

An Irregular Use of Military Force: Stability Policing Operations

Description

In the wake of escalating violence and deepening humanitarian crises in the Middle East, the international community finds itself at a pivotal juncture with recent calls for [deploying a peacekeeping force to Gaza](#). As this discussion gains momentum, it highlights a vital yet frequently underestimated aspect of modern military operations: the practice of stability policing, commonly known as SP. Bridging the gap between military and police work, SP may play a significant role in maintaining order and fostering peace in volatile regions. Indeed, it could be a strategic asset in future planning for regions like Gaza, where the fabric of society has been severely disrupted by pervasive violence, leaving even the most fundamental services in ruins.

[SP operations](#) represent a departure from conventional military missions. They are designed to restore order, reestablish the functioning of the civil administration, and foster cooperation between civilian organizations and the military. Given the time and resources required to train conventional military units in these diverse responsibilities, specialized gendarmerie-type law enforcement forces with military status and military police units become the primary considerations for deployment. Yet, despite their increasing importance, these types of units are understudied and underappreciated.

The post-Cold War shifts in global security dynamics compelled a reassessment of military structures primarily designed for interstate warfare. The fundamental function of many of the world's most powerful militaries—predominantly aimed at countering external threats—sparked intense discussion and uncertainty when considered for situations outside conventional warfare. Such reluctance was devastatingly evident in instances like Rwanda and Bosnia, where debate and hesitation contributed to horrific episodes of ethnic genocide.

[New forms of security threats](#), such as civil wars, terrorism, ethnic and sectarian tensions, have led to the emergence of new actors on the battlefield that resemble organized criminal groups or gangs rather than traditional military units. Addressing these threats goes beyond the objectives and organization of conventional military units. To ensure public order and security in this complex landscape, it is imperative to employ specialized units that combine military readiness with expertise in human rights, crime prevention, judicial processes, and socio-cultural issues.

The crucial role of law enforcement units

In contemporary conflict environments, many SP functions align with the duties of domestic police organizations. However, these settings often present elevated threat levels that surpass the capabilities of conventional police forces. As a result, [gendarmerie-type law enforcement forces](#), distinguished by their unique fusion of military and police attributes, emerge as a viable solution.

The practice of military units performing law enforcement functions, recognized in the 1990s as an important component of peace and stability operations, traces its origins to colonialism. C.W. Gwynn, for example, aptly referred to this practice as [imperial policing](#). Unlike in traditional military roles, imperial policing emphasized suppressing insurrections, establishing administrative authority, minimizing the use of force, and winning over the local population. These tasks, often associated with [small wars](#), were historically deemed secondary missions and received limited attention within military units. During the Cold War, such activities were considered [non-prestige tasks](#) to be performed by military units. However, the changing threat landscape has underscored the increasing importance of military-like law enforcement units.

The convergence of law enforcement and military functions came to the fore with initiatives like the NATO Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the UN International Police Task Force. Following the Dayton Agreement in 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina faced the challenge of preventing renewed violence, ensuring a secure environment for development efforts, combating organized crime, drugs, corruption, and terrorism, and maintaining public order. Military units lacked the necessary experience, training, and force structure for civilian law enforcement, leading to the creation of the [Multinational Specialized Unit](#) (MSU), composed of gendarmerie and military police units from various countries.

The first MSU deployed to Bosnia and Herzegovina on August 2, 1998. Its main [tasks](#) included supporting military operations, filling the security gap between military units and law enforcement agencies, gathering intelligence, verifying compliance with the Peace Agreement, and supporting local law enforcement elements. The MSU consisted of some 600 troops from Austria, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovenia, and Italy, and later became a part of the European Union military mission (EUFOR Althea) under the name [Integrated Police Unit](#) (IPU).

MSU units were subsequently deployed in Kosovo, where they proved [successful in activities](#) such as riot control, maintaining public order, and executing high-risk arrests of war criminals and members of organized crime groups, mirroring their achievements in Bosnia.

While the MSUs performed well in Bosnia and Kosovo compared to other military units, they too encountered challenges. One primary issue was the lack of familiarity with gendarmerie-type forces among military leaders, particularly from nations that do not maintain such units. The gap in

understanding often resulted in the MSUs being underutilized and relegated to secondary roles like reserve troops or guard duty. Moreover, the limited availability of gendarmerie forces as countries with these specialized units often needed to retain them domestically restricted the number of personnel available for international deployment.

