police forces as a major obstacle to security cooperation: "Instead of adhering to proper channels, there was a strong inclination among some officers to exchange valuable intelligence for monetary compensation. This practice not only compromised the integrity of the police force but also undermined the flow of critical information that could have been reported to superiors for more effective action [...]. These systemic issues hindered their operational effectiveness and posed significant obstacles to building

collaborative security environments. Therefore, fostering a strong sense of legitimacy and ownership within the community is essential for the success of our mission” (Interviewee #10). Ethical policing therefore forms the foundation of law enforcement effectiveness and its ability to engage with communities, ultimately strengthening counter-irregular/hybrid capabilities through community resilience and capacity-building.

5.c Policing Gaps in Countering Irregular/Hybrid Threats

The preceding sections demonstrated that policing plays a critical role as a capability for countering irregular/hybrid warfare. This section, in turn, examines potential limitations within current policing practices that may reduce their effectiveness against such threats. The analysis takes a broad view of police readiness in confronting irregular/hybrid challenges, effectively serving as a gap assessment for operations both within and beyond NATO borders. Using Stability Policing as a reference framework allows for a structured evaluation of existing capabilities in Allied territories, offering a structured approach to reinforce the key attributes that enhance NATO police forces' overall effectiveness in confronting irregular/hybrid threats.

The first weakness identified through the interviews concerns the predominance of tactical over strategic focus, often stemming from the fragmentation of police units. Internal security is inherently a multi-agency responsibility, usually shared between executive authorities - primarily police forces - and the strategic level, that typically falls under government authority. In many policing models and internal security architectures,¹²⁸ the judiciary also plays a central role in managing

¹²⁸ The NATO SP CoE conducted research at the request of the Supreme Allied Command for Transformation, titled “The policing gap in modern NATO operations. A better

internal security policy and influencing criminal governance at both local and national levels. This structure often restricts law enforcement's ability to assess and plan beyond the tactical level, leading to an emphasis on the immediate impact of police operations such as disrupting specific criminal networks, responding to incidents, or addressing security concerns within a defined timeframe. Consequently, policing frequently emphasizes tactical interventions, which can limit its ability to address irregular/hybrid warfare comprehensively. Police forces are often the first responders to incidents potentially linked to irregular/hybrid threats - ranging from terrorist attacks and drone-related incidents to public demonstrations or acts of sabotage - particularly below the threshold of conventional conflict. Yet, their operational mindset largely remains tactical, balancing the dual objectives of protecting individuals and identifying the perpetrators.

For example, the immediate assessment of incident scenes, coupled with evidence collection and the establishment of information flows, can be critical for preventing similar occurrences in other areas. At the same time, the safety of responding officers may be jeopardized if they are unaware of related incidents elsewhere or at different times. Formal investigations provide a more comprehensive analysis of ramifications for the organization responsible or individual and may even link multiple events. However, the confidentiality inherent in police investigations - usually overseen by a judge or superintendent - can hinder real-time information exchange needed to connect incidents. While these links will be eventually identified, the delay may render them less useful during the critical early phase when timely action is essential. A comparable

understanding of the internal security architecture of a state as a mean to allow NATO planners and commanders to address future threats to peace and security". The findings, developed in collaboration with John Jay College of Criminal Justice (New York) and the 1 CMI Command of the Netherlands Army, are scheduled for publication in September–October 2025.

limitation applies to tactical decisions taken by police investigators or field commanders in routine operations. A greater awareness of irregular/hybrid maneuver tactics could prompt investigators to adopt alternative strategies, such as delaying arrests to gather additional intelligence before intervening. In general, the first-response tactical approach typical of policing can constrain effectiveness against irregular/hybrid maneuvers.

Signs of this tactical mindset are evident in the statements of the experts interviewed. One respondent described countermeasures against irregular/hybrid threats during his deployment in a crisis area: "Every time the teams went out on the territory to carry out specific activities of engagement of key leaders, it was necessary to carry out a monitoring on the media and reports of the other units transited on that territory. To understand if that area or subject to engage with was a potential undeclared exponent of [an armed militia] and could therefore be hostile or dangerous to our activities" (Interviewee #1). This illustrates a tactical approach closely tied to the officer's role and responsibilities during deployment. Another interviewee observed a similar tactical mindset among police forces in an African country where he was deployed, stating: "I have noticed that the local security forces, in a very slow mode, developed better capabilities to elaborate information remaining at the tactical level and subsequently changing the tactics. But this happened right after a specific event such as a suicide attack. Learning from their mistakes, they were able to change the behavior to not repeat the same mistake" (Interviewee #2). These observations highlight a slow, tactical-driven strategy that limits the ability to fully leverage field experience and reflects a lack of strategic vision regarding information-sharing across police entities.

The interviewee further explained that "threats were taken into the proper consideration, but they never had any direct impact on the

mission. In all my mission in Africa, I worked inside security force training camps, in which the security was provided by local forces. The only real risk could be encountered travelling from and to the area in which I was living. Nothing happened. Generally speaking, and in accordance with the local security awareness, it was just necessary to pay attention during the movements outside the camps” (Interviewee #2). Two key points emerge from this account. First, threat reports had little or no influence on the overall mission strategy. Second, threat assessments were confined primarily to self-protection measures. These limitations appear rooted in the tactical focus of the officer’s engagement, but they also reflect a wider blind spot in strategic analysis. Irregular/hybrid warfare maneuvers are best interpreted at a strategic level, where patterns and connections become visible. This represents a challenge for policing, which rarely operates strategically by default, and not all police units possess the capacity for high-level strategic analysis. An interviewee elaborated on interactions with local populations, reporting that “I was focusing my attention to the information coming from open sources and talking with local population. To have a realistic perception of the situation and consequently to modify my behavior [...]. This activity is ordinary for a policeman: only having a direct relation with the population and communicating with people, [enables] a real perception of the situation on the ground” (Interviewee #2). As highlighted above in this report, the “mood” of a local area is best assessed by being embedded within the community and being aligned with a community-oriented policing approach. Nevertheless, in contexts involving irregular/hybrid threats, this approach often remains tactical and may limit the full potential of policing - for example, by restricting effective information-sharing.