[UN Formed Police Units](#) (FPUs), similar to MSUs, were first deployed in 1999 during peace missions in Kosovo and East Timor. Defined as specialized, mobile police units, FPUs secure UN personnel, protect civilians, and support police operations requiring a heavier, more organized response. Following NATO's MSU initiative, the creation of FPUs marked a significant shift toward integrating law enforcement into peacekeeping. These units have effectively aided local police in diverse regions, including [South Sudan](#), [Liberia](#), [Darfur](#), [Mali](#), [Central African Republic](#), [Haiti](#), and [Congo](#).

The rise of stability policing doctrine

The 2015 establishment of the NATO Stability Policing Center of Excellence ([SP CoE](#)) in Vicenza, Italy, marked a significant step toward formalizing SP doctrine. The center aims to improve SP capabilities and teamwork within NATO and its allies by developing doctrine, conducting training, and aiding operations for peacekeeping and crisis response. Nations like Türkiye, Romania, Greece, the Czech Republic, France, Spain, Poland, and the Netherlands contribute to the center's work. The center has influenced NATO planning and future force structures, leading to the integration of stability policing into NATO joint doctrine in 2016 with the publication of [AJP-3.22](#). One of the key objectives at the Center is to broaden understanding of SP Doctrine and the role of military forces in law enforcement among NATO members and partners, offering specialized courses at the Leader and Field Commander levels.

According to doctrine, SP aims to create a safe and secure environment, restore public order and security, and lay the foundation for long-term governance and development. This involves not only strengthening local law enforcement agencies but also, if required, temporarily replacing those agencies with external SP units. Recent operations in [Iraq and Afghanistan](#) are examples of this approach. [The doctrine](#) highlights that gendarmerie-style units and military police are the most appropriate choice for the intricate job of preserving security, maintaining public order, and enforcing the rule of law.

The future of stability policing operations

Recent tensions in [Kosovo](#) as of May 2023, and ongoing stabilization operations in South Sudan, Mali, and Congo further emphasize the need for law enforcement forces with military capabilities. As mentioned earlier, the deteriorating situation in Gaza also represents a significant and recent case that

underscores the importance of considering SP as a viable alternative. In fulfilling SP responsibilities, the earliest possible intervention, referred to as the [“golden hour”](#), is of great importance in ensuring legitimacy and preventing conflict. To this end, in 2022, the UN Police Division developed [a Statement of Unit Requirements](#) (SUR) to be added to the existing United Nations Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System (PCRS) to create a Rapid Reaction Police Unit that can be deployed within 60 days of a request. It states that FPU should be deployed at short notice to new stability and peace operations where different threats arise.

Given the changing security environment, it makes sense there are also calls for creating a [NATO High-Readiness Constabulary Force](#) (HRCF). This recommendation holds significant merit. Establishing such a force would be a positive step toward upholding peace and stability, especially in situations involving hybrid threats, and would enhance NATO’s crisis management capabilities. The insufficient recognition of the importance of stability policing among political leaders and military commanders often results in the ineffective utilization of specialized units like gendarmerie and military police. Consequently, it’s crucial to raise awareness and provide information about SP doctrine to NATO members and its partner nations.

International organizations like the UN, EU, and NATO each conduct SP operations, albeit under varying monikers. Harmonizing these operations into a unified framework would enhance coordination in peacekeeping and crisis management. The SP CoE has already made strides in this direction. The key to success in crisis response is rapid and prepared action, an area where NATO has demonstrated capable leadership. Integrating the HRCF into NATO’s structure would bolster these response efforts significantly. Moreover, the establishment of the HRCF would foster shared understanding and language among NATO members, particularly concerning gendarmerie-type law enforcement units, facilitating the exchange of different ideas and techniques.

The transformation of stability policing from its imperial origins to a pivotal component of global peacekeeping underscores its essential role in today’s conflict-ridden security environment. As global security needs grow more complex, the deployment of specialized law enforcement entities such as MSUs and Formed Police Units becomes increasingly relevant. As the world’s decision-makers weigh the merits of dispatching peacekeepers to address the unrest in Gaza, it’s crucial to factor in the distinct competencies of these units. Integrating their specialized expertise is not just beneficial; it’s essential to effective management of conflict resolution and cultivating enduring stability in regions beset by turmoil.

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, or Department of Defense as well as the Turkish National Defense University and the Ministry of National Defense.

Main image: Spanish armed forces Staff Sgt. Rovio de Rojas Rernandez assists Security Forces at the base gates during Operation Allies Refuge at Ramstein AB, Sept. 8, 2021. Military Police from NATO worked with Security Forces to ensure base operations continue efficiently during Operation Allies Refuge. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Jacob Wongwai)

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