In addition, the interview material highlighted further limitations of policing in contexts involving irregular/hybrid threats, which can be summarized as follows:

- **Limited Information-Sharing:** Operating at a tactical level only often fosters a perception that information only needs to be shared within the perimeter of a single police command, creating a so-called tunnel vision. This risk is reduced in nation-wide or general-competence forces, such as gendarmerie-type units, where information naturally flows to higher organizational levels and systemic analysis is more likely to be conducted. Nevertheless, investigative secrecy can impose critical constraints on both information-sharing and the safety of operating personnel. One interviewee observed, “if in the future the culture of the awareness about the specific topic will develop and an effective sharing of relevant information between countries will take place, this could really be a first step to face the hybrid threat” (Interviewee #2). In other words, promoting a “need to share” culture is essential for effective counteraction. Another expert identified this gap in law enforcement architecture in the country of deployment: “From an information-gathering view, [a Middle Eastern country] is still at the beginning of the process, where all security agencies have their own database and information flow, not shared with other entities” (Interviewee #4).
- **Limited Strategic Context (Connecting the Dots):** The fragmentation of local police activities often leads to a lack of strategic-level understanding of irregular/hybrid warfare. In systems composed solely of local civilian police, intelligence agencies are generally tasked with strategic analysis of internal security, the dots between events occurring in each area. However, this role is secondary, meaning that critical insights from first responders may be lost during communication and interpretation. Even when a comprehensive understanding is achieved at higher levels, it is rarely fed back to local units, limiting situational awareness of first responders on the ground. One interviewee highlighted this concern when stating that there is: “No uniform method for assessing the effectiveness of

measures: information is gathered from various sources, including open sources and newspapers, but it lacks a standardized evaluation process. I have found that proper documentation and reporting of all information are essential. It ensures effective information sharing and helps create a detailed and accurate picture, which can be used as feedback for refining future strategies” (Interviewee #5). Establishing a standardized framework for sharing is therefore critical to ensure a coherent analysis of the situation.

- **Limited Training:** Irregular/hybrid threats are complex and multifaceted phenomena that require specialized expertise within law enforcement, particularly among first responders and analytical units. Interviewee #1 emphasized how the operational environment improved after his specialization as a psyops specialist: “I could benefit from a contextualized understanding of the situation, which helped me in conducting a more accurate and referenced analysis of the information I [...] gathered on the field. That specialized approach contributed significantly to maximizing the strategic relevance of my observations on the field. In other words, connecting the dots is missing in ordinary law enforcement. [...] It is for this reason that I think that analysis capabilities are the most relevant in detecting hybrid warfare” (Interviewee #1). Even highly capable police units benefit from further professionalization to improve their performance. Given the likelihood of irregular/hybrid threats affecting communities, investment in such expertise - even at lower operational levels - is highly advisable. One interviewee noted the challenges posed by undertrained local forces in a crisis deployment area: “A lack of professionalism was a major issue, with officers displaying inadequate training, poor discipline and inability to execute their duties effectively. This made it difficult for them to handle the complexities of irregular threats or maintain law and order in the face of insurgent activity” (Interviewee #9).

Nevertheless, several mitigating strategies can be implemented. Law enforcement agencies are often cut off from the collective defense intelligence communities, and information sharing between these domains is not adequately regulated. This gap contributes to limited understanding of irregular/hybrid threats as distinct phenomena. Establishing knowledge of these threats across all hierarchical and organizational levels - like the baseline knowledge of OC that permeates police departments and entities - would be highly beneficial. Such understanding is typically reinforced through formal procedures and regulations that guide appropriate response when these threats are detected. A key first step involves investing in the professionalization of police personnel in the field of irregular/hybrid threats. Awareness at lower organizational levels is essential to create a virtuous chain of reporting from local units to central commands or authorities. This point was reinforced by an interviewee emphasizing the need to support the population in dire conditions by stating that: "it is necessary to take control of all the security in this place, in all the dimensions and to do that it is necessary to be trained and prepared" (Interviewee #7). Another expert highlighted that overall counter-irregular/hybrid capability is enhanced by improving both "inter-agency cooperation" and "the average competence across all agencies" (Interviewee #5). Regarding local police in crisis areas, Interviewee #9 stressed the importance of structured training: "Addressing [the lack of expertise] is critical. This means investing in rigorous, scenario-based training that prepares officers for the realities they will face. It also requires embedding experienced personnel, focusing on leadership development, and fostering a professional culture that prioritizes the rule of law and public service. Without these efforts, law enforcement will continue to fall short in combating irregular threats, ultimately impacting the stability of the region" (Interviewee #9).

A second key effort should focus on enhancing horizontal and vertical information-sharing, which requires capabilities, procedures, and potentially legislative support. One interviewee suggested the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell as a model for virtuous information-sharing: it “gathers information and intelligence from Member States to inform the decision-makers in EU institutions and Member States” (Interviewee #8). A comparable framework could be applied within NATO. At the same time, all security sectors must contribute to a comprehensive picture of irregular/hybrid threats and how to evaluate the relevance of each incident. Interviewee #7 stressed that effective capabilities require “expanding the capacity to detect hybrid threats and scale up measures against disinformation campaigns: efforts to counter and respond to hybrid threats have to be underpinned by a capacity to detect malicious activities and their sources, which can come both from within and outside the Union” (Interviewee #8). Achieving this necessitates access to all relevant sources in the field, including police agencies. Finally, while awareness at peripheral levels is essential, robust analytical capabilities must exist at central levels. Identifying irregular and hybrid threats is inherently complex, as attribution rarely results from a direct attack by one malign opponent only, and can carry significant political implications, such as triggering a NATO Article 5 response. Nevertheless, the tactical sharing of strategic assessments of an incident is at least recommended to prevent impairing tactical reactions. Stability Policing, operating beyond national and state dynamics, can enhance these systems by fostering information-sharing and raising awareness of irregular/hybrid threats. This contribution is relevant both for overseas capacity-building missions and for harmonizing systems within NATO borders. By identifying gaps, recommending best practices, and deploying experts to support countries affected by irregular/hybrid threats, Stability Policing can strengthen the resilience of Allies, partners, and host nations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

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6.a The Relevance of Policing against Irregular/Hybrid Warfare

As noted in the introductory chapter, one of the starting assumptions of this research was the idea that irregular/hybrid warfare is characterized by its focus on civilians.¹²⁹ This feature was seen as the matching element with policing, which has traditionally centered its efforts on the protection of people.¹³⁰ Consequently, the first two research questions were designed to test the relevance - and effectiveness - of policing in countering irregular/hybrid warfare.

Do law enforcement/internal security agencies represent an instrument to raise awareness/readiness/resilience against irregular/hybrid warfare maneuvers, or do they hinder effective responses? How? What are the relevant capabilities for law enforcement/internal security agencies to be effective to contrast irregular/hybrid warfare maneuvers? What is the most relevant of these capabilities from a counter-irregular/hybrid warfare perspective?

The findings of this research went beyond simply confirming the potential relevance of policing against irregular/hybrid warfare.

Most notably, drawing on the experience of the experts consulted, the distinction between hybrid and irregular warfare - originally central to the research design - proved less significant than anticipated. Whether directly targeted or indirectly instrumentalized to influence governance dynamics, evidence shows that civilian population - the potential victim

¹²⁹ Sandor and Kennedy, “The Conceptualization of Irregular Warfare in Europe”.

¹³⁰ United Nations Secretary-General, “Report of the Secretary-General on United Nations policing”.

of irregular warfare as defined by the Hybrid CoE in the introduction - is always one of the elements in hybrid warfare maneuvering. Civilians are inevitably part of the overall picture. Accordingly, we argue that a strict distinction between irregular and hybrid warfare is not always operationally useful (e.g., for designing response schemes). Recognizing that people are at the center of irregular/hybrid warfare already reinforces the relevance of policing in countering these threats.

Following this doctrinal premise, what initially appeared to be mere relevance emerged as a fundamental shift in understanding and countering irregular/hybrid warfare after reviewing first-hand accounts of the interviewees. Despite a clear conceptual distinction between hybrid and irregular warfare - consistently noted by the experts - the study highlighted a similarity between the modus operandi of hybrid/irregular actors and of organized crime.¹³¹ For the purposes of this study, the definition contained in Article 416-bis of the Italian Criminal Code on mafia-type criminal organizations is instructive: “acquire direct or indirect control of economic activities, licenses, authorizations, public procurement contracts and services or to obtain unjust profits or advantages for themselves or others, or to prevent or obstruct the free exercise of vote, or to procure votes for themselves or others at elections”.¹³² Through maneuvers aimed at infiltrating civil society, criminal organizations can achieve objectives that extend beyond economic gain only. Criminal jurisprudence has emphasized the ability of OC to exploit vulnerabilities in civil society for infiltration, even without committing overt criminal acts.¹³³ Similarly, irregular/hybrid warfare infiltrates civil society to influence decision-makers, not

¹³¹ Klaus von Lampe (2016). *Organized Crime: Analyzing illegal activities, criminal structures, and extra-legal governance*, pp.27-30. Thousand Oaks, CA.

¹³² Article 416-bis, co.3, CPP.

¹³³ According to the Italian criminal Law, the mere belonging to a mafia-type criminal organization is already a crime per se.

necessarily through criminal activities, but by exerting leverage over people or exploiting systemic vulnerabilities. Police forces are already experienced in countering criminal organizations operating within civil society. This report anticipates a similarly expanded role for policing in addressing irregular/hybrid threats.

The interviewees observed the added value of applying advanced policing skills to counter irregular/hybrid maneuvers across different phases - ranging from early warning to investigative activities that enable effective countermeasures. Policing is inherently embedded in civil society, where the police are often perceived as the most credible expression of governance. This proximity fosters a relationship of mutual understanding between police personnel and the population, forming the basis of community-oriented policing. The interviewees consistently highlighted the essential importance of building such relationships with local communities as the most effective method for countering irregular/hybrid warfare. From an early-warning perspective, trust-based engagement with the population can encourage civilians to report potential irregular/hybrid maneuvers that threaten their security. From a countermeasure standpoint, contemporary irregular/hybrid warfare positions people as the primary battleground. Their allegiance must be secured through trust in legitimate actors rather than manipulated by external hostile entities. This is especially relevant in strategic communication: the experts stressed that countering malign messaging succeeds only when an established relationship exists between international forces and the local population. Since the police constitute the primary interface between governance and civilians, community-oriented policing must be designed through multidisciplinary research into both operational and social environments. This approach demands sophisticated policing skills that are generally uncommon within traditional defense and defense intelligence communities. In addressing the research questions, it becomes evident that policing is not merely a

first-responding capability against irregular/hybrid warfare but rather a genuinely multi-domain approach to confronting such threats.

6.b Policing in Countering Irregular/Hybrid Threats: Legal Aspects

The third research question focused on examining the legal aspects linked to the presumed relevance of policing in countering irregular/hybrid threats. What legal considerations must law enforcement and internal security agencies consider? Ethical policing is governed by the rule of law, and each country operates under its own legal framework (e.g., laws and procedures). It therefore becomes essential to assess whether these legal systems, as comprehensive structures, are prepared to address unconventional threats such as irregular/hybrid warfare. According to the interview findings, the legal systems in most of the countries examined are not adequately equipped to confront irregular/hybrid threats. Such threats are often characterized by long-term, strategic objectives that may appear legitimate from a mere criminal perspective, yet they can still pose significant risks and be difficult to contain when efforts are made to minimize their effects. Once more, experience gathered in countering mafia-type criminal organizations provides useful insight. As outlined in the analysis, countries affected by entrenched mafia-type organizations were compelled to design specific legal instruments tailored to address irregular/hybrid tactics used to influence society for personal gain (which may not always be illegal). A comparable approach may be adopted by states seeking to enhance their counter-irregular/hybrid capabilities - for example, through mechanisms targeting financial transactions.

Judicial literature provides numerous examples of effective criminal justice action against OC, demonstrating that legislative tools can form a systemic cornerstone in countering irregular/hybrid warfare.

Two main elements should be considered when shaping an effective legal framework against hybrid warfare:

- 1) a discriminating criterion that enables the identification of a hybrid/irregular maneuver, and
- 2) the availability of legal instruments to investigate and halt an opponent's hybrid activities.

Regarding the first aspect, the experience of Italian legislation is once again instructive. Both the Italian Constitution and specific legislation¹³⁴ prohibit any form of “secret” association, whether secrecy concerns the group's existence or parts of its functioning (e.g., objectives, funding sources, membership, internal roles, etc.).¹³⁵ Secrecy can be viewed as one of the defining features of organizations that support or conduct hybrid/irregular maneuvering - whether related to their goals, financing, organization etc. In this sense, even an otherwise legitimate organization (for example, a hypothetical “Association of Friends of Russia”) could violate laws aimed at preventing and countering illicit external influence if it receives undeclared directives, guidance, or funding from hostile actors. This principle would apply to all legitimate forms of associations, including political parties, companies, and similar entities. Conversely, if such an entity openly declared its affiliation with an external actor, its

¹³⁴ Art. 18 of the Italian Constitution, and the Law 25 January 1982, no. 17.

¹³⁵ In Europe, laws prohibiting secret societies have varied historically and across countries. Some nations implemented specific legislation targeting secret societies, often due to concerns over political activities, subversive potential, or conflicts with religious authorities. These prohibitions have often been challenged, with certain societies successfully asserting their right to exist and operate, particularly when their objectives were demonstrably non-subversive or non-harmful. Examples of European legislation addressing secret societies include: 1) **France** – During World War II, the Vichy regime banned secret societies and required officials to declare they had never been members; 2) **Italy** – Italian law prohibits secret associations, particularly those pursuing political aims through paramilitary-style organizations; 3) **United Kingdom** – The Societies Restriction Act of 1799 outlawed groups that swore secret oaths, with the exception of Freemasons.

credibility or capacity of offense - previously enabled by concealed objectives or control - would be substantially downsized.

Once an entity is formally charged with operating under unlawful secrecy, the investigative and countering tools required should mirror those already used against organized crime.

These ones include investigative instruments needed to uncover the structure, membership, funding sources, etc... as well as inhibitory measures such as the seizure or confiscation of material or financial assets, the issuance of preventive measures to block or limit communication between involved parties, and, when necessary, the dissolution of entities, whether public or private.

Naturally, legislative action falls under the sovereign responsibility of each state and carries significant complexities and sensitivities. Nonetheless, we believe that the experience gathered in combating organized crime can be extremely valuable - both from a capability perspective, as highlighted in this paper with reference to NATO capabilities, and from the more intricate and politically sensitive legislative perspective.

6.c Gaps to an Effective Police Approach against Irregular/Hybrid Threats

Research questions #4 and #5 focused on the shortcomings of police capabilities in presenting a credible tool to prevent and counter irregular/hybrid warfare. More specifically question #4 and question #5 respectively stated: Which are the viable means and methods to increase the efficiency of law enforcement/internal security agencies from counter-irregular/hybrid warfare perspective? Can we develop a tool to measure the police capability gap or the broader security gap from a counter-irregular/hybrid warfare perspective? These questions do not

contradict the previous questions, since policing undoubtedly represents a relevant instrument against irregular/hybrid maneuvers. Rather, they highlight a critical issue: whether existing tools are employed effectively and whether the current approach to irregular/hybrid warfare allows for a novel interagency and multi-domain response.

In their statements, experts described several shortcomings in the preparedness of traditional law enforcement agencies to confront with irregular/hybrid threats. The roots of these gaps lie in policing and of law enforcement structures. In democratic countries, strategic approach to crime (i.e., criminal police) operates at governmental level, leaving police forces with the executive role of countering crime according to these strategic directives. Consequently, law enforcement agencies often adopt a predominantly tactical approach, even when confronting criminal organizations whose activities may have strategic relevance. A second limitation of law enforcement agencies is territorial fragmentation. Together, these factors determine a lack of strategic perspective - both temporal and geographical - when addressing irregular/hybrid threats. This results in difficulties on “connecting the dots” to outline a comprehensive strategic picture of irregular/hybrid activities. This capability gap further compounded the exclusion of law enforcement agencies from the collective defense intelligence process. The only significant exception is terrorism, considered the most dangerous type of irregular/hybrid threat. An example is the *Comitato di Analisi Strategica Antiterrorismo* (Counterterrorism Strategic Analysis Committee, CASA), established at the ministerial level by the Italian government in 2004. CASA convenes weekly and brings together the heads of all Italian police forces and intelligence agencies. It provides a permanent mechanism for sharing information on terrorism and ongoing counterterrorism operations to foster synergy and prevent overlap. NATO’s SP CoE has drawn inspiration from the CASA model: since 2023 the Centre has been developing the “Law Enforcement Intelligence - LEINT” project, aimed at

enhancing the array of information detained by law enforcement agencies to integrate them into the intelligence architecture of the Alliance.¹³⁶

A clear example of the value of direct information-sharing between law enforcement agencies and collective defense intelligence is the monitoring of people of interest moving within the Alliance territory. In the nine nations bordering the countries involved in Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine (i.e., Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus), each day police checkpoints identify between 100,000 and 200,000 persons of interest daily - based on approximately 40,000 - 50,000 police patrols. By focusing specifically on individuals originating from those crisis areas and making a double check of their passport serial numbers, it becomes possible to identify redundancies in those numbers. Passports from a given country that share similar serial numbers in the first half of the code indicate that the documents were issued within the same timeframe and by the same government office. Thus, simply cross-checking passport numbers of foreign nationals from areas of interest across NATO's broader area of responsibility can expose patterns linked to irregular/hybrid activities. Additional indicators may also be derived from routine police reporting - for example, whether people of interest were identified near sensitive

¹³⁶ The Law Enforcement Intelligence (LEINT) project was launched in 2023 by the NATO SP CoE and endorsed by the Supreme Allied Command for Transformation, forming part of its 2025 Concept Development Program of Work on Cognitive Superiority. The project aims to deliver, by the end of 2025, a proposed definition and conceptual framework for "law enforcement intelligence" through workshops, seminars, tailored presentations, and experimental activities. LEINT was referenced in the 2023 BI-SC Annual Update Report on Counterterrorism and status of work related to the Fight Against Terrorism (FAT) Action Plan. It is also discussed in NATO Doctrinal Publications ATP-103 Reinforcement and Replacement of Indigenous Police Forces, ratified by the Nations on May 2025) and AJP 3.24 (Allied Joint Doctrine for the Military Contribution to Peace Support, promulgated in March 2024). NSO(JOINT)0384(2025)LO/2616 that is the Military Committee Doctrine Tasker for the revision of STANAG 2616-LO Edition 2 AJP 3.22 "Allied Joint Doctrine for Stability Policing". A current working definition describes LEINT as "intelligence derived from the home/host nation law enforcement agencies and Stability Policing assets, complementing the common intelligence picture".

sites such as power plants or military facilities. The paradox is that the Alliance already possesses this information - stored inside national law enforcement database, yet it cannot access it. Meanwhile, national law enforcement agencies remain confined to their national jurisdictions. The LEINT project seeks to promote information-sharing between collective-defense intelligence and internal-security intelligence - two cognitive domains that rarely interact.

Implementing this project - that is, recognizing the relevance of information exchange between defense and internal-security agencies - could significantly enhance law enforcement's capability to prevent and counter irregular/hybrid threats. Achieving a wider and shared intelligence and police picture across nations is essential if the Alliance intends to establish credible countermeasures against irregular/hybrid threats. At the same time, this last would provide local law enforcement agencies which are the first responders to most irregular/hybrid incidents with the level of situational context necessary to ensure effective action. The training gaps identified by several experts cannot be properly addressed without access to that relevant contextual information. Consequently, the *policing gap* is inevitably connected with the level of information-sharing between internal-security actors and collective-defense intelligence. As former Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, General Philippe Lavigne, sharply noted during a conference in Copenhagen in October 2023,¹³⁷ innovation requires embracing multi-domain operations and the data-centric nature of contemporary warfare - an evolution currently obstructed by the "data jealousy" displayed among Allies. This lack of information-sharing between internal security and collective defense is a luxury the Alliance can no longer afford in the face of irregular/hybrid threats.

¹³⁷ NATO Multi-Domain Operations Conference 2023, Copenhagen, 9-11 October 2023.

6.d The Way Ahead for the NATO Doctrine

The final research question examined the broader implications of policing in countering irregular/hybrid threats. Specifically: How can the concept of a support/police capability mission be included in the broader NATO efforts to increase the Alliance’s layered resilience? Under which doctrinal framework? Addressing this question required assessing whether NATO’s doctrine related to civil policing - namely the NATO Stability Policing doctrine defined by AJP 3.22 Allied Joint Doctrine for Stability Policing or ATP 103 Reinforcement and Replacement of Indigenous Police Forces - could serve as the appropriate framework to structure and channel policing capabilities in the context of irregular/hybrid warfare.¹³⁸ When the research question was first formulated in summer 2023, Stability Policing was still largely viewed as a capability designed for stabilization operations, and only marginally deployable in active confrontation - whether symmetric or asymmetric - occurring within Alliance territory. Consequently, the doctrinal reference that initially appeared most relevant to Stability Policing in relation to irregular/hybrid threats was the concept of *Layered Resilience*, which refers to NATO’s comprehensive approach to enhance the Alliance’s capability to withstand and recover from threats. By emphasizing the interdependence of military and civilian resilience, this framework underscored that NATO’s effectiveness depended upon both dimensions.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Allied Joint Publication AJP-3.22 “Allied Joint Doctrine for Stability Policing”, Ed.A, Ver.1, July 2016 (under revision). Allied Tactical Publication ATP-103 “Reinforcement and Replacement of Indigenous Police Forces”, ed.A, ver.1, May 2025.

¹³⁹ The Layered Resilience concept is reflected in NATO’s Strengthened Resilience Commitment (2021) and the earlier Commitment to Enhance Resilience, issued by the Heads of State and Government during the North Atlantic Council meeting in Warsaw (2016).

However, since 2023, NATO's understanding of Stability Policing and its applicability to diverse scenarios significantly evolved. This shift is reflected in the NATO Military Committee's doctrine Tasker,¹⁴⁰ which in 2025 provided the essential guidelines for revising the level two Stability Policing doctrine. In essence, the Doctrine Tasker for AJP 3.22 is compelling a new vision of Stability Policing for it to become an effective and interoperable capability usable across the entire continuum of operations- including within the Alliance borders. This Tasker represents a substantial shift in NATO's perspective: Stability Policing is now considered fully employable across all phases of asymmetric and symmetric confrontation, including irregular/hybrid warfare, in support of indigenous law enforcement agencies within Allied territory. The scrutiny of the strengths and shortcomings of law enforcement in responding to irregular/hybrid threats reveals the two core elements that underpin the planning and execution of Stability Policing missions: identifying a policing gap and determining whether it can be mitigated through reinforcement or temporary replacement missions. In this context, deficiencies in training and awareness among Allied law enforcement agencies constitute a capability gap that must be addressed to ensure effective performance against irregular/hybrid warfare. Under the NATO umbrella - complementing existing police-cooperation mechanisms - the Stability Policing capability provides the appropriate framework for such cooperation. Policing potential relevant to countering irregular/hybrid threats can therefore be channeled and formally integrated into NATO doctrine by applying the principles of Stability Policing at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Achieving this requires the rephrasing and updating of the NATO Stability Policing doctrine, which already offers sufficient flexibility to adapt its

¹⁴⁰ NSO(JOINT)0384(2025)LO/2616, Allied Joint Doctrine for Stability Policing (STANAG 2616 – AJP-3.22) – Allocation of Study Number and Detailed Tasking, dated 18 March 2025, by the Military Committee Joint Standardization Board.

interpretation to irregular/hybrid warfare both within and beyond NATO borders.

6.e Further Steps for Planners and Commanders: Redefining the Public Security Gap

The current NATO Stability Policing doctrine (AJP 3.22) authorizes Allied intervention across *the whole spectrum of conflict* to temporarily replace or reinforce indigenous policing capabilities with the objective of stabilizing the area of interest.¹⁴¹ NATO doctrine has traditionally defined the “*spectrum of conflict*” as follows: “there are discrete types of conflict, with traditional ‘war’ against near-peers as the professional benchmark. [It] overlooked the inevitable concurrency and unique challenges posed by conflicts that have different characteristics. These characteristics overlap and merge and can be visualized as a spectrum. Conflict can now be seen as a blurring of the distinctions between adversaries and the way they use force to achieve political goals, generating a spectrum of conflict in which the level of violence increases from stable peace to high intensity conflict”.¹⁴² In response to the evolving strategic scenario, NATO introduced the concept of the “**continuum of competition**”, defined as “a model depicting the attitude and behavior of international relations. The continuum has four relationships: cooperation, rivalry, confrontation and armed conflict”.¹⁴³ The continuum of competition is therefore considered an evolution from the earlier, more symmetric “old” spectrum of conflict, offering planners an analytical model for crisis response or stabilization

¹⁴¹ AJP 3.22, para. 1.2.3, The added value of tactical Stability Policing activities and tasks.

¹⁴² NATO Allied Joint Publication AJP-01 “Allied Joint Doctrine”, Ed.E, ver.1, February 2017, para. 2.23. Accessible here: [AJP-01_EDE_V1_E_2437.pdf](#).

¹⁴³ NATO Allied Joint Publication AJP-01 “Allied Joint Doctrine”, Ed.F, ver.1, December 2022, para. 1.10. Accessible here: [AJP-01_EDF_V1_E_\(1\)_2437.pdf](#)

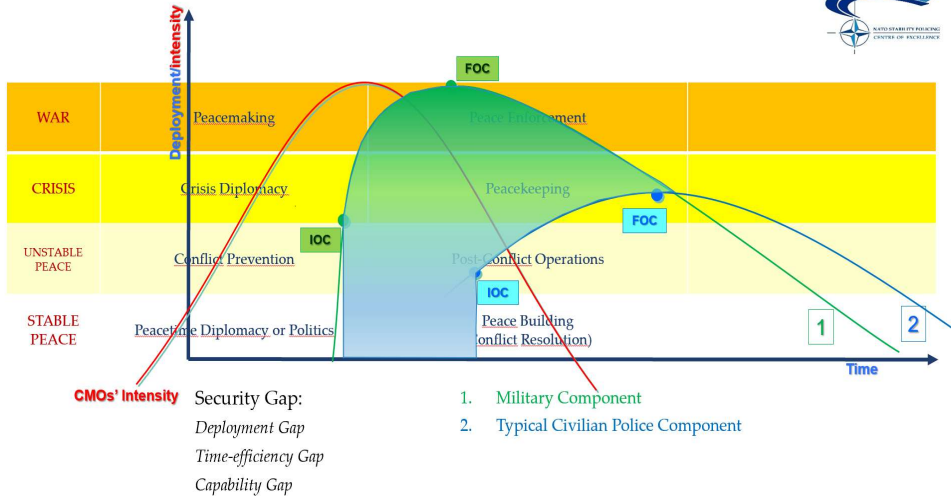
operations - regardless of root causes - while still remaining applicable to contexts of symmetric confrontation.

As previously noted, an updated doctrinal understanding of Stability Policing requires recognizing its applicability across the full continuum of competition. The distinction between the two concepts is significant. One immediate doctrinal implication for the Stability Policing doctrine is the need to re-define and re-design the concept of the *security Gap* - also referred to as the *public security gap* - which constitutes a core analytical tool for the devising and planning of a Stability Policing mission. Although referenced in the current AJP 3.22, NATO lacks a formally agreed definition of the security gap. The concept originated in the Brahimi Report of August 2000, which described a “a lack of security that an international (peacekeeping) force might encounter within the operational environment, calling for a new structure of policing within UN peacekeeping”.¹⁴⁴ Subsequent work by the Stability Policing Centre of Excellence further refined the concept, linking the security gap to the deployment of international peacekeeping forces (including international civilian police missions) and defining it as the result of three distinct gaps: the deployment gap, the capability gap, and the time-efficiency gap. This framework is illustrated at **Figure 1**.

¹⁴⁴ United Nations General Assembly and Security Council, “UN Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations” (A/55/305 and S/2000/809).

Figure 1. The Security Gap along the Spectrum of the Conflict.

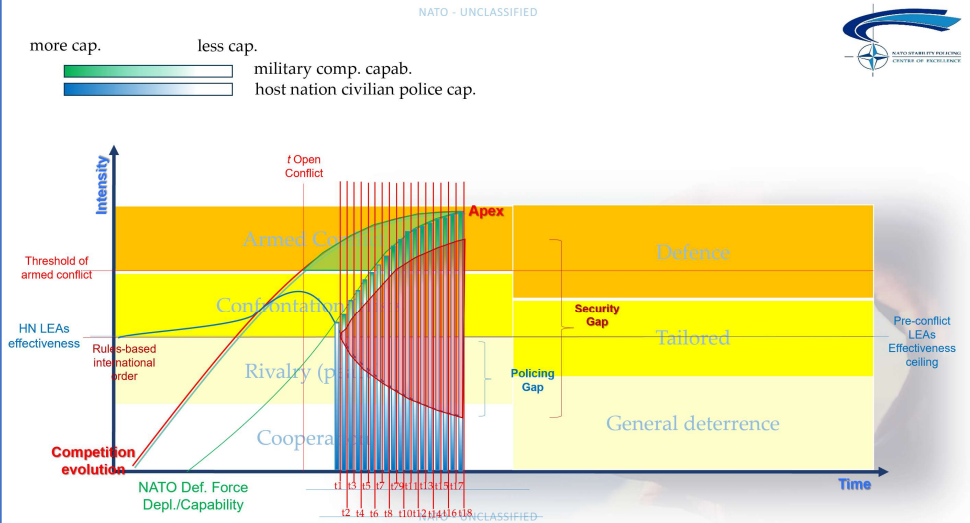
NATO - UNCLASSIFIED



The representation of the security gap was originally derived from the crisis-management operations intensity curve (the so-called Lund curve) mapped across the spectrum of conflict (*stable peace-unstable peace-crisis-war*).¹⁴⁵ With SP shifting toward symmetrical/asymmetrical confrontations rather than traditional crisis-management operations - and in response to the requirement to reassess the full contribution of Stability Policing across the continuum of competition - the NATO SP COE has developed the diagram reported at **Figure 2**.

¹⁴⁵ Lund M.S. (1966). Preventing Violent Conflicts: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy. USIP Press.

Figure 2. The security gap across the *Continuum of Competition*.



While the overall trend remains based on an “intensity curve,” illustrating the escalation of competition toward higher levels of violence (the so-called *violence curve*), it has been adapted to NATO’s continuum of competition (*cooperation–rivalry–confrontation–armed conflict*). Beyond elements linked to the timing of international force deployments, the updated diagram also integrates curves representing the effectiveness of local law enforcement (*HN LEA effectiveness*) and international civil police capabilities (*Int LEA effectiveness*), which in the earlier version were depicted separately.¹⁴⁶ Consequently, a possible revised definition of the *public security gap*, developed by the NATO SP CoE, could read as follows: “The lack of overall security determined by the *incapability* or *unwillingness*, in whole or in part, of local or international security forces

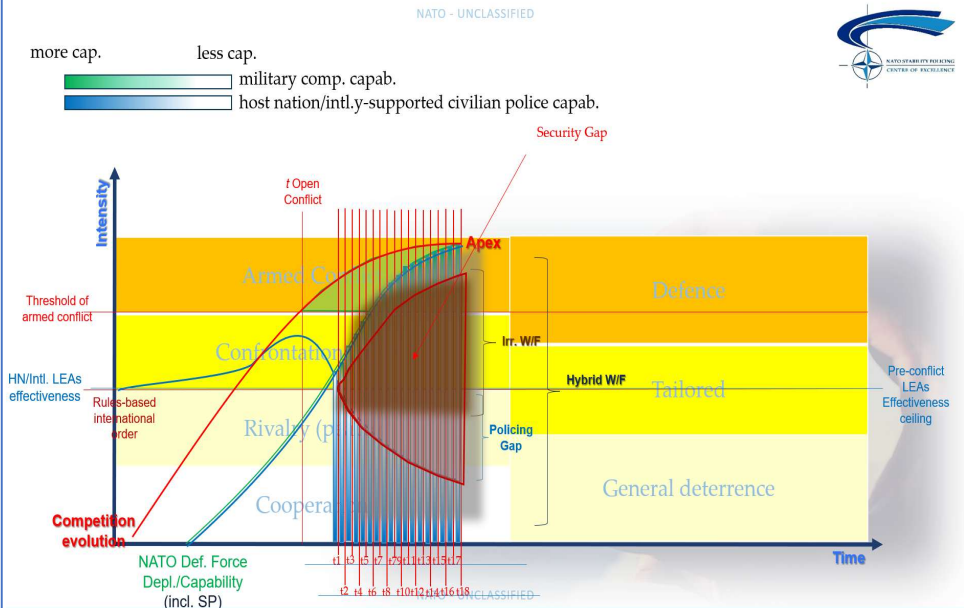
¹⁴⁶ The trajectory of this curve was proposed by the NATO SP CoE, drawing on observations from ongoing major conflicts through the activation of two dedicated observatories: the Israel-Hamas Conflict Observatory and the Russia-Ukraine War Observatory.

to conduct *policing activities* and/or to perform *policing tasks*".¹⁴⁷ The *Security Gap Analysis* consists of two dimensions: first, it considers whether such gaps are structural or contingent; second, it reviews the capability of other national or international security forces operating in the area (other than police). In essence, a public security gap represents a shortfall in security caused by insufficient policing capabilities - regardless of the provider - within a specific area and timeframe.¹⁴⁸ The public security gap serves as a key tool for planning the entirety of a Stability Policing mission. Its formulation is additionally valuable in mapping the interaction between existing police capabilities and vulnerabilities to irregular/hybrid threats. This approach allows for defining a policing gap not only from the traditional lens of the original AJP 3.22 but also considering the expanded understanding of Stability Policing as an effective instrument against hybrid threats.

¹⁴⁷ This definition will be discussed within the SP community and proposed for the valorization in the new AJP 3.22.

¹⁴⁸ According to AJP-3 (para. 1.21, letter j), security is defined as a condition that "enhances freedom of action by limiting vulnerability to hostile activities and threats." This definition is considered overly broad for maintaining a clear focus on policing functions.

Figure 3. Security gap as irregular/hybrid warfare potential area of major vulnerability.



From this perspective, **Figure 3** illustrates the potential area of highest risk for irregular/hybrid warfare maneuvers: the overlap with the public security gap represents the areas where local law enforcement - even when supported by international civil police - shows less effectiveness. Alternatively, the “security gap” concept can be adjusted to specific threats of hybrid/irregular warfare maneuvers by changing specific indicators’ measurement.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹The NATO SP CoE is currently developing a set of indicators to support the assessment of the public security gap, using a radar chart as a graphical tool and calculating/comparing the areas corresponding to each indicator. A dedicated subset of indicators related to the capability to detect and counter hybrid/irregular threats can be incorporated without altering the overall structure of the indicator set.

Since this example was designed for the deployment of an international force including a SP component in response to the outbreak of open conflict, it does not capture the full spectrum of possibilities provided by Stability Policing in irregular/hybrid contexts *prior to* the onset of an open conflict.

A further extension of the tool’s analytical scope is shown in **Figure 4**, which depicts the stability gap that a SP mission can address. Particularly notable is geographical contextualization, which considers both the effectiveness of policing in each specific area and the intensity of violence, represented by the red line.

Figure 4. Visual representation of the security gap potentially filled by a SP mission, before and after the outbreak of the conflict.

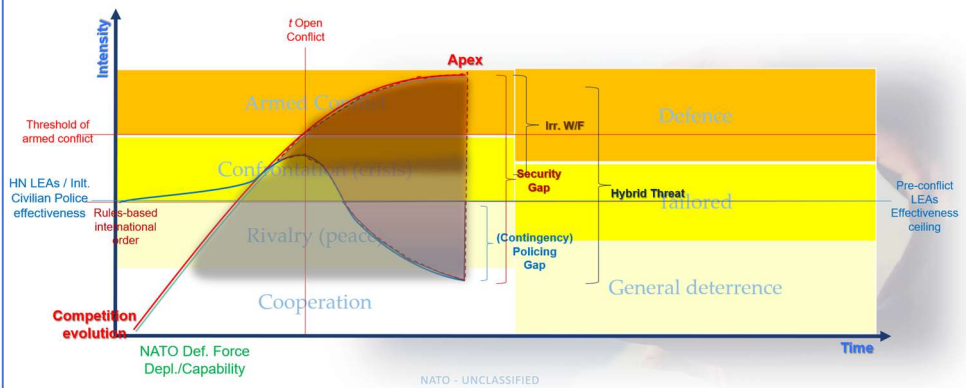
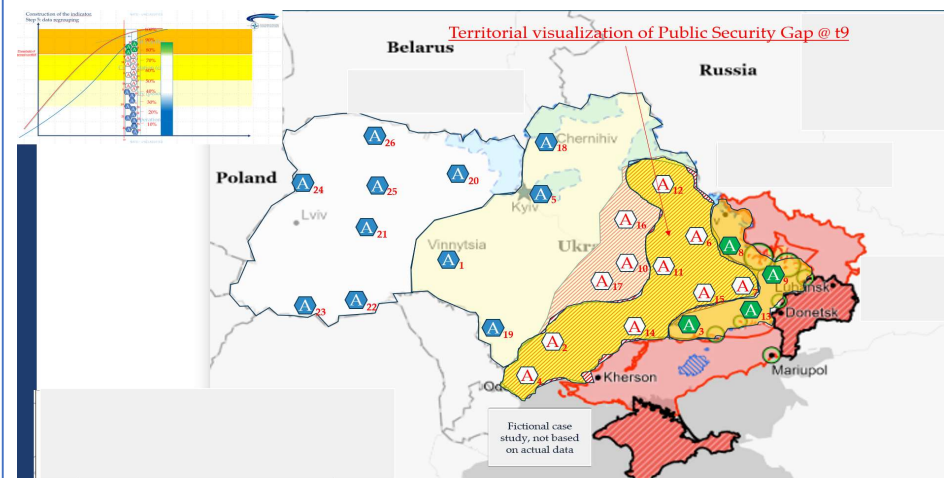


Figure 5 provides a preliminary example of how the public security gap can be mapped geographically for a specific timeframe (i.e., t9 after the outbreak of conflict). The numbered hexagons labeled with the letter “A” illustrate sample geographic areas analyzed to construct the overall picture. To operationalize this analytical tool, the NATO SP CoE is developing a set of standardized indicators¹⁵⁰, including measures of

¹⁵⁰ See footnote no. 145.

vulnerability to irregular/hybrid threats, which can be adapted according to the prevailing conflict or competition conditions. We recognize that this methodology remains rudimentary and requires further refinement before being fully operationalized.¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, we maintain that an updated definition of the public security gap, combined with efforts for a graphical representation of these gaps - including the spectrum of law enforcement agencies 'awareness, readiness, and resilience against irregular/hybrid threats - constitutes an essential step toward creating a comprehensive, effective, analytical and graphical tool to support deployment of SP mission and enhance their success rate against irregular/hybrid threats.

Figure 5. Geographical transposition of the public security gap on a given timeframe



¹⁵¹ The NATO SP CoE is organizing a series of workshops to support the revision of AJP 3.22, including refining the definition of the public security gap and validating a set of indicators. These indicators aim to define its perimeter, including the area of NATO force intervention against hybrid threats.

